



Understanding Poetry

(Revised)

BEGE 106

VII

The American Poets-II

(The Twentieth Century)

Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Langston Hughes,
Allen Ginsberg



School of Humanities

Indira Gandhi National Open University

Maidan Garhi, New Delhi

Block

7

THE AMERICAN POETS-II

UNIT 31

Robert Frost **9**

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October, 2015

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ISBN : 978-93-85911-09-5

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Printed and published on behalf of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi by the Prof. Sunaina Kumar, Director, School of Humanities

Cover Design by : Ms Ketaki Kushahari Sharma

Laser Typeset by : Tessa Media & Computers, C-206, A.F.E.-II, Okhla, New Delhi

Printed at : M/s. Raj Printers, A-9, Sector B-2, Tronica City, Loni, Ghaziabad (U.P.)

INTRODUCTION TO BLOCK 7

AMERICAN POETRY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Whitman's long lines derived from the metrics of King James Bible and his democratic inclusiveness combined with Dickinson's short lines and stanzas derived from Protestant hymn books and her laconicity and irony stamped the poetry of twentieth century America. The typical American idiom, 'VURRY Amur'k' 'n' as Pound called it, can be seen in varying ways in the poetries of Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935), Stephen Crane (1871–1900), Robert Frost (1874–1967) and Carl Sandburg (1878–1967).

Although Frost identified himself with New England, he was actually born in California and lived there in his early childhood. His father died when Frost was eleven and then the family moved to New England where his mother supported the family by teaching school. His very difficult circumstances made Frost very depressed when in 1912 he decided to make a new start by moving to England. There his first book *A Boy's Will* (1913) was published. It drew the attention of Ezra Pound and he introduced Frost to American editors and helped his second book *North of Boston* (1914) getting published. With this Frost's reputation as a poet was established not only in England but also in America.

Frost is often seen as an ideological descendant of the nineteenth century American Transcendentalists. But he is far less affirmative of the universe than them who discerned in nature a benign Creator. Frost saw, 'no expression, nothing to express'. Frost was no modernist like Pound. His contribution lies on the one hand in re-affirming the centrality of the pastoral myth of New England in the teeth of modernism and on the other his vision of the work of art as a momentary stay against confusion as we find for instance in Wallace Stevens's, 'The Idea of Order at Key West'.

Another New England poet, from Maine, was Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935). He was drawn to the bleak tragic vision of Thomas Hardy and the eighteenth-century English poet George Crabbe. These influences are distilled in his austere and gloomy verse of his second book. *The Children of the Night* (1897). *The Torrent* and *the Night Before* had been published the previous year. Robinson moved to New York around the turn of the century. Robinson's works appeared at a steady pace: *The Town Down the River* (1910), *The Man Against the Sky* (1916), *Avon's Harvest* and *Collected Poems* (both 1922). He got a Pulitzer Prize for his narrative poem *Tristram* (1927) but it represented, to a large extent, a belated recognition of his earlier poetry.

Regional tendencies in American Literature had been strong since the Civil War. The voice of the Mid-West can be heard in the *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) edited by Edgar Lee Masters (1868 - 1950), in which a picture of life in a fictional town in Illinois emerges from the monologues of the dead in a cemetery. The *Anthology* was an immediate success but Masters' subsequent publications never achieved the popularity of the *Spoon River Anthology* though it contributed significantly to the so-called **Chicago Renaissance**.

Chicago flowered artistically in the poetries of Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay (1879 - 1931). Sandburg's 'Chicago' (1914) and Lindsay's 'The Congo: A Study of the Negro Race' (1914) were instant success. While Sandburg hymned the geography of the United States Lindsay pointed out at the

contributions of African Americans to American life. Moreover 'The Congo' was noticed for its craft that was not unlike some of the art practices in contemporary Europe. A number of others such as Archibald McLeish (1892 - 1982), Kenneth Fearing (1902 - 61), Kenneth Rexroth (1905-82) and Kenneth Patchen (1911- 72) all of whom were born in the Mid-West and had some connection with Chicago published in the 1930's and the 1940's socially inspired poetry *a la* Whitman, Sandburg and , Lindsay. Later Rexroth and Patchen moved to California, developed an interest in Jazz poetry and influenced the Beats. Besides, Rexroth got involved in oriental, especially Japanese poetry, and Patchen in ecologism.

Chicago's major contributions were the literary magazines *Poetry* (1912 -) and *The Little Review* (1914 - 29) edited respectively by Harriet Monroe (1860-1936) and Margaret Anderson (1886 - 1973), Ezra Pound acting as foreign editor in London for the *Review* disseminated the works of modernist artists in Europe. Monroe introduced '**Imagism**' to the American readership.

A number of poets and critics in the 1920's gathered around the journal *The Fugitive* (1922 - 25) at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, who propagated southern regionalism. They were averse to, urbanization, industrialization and commercialization and like Frost advocated a return to agrarian America. The founder and leader of the group was John Crowe Ransom (1888 - 1974) and his two followers and collaborators were Allen Tate (1899 - 1979) and Robert Penn Warren (1905 - 89).

The extent of the '**Fugitives**', identification with their southern past can be gauged from Tate's 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' (1923 , 1937) and Warren's 'Founding Father, Nineteenth Century Style, Southeast USA' (1957). Tate largely also subscribed to T.S. Eliot's' conservative religious views.

Robinson Jeffers (1887 - 1962) was another regionalist but this time from **California**. He subscribed to the creed, as he called it, 'inhumanism' which for Robinson meant that man and his attainments were ineffectual and aimless when compared with the universe. He was successful both in his shorter lyrical pieces and longer narrative poems. *Room Stallion and Other Poems* (1925) brought him to the attention of the American reading public. In the title poem 'Roan Stallion' he wrote, 'humanity is the mold to break away from, the crust to break through, the coal to break into fire, the atom to be split'. Jeffers' writings, owing to their 'inhumanism', took a long time to be appreciated.

Robinson, Frost, the Chicago poets and, the Fugitives were all basically traditionalist. The poets who were called '**Modernists**' or '**High Modernists**' were the 'expatriates' Ezra Pound (1885 - 1972) and T.S. Eliot (1888 - 1965) on the one hand and William Carlos Williams (1883 - 1963) and Wallace Stevens (1879 - 1955) on the other who lived and worked in America. Their poetry was marked by various kinds of experimentations in theme, technique and setting of their poems. E.E. Cummings (1894 - 1962), Hart Crane (1899 - 1932) and Marianne Moore (1887 - 1972) also made important contributions to modernism but had less impact on succeeding generations.

Hilda Doolittle "H.D." (1886 - 1961), Elinor Wylie (1885 - 1928), Mina Loy (1882 - 1966) and Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892 - 1950) largely forgotten have been resurrected, thanks to the success of feminist studies.

A group of poets known as **the Objectivists** carried the torch of modernism into the 1930's. These included Louis Zukofsky (1904 - 1978), Charles Reznikoff

(1894 - 1976), George Oppen (1908 - 1984) and, Carl Rakosi (1903 -2004) and later Lorine Niedecker (1903 - 1970). These poets came from urban communities of new immigrants. They brought new experience and enriched the American idiom with their language.

The American idiom got a distinctive hue at the hands of African Americans. Owing to World War I and its aftermath there was mass exodus of African Americans from the South to various cities in the North. Harlem in New York near the north of Central Park was a middle-class suburb which was taken over by the Blacks. Finally a Jamaican printer, journalist, orator and, politician called Marcus Garvey (1887 - 1940) who advocated pan-Africanism appeared on the scene. Garvey was a well travelled man by 1916 when he came to the US. He established a branch of the **Universal Negro Improvement Association** which he had founded in 1914 in Jamaica. Garvey exhorted African Americans to be proud of their ancestry and return to Africa, in particular to Liberia. Garvey was later accused of mail fraud and sentenced imprisonment for five years in 1923. In 1927 he was deported to Jamaica. He spent the later part of his life in London where he died in 1940.

White artists such as Picasso, Braque and Brancusi and American writers such as Eugene O' Neill and Sherwood Anderson also showed interest in the lives of Black people. However, White interest in black America peaked after the publication of *Nigger Heaven* (1926) a novel by Carl Van Vechten (1880 -1966) which shows appreciation for the vibrancy and spontaneity of the lives of the Blacks compared with those of the Whites. Van Vechten helped a number of '**Harlem Renaissance**' writers in getting published.

Alain Locke (1886 - 1954) played a major role in fostering the talents of the black people. *The New Negro* (1925) showcased a number of young black writers. All black writers did not live in Harlem so many a time the appellation 'New Negro' is preferred.

Claude McKay (1889 - 1948), another Jamaican, had made his debut on the literary stage with his *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* (both 1912) even before the advent of the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro. 'If we Must Die', a defiant poem, published in *The Liberator* run by Max Eastman (1883 - 1969) brought McKay into national prominence in 1919. He wrote,

If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O Kinsmen, we must meet the common foe!

McKay travelled to the Soviet Union in 1923. In the previous year he had published *Harlem Shadows* (1922) a collection of poems that ushered in the Harlem Renaissance. McKay was prevented from returning to the US until 1934 owing to his communist sympathies. McKay later got disenchanted with communism owing to Stalin's mass persecution of the 1930's, turned Catholic and moved to Chicago where he passed away in 1948. Now the soil was fertile for the appearance of works of poets such as Countee Cullen (1903 - 46), Langston Hughes (1902 - 67), Margaret Walker (1915 - 98), and Sterling Brown (1901-89).

World War II (1939 - 45) saw the emergence of poets who had the experience of active service: Karl Shapiro (1913 - 2000), Randall Jarrell (1914 -1965) and James Dickey (1923 - 97). Unlike their predecessors they wrote like Elizabeth Bishop (1911 – ‘79), Theodore Roethke (1908 – ‘63) and Delmore Schwartz (1913 - 1966) their contemporaries in traditional verse forms.

John Berryman (1914 – ‘72) and Robert Lowell (1917 – ‘77) gained eminence in the post-war years. They chose to explore their own experiences, subject matter and style in their poetry and came to be known as **Confessional** Poets. They had a strong influence on Sylvia Plath (1932- ‘63) and Anne Sexton (1928 –‘74).

As opposed to the Confessional poets, Jack Kerouac (1922 –‘69), Allen Ginsberg (1922 –‘97), Gary Snyder (b. 1930), Amiri Baraka (b. 1934) and, Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1919) are distinctly raw. These **Beat Poets** pushed American idiom in the direction of demotic speech further than any others before them.

Along with the Beat Poets **Black Mountain Poets** (at Black Mountain College) were also exploring the open form in a much better manner than the Beat poets. Their leader was Charles Olson (1910 –‘70) and the prominent poets were Robert Creeley (1926 - 2005), Robert Duncan (1919-‘97) and, Denis Levertov (1923 – ‘97).

Under the influence of Kenneth Rexroth and Gleason San Francisco became the hub of experimental activity since the 1930’s. The Beats and some of the Black Mountain Poets contributed to the growth of the **San Francisco Renaissance** which produced poets such as Charles Bukowski (1920 - 94) and Jack Spicer (1925 –‘65).

On the East Coast, the **New York School** produced poetry of urbane wit and elegance in contrast with the work of their Beat contemporaries. The leading lights of the group are John Ashberry (b. 1927), Frank O’ Hara (1926 –‘66), Kenneth Koch (1925 - 2002), Ted Berrigan (1934 –‘83) and James Schuyler (1923 –‘91). Of these John Asberry has been acclaimed as the most prominent poet in the latter half of the twentieth century.

This note gives you an outline of the developments in poetry in the twentieth century in America. With this background you may read the poems in this block in perspective.

Amiya Bhushan Sharma

UNIT 31 ROBERT FROST

Structure

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 - 31.4.4 Themes/ Questions for Discussion
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31.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to enable you to:

- write about Robert Frost’s life and work
- discuss Frost’s poetry with special reference to:
 - i) “After Apple-Picking” and
 - ii) “A Boundless Moment”

31.1 INTRODUCTION

Have you learned any poem by Robert Frost during your school days? Perhaps you have studied “The Road Not Taken” or “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” It would be useful and delightful to read one of these poems before you start learning this unit whether you are familiar with these poems or not.

Robert Frost, one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, has a rare finesse to raise the commonplace to the level of the sublime. His poems have a unique charm. Many of his poems begin by referring to routine experiences of the village life but they always lead us to some profound philosophical truth that helps us to understand life beyond the surface. As the poet himself commented his poems begin in delight and end in wisdom. Frost’s style is often deceptively simple veiling the complexity of his thought. Realistic description frequently leads to a meditative attempt to explore the deeper meanings and complexities of human existence. Read the next section to know more about the poet and his poetry.

31.2 ROBERT FROST (1874-1963)

Robert Frost was born on 26th March 1874 in San Francisco, California. His father William Prescott Frost, Jr. was a journalist and his mother, Isabelle Moodie, a Scottish schoolteacher. The Frosts were originally based in New England. Frost is often regarded as the greatest exponent of New England life and culture. When Frost was about ten years old his father died, and so the family had to move to Lawrence, Massachusetts and lived there with the support of the poet's paternal grandfather. Frost began to write poems early and had his first poem published in the student magazine of Lawrence High School. He joined Dartmouth College but left after a few months. Then he tried a hand at various jobs, including delivering newspapers, working in a factory, and editing the local newspaper. In 1895 Frost married Elinor Miriam White, a former schoolmate. In 1897 he entered Harvard but left studies before obtaining a degree. For the next few years he lived in a small farm in New Hampshire. During this period he wrote many of his famous poems. At the same time he led a farmer's life.

Frost worked as an English teacher at Pinkerton Academy and the New Hampshire Normal School from 1906-1912. In 1912, Frost sold the farm and moved to England with his family. In England Frost became acquainted to poets such as Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, and Ezra Pound. He published his first collection of poems, *A Boy's Will*, in 1913. But it was *North of Boston*, published in 1914, that assured his status as a great poet. *North of Boston* included many of his famous and widely anthologised poems such as "Mending Wall," "The Death of the Hired Man," and "After Apple-Picking."

The outbreak of World War I compelled Frost to return to America with his family. As a reputed poet he embarked on a career of writing, teaching, and lecturing. He was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1916, the year in which his third collection of poems *Mountain Interval* was published. It included poems like "The Road Not Taken" and "Birches." The same year Frost also began to teach English at Amherst College. In 1921 Frost was given a teaching fellowship at the University of Michigan. Frost's later publications include *New Hampshire* (1923), *From Snow to Snow* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942) and *Steeple Bush* (1947). His *Collected Poems* appeared in 1951.

Robert Frost is perhaps the most honoured and beloved American poet. He received the Pulitzer Prize four times (1924, 1931, 1937, and 1943) and honorary degrees from a number of universities including the Oxford and Cambridge. He was an honoured guest at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and was invited to travel to the Soviet Union as a member of a goodwill group in 1962. Frost died on 20th January 1963.

Frost envisioned poetry as a mode of survival in a world of chaos, "a momentary stay against confusion." For him the humdrum everyday aspects of life in New England are a staple to come to terms with the philosophical issues that troubled him. It is quite natural that the peasant life is a composite imagery for the poet to discuss the hard realities and baffling complexities of life. The colloquial idiom of Frost's poems deftly creates a rapport with the reader. It has been said that he "turned the living speech of men and women into poetry." Many of his poems take the form of monologues or dialogues that lay bare the inner feelings and thoughts of the narrative voice.

In “Education by Poetry” Frost remarks that “Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have. Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another.” Nature and human activities associated with nature often become metaphors that evoke deeper realities of life in Frost’s poems. Imagery becomes a vehicle to convey philosophical insights into life. In the process fact and fancy mingle in his poems into a delightful harmony revealing the ultimate truths about human life.

Self-check Exercise I

1) What is Frost’s own comment on his poems?

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2) Whom did Frost meet while he stayed in England?

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3) Which are the early collections of Frost’s poems?

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4) Why did Frost return to America?

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5) Why is Frost regarded as the most honoured of American poets?
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6) What was Frost’s vision about poetry?
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31.3 AFTER APPLE-PICKING

31.3.1 Introduction

Have you ever been involved in the harvest of any crop? Had it been a long day’s toil that exhausted you? Did the initial enthusiasm of the harvest persisted throughout the day? Or did you long for rest and sleep once you became exhausted? Again, what kinds of thoughts do you usually have before falling asleep? Could you ever predict what you will dream about?

Here is a poem that begins with an almost realistic account of farm life, the process of apple-picking to be specific. But it is much more than a matter-of-fact description of harvest. The poet soon tells you about a dream, inviting you out of the realms of reality. As in a typical poem by Frost everyday reality transforms into the revelation of profound truths about human existence. The routine harvest in the apple orchard becomes a metaphor that prompts the reader to meditate upon the meaning of life beyond the surface.

Now read the poem a few times carefully and make an attempt to answer the questions that follow.

31.3.2 Text

My long two-pointed ladder’s sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there’s a barrel that I didn’t fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn’t pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight

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I got from looking through a pane of glass 10
 I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
 And held against the world of hoary grass.
 It melted, and I let it fall and break.
 But I was well
 Upon my way to sleep before it fell, 15
 And I could tell
 What form my dreaming was about to take.
 Magnified apples appear and disappear,
 Stem end and blossom end,
 And every fleck of russet showing clear. 20
 My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
 It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
 I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
 And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
 The rumbling sound 25
 Of load on load of apples coming in.
 For I have had too much
 Of apple-picking: I am overtired
 Of the great harvest I myself desired.
 There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch, 30
 Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
 For all
 That struck the earth,
 No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
 Went sure to the cider-apple heap 35
 As of no worth.
 One can see what will trouble
 This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
 Were he not gone,
 The woodchuck could say whether it's like his 40
 Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
 Or just some human sleep.

31.3.3 Glossary

- Line 11 *skimmed*: picked up
- Line 12 *hoary grass*: white grass covered with snow
- Line 18 *Magnified apples*: In the dream apples appear larger, an indication that reality gets transformed in dreams.
- Line 20 *fleck of russet*: tiny patches of deep reddish brown
- Line 21 *instep arch*: The arched middle part of the human foot between the toes and the ankle.
- Line 22 *ladder-round*: the rung of the ladder; presumably the rungs of the ladder are rounded in shape
- Line 24 *cellar*: basement or vault; a room below ground level in a house, often used for storing wine

Line 35 *cider-apple*: apples for making cider, i. e., a fermented alcoholic beverage made from apple juice

Line 40 *woodchuck*: A common rodent of North America, having a short-legged, heavy-set body and grizzled brownish fur. It is also called groundhog. It burrows in the ground and hibernates

Line 41 *Long sleep*: In case of the woodchuck it refers to its hibernation in winter. With human beings it implies death, the long sleep that puts an end to life.

Self-check Exercise 1

Now see if you can answer the following questions briefly.

1) Has the speaker finished apple-picking?

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2) Is there any hint in the initial lines that suggest that the apple-picking is not finished?

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3) Is this a poem about apple-picking? If yes, why is it entitled 'After Apple-Picking'?

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4) What experience of the morning does the speaker refer to?

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5) Describe the speaker's dream?

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6) Why does the speaker feel that he is overtired of the great harvest?

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7) Explain the line: "This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is."

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8) What does the woodchuck's long sleep imply?

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9) What is the difference between the woodchuck's long sleep and "some human sleep"?

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Could you answer the questions? The next section provides a critical evaluation of the poem. It would help you to have a better understanding of the poem. After reading it you may go back to the Self-Check Exercise again and modify your answers if necessary.

31.3.4 A Critical Appreciation

Frost sets the poem on a late autumn season. The harvest is almost over and the signs of winter are very much evident. At the end of a long day's apple picking, the speaker is overcome by fatigue. He is feeling sleepy and seems to have been out of touch with reality since early morning. The trance like state induced by fatigue and sleep is foreshadowed in the morning when he looked at the apple trees through a filmy sheet of ice that he lifted from the drinking trough. From the reality of the farm he gradually slips into the world of dream. But even in his sleep, in the dream, apples are an integral part. In his vision he sees apples grow from blossoms, fall off trees, and pile up in the cellar. As sleep overcomes him, he wonders if it is the normal sleep of a tired man or the deep winter sleep of death.

The opening lines seem to suggest that the speaker is still picking apples, but the title emphasizes that the poet focuses on what happens after apple-picking. However his job is not yet finished. At the foot of the tree a barrel remains half filled and there are apples still on the boughs. Thus he stops harvesting apples half way. The speaker says that his ladder still points 'toward heaven.' The ladder pointing toward heaven gives the poem religious overtones. It alludes to Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28:10-19. Jacob dreams of a ladder up to heaven that angels climb. God stands at the top of the ladder and tells Jacob that he and his descendants will be blessed.

The speaker feels that the essence of winter sleep fills the night air. It is gradually approaching him, and is like the fragrance of apples and is sleep inducing. He feels too drowsy that it is impossible for him now to remain awake. As he slips into the unreal world of sleep and dream he remembers a strange sight of the morning. At the drinking trough the top layer of water was frozen. He picked up a thin sheet of ice and looked through it. He saw the frost-covered, hoary grass, distorted by the vision through the filmy ice which was like a pane of glass. But as the ice began to melt, he let it fall and break thus freeing himself from the unreal vision of the world. But now as he is drowsy he can once again enter the world of dream reigned by unreality. The morning vision through the pane of glassy ice was strange. The speaker has not been able to get rid of this sense of strangeness all day. He tried to rub it from his sight, like rubbing sleep out of your eyes in the morning, but in vain.

The poet introduces what seems to be a delicate time shift. The speaker says that he was upon his "way to sleep" before the sheet of ice fell down and broke. In his drowsy state the speaker associates the image from the morning into his dream. Memory and dream coalesce to confuse our sense of time. After a long day's toil the speaker seems to be asleep on his bed. And before he sinks into sleep he guesses what he is about to dream. In his dream he partially relives his daytime activity. In the dream apples appear larger, an indication that reality gets transformed in dreams. As the apples in his mind's vision are magnified he can see every speck of reddish brown on them. His dream about apple-picking is realistic as well. In the dream his feet feel the pain of sanding on the ladder for a long time. He can even feel the pressure on his feet as the ladder sways round as

the branches of the apple tree bend under his weight. That is, in the dream he feels he is still upon the ladder picking apples. Frost conveys the dream of the speaker with an immediacy of appeal. The sights and sounds the speaker experiences are also felt by the reader. He hears the other apple pickers unloading barrels of apples in the cellar.

The speaker is tired of picking apples for so long. Now he is sick of the great harvest he wished for. He elaborates why he is tired of harvesting apples. The initial excitement of harvest gives way to the monotony of picking and putting apples into the barrel again and again. Moreover it has to be done very carefully. The apples that fall on the ground would be considered worthless even if they are without bruises or stubble. Such apples would become part of the cider-heap. Frost brings in again the image of falling, suggesting the Fall of Man. The apples would be fine if they remain on the branches, or put into the barrels carefully. Or they may remain in the unreal world of dreams. But they seem to be “of no worth” if they touch the earth.

The poet returns to sleep again. To be more specific the speaker is puzzled about nature of his sleep. He says that he can realise what is going to trouble his sleep. It implies that the images in the dream are haunting him, making him restless even in sleep. The speaker seems to be uncertain about the sort of sleep he is going to have. He wonders if his sleep is the normal everyday sleep of human beings or the long sleep of a hibernating woodchuck. The woodchuck is an expert in hibernation, so it could say whether the speaker is about to go into hibernation. Unfortunately, the woodchuck has already gone to sleep for the winter, so the speaker’s question will remain unanswered.

Frost employs visual, tactile and auditory images to convey the feeling of the harvest and its reflection in the dream. Accordingly, he focuses on the sights, sensation, and sounds. He sees magnified apples in the dream and every spot of reddish hue is clearly visible. The pain and pressure that his feet experienced after standing on the ladder for a long time continue to be felt in the dream. In the dream he can hear the rumbling of apples being unloaded in the cellar. Frost evokes the scent of apples in the air.

Metrically the poem appears rather strange. But there is a curious association between meter and theme. Of the forty-two lines about twenty-five are in iambic pentameter. The intermingling of uneven lines corresponds to the speaker’s consciousness as it journeys in and out of dream, gliding between wakefulness and dream at irregular intervals. Just like the varying meter and rhyme there is a confusion of the tenses in the poem. It is evident when the speaker says that he was “well upon my way to sleep” before the sheet of ice fell from his hands. This heightens the dream-like ambience of the poem.

In a way the poem is simply about apple picking. Even after a hard day of apple picking, the exhausted speaker cannot be out his toil. In his mind he continues picking apples. Apples continue to appear and disappear in his mind’s eye, the pain and pressure of standing on the ladder is still felt on his feet, and he is concerned about the apples that fall upon the ground which are fated to go into the cider press. But the title implies that the poem focuses on what happens after apple picking. On a deeper level, the speaker is exhausted by the hardships of life and longs for a relief from them. He wants to escape from reality and enter into a dream-like world through sleep. For Frost, the routine of picking apples during the harvest becomes a metaphor for dealing with deeper issues – of seasonal change and death. It is evident that it is the fag end of autumn. Signs of winter

are too evident to go unnoticed. The 'hoary' grass, the frozen surface of the water trough and the essence of winter sleep that pervades the air bear witness to the onslaught of winter. For the natural world death is approaching. The poet is doubtful if the human world would be renewed in spring like nature.

From another perspective the poem can be seen as the rambling thoughts a man who is about to die. The descriptions and thoughts, and dreams about apple-picking may be his hallucinations. Apple-picking becomes a metaphor for life itself or of human obligations and duties. The speaker has finished his vocation and is "done with apple-picking now." For a farmer like him harvest season is a time of fulfilment but he is now "overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired." As he falls asleep or loses consciousness, he is unable to ascertain if he is dying or merely sleeping. He is not sure if he is falling into the normal everyday sleep or the long sleep from which there is no return unlike the hibernating animals. Sleep is a common metaphor for death that Frost has employed in many poems; cf. "Miles to go before I sleep" (Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening). But as it is beyond human powers to foretell the advent of death it may just be some human sleep and nothing more.

In *Robert Frost: The People, Places, and Stories Behind his New English Poetry*, Lea Newman comments: "The reference to the woodchuck and his long sleep in the concluding lines of the poem has confused many readers. Frost probably found the idea of comparing humans to woodchucks in Emerson's essay "Nature," where readers are told, "let us be men instead of woodchucks." A discussion of hibernation in another Emerson essay, "Fate," may have been the source for the term "the long sleep." In terms of the dream-ridden and exhausted state of the speaker in Frost's poem, he could be seeking the dreamless sleep of an animal or the month-long sleep of hibernation."

Apple-picking is employed as a metaphor for life and death. In a hard, tiresome life, things remain undone like the unpicked apples on the branches. The unpicked apples represent the things in the speaker's life that he has not completed. While crossing the threshold of death many things remain unaccomplished like the barrel that the speaker didn't fill. But the speaker is overtired and is "done with apple-picking now." He yearns for sleep or death as a way of escape from the trials and tribulations of life. So "After Apple-Picking," is not merely a poem about a man longing for rest after a hard day's work of picking apples though he knows that his sleep will be troubled because his work remains unfinished. In his overtired state the speaker wants a sleep corresponding to the hibernation of a woodchuck rather than a "human sleep." But his sleep will be human precisely because it will be disturbed by dreams in which reality is magnified and distorted. It differs from animal sleep as it is troubled by memories

31.3.5 Themes/ Questions for Discussion

- 1) Justify the title of the poem.
- 2) How does reality transform in the speaker's dream?
- 3) The Imagery in the poem
- 4) The metaphor of sleep
- 5) Critically evaluate the poem commenting on the interrelations among the metaphorical, metrical and thematic elements.

31.4 A BOUNDLESS MOMENT

31.4.1 Introduction

Have you ever come across a beautiful sight that captivated your attention? How long did you watch it? Did it interrupt your work in any way? Why did you turn your attention from it and resume what you had been engaged in? What if the sight that captured your attention was just an illusion, a creation of your imagination?

Well, here is a poem by Frost which presents such a situation. A sudden distraction created by a sight takes the speaker and his companion into a world of unreality. But they come back to reality soon. What lesson do they learn from an incident that seems not so significant?

Read on this short poem to answer these questions. But more importantly there are a few more questions in the next section which you have to answer after reading the poem a few times.

31.4.2 Text

He halted in the wind, and – what was that
Far in the maples, pale, but not a ghost?
He stood there bringing March against his thought,
And yet too ready to believe the most.

“Oh, that’s the Paradise-in-bloom,” I said;
And truly it was fair enough for flowers
Had we but in us to assume in March
Such white luxuriance of May for ours.

We stood a moment so in a strange world,
Myself as one his own pretense deceives;
And then I said the truth (and we moved on).
A young beech clinging to its last year’s leaves.

Self-check Exercise 2

1) Why does the poet’s companion suddenly halt?

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2) What is the significance of the reference to March?
3) Why does the speaker say that it is the paradise in bloom?
4) What does the strange world refer to?
5) What in truth was the sight that captivated their attention?

Now you may read the next section which is a critical evaluation of the poem. It would help you if you had any difficulty in answering the above questions.

31.4.3 An Evaluation of the Poem

The poem opens rather abruptly. The poet and his companion seem to be taking a leisurely walk. Suddenly something moving faraway among the maple trees arrests their attention. The wind seems to be carrying something pale but it is not a ghost. The poem’s dramatic opening line switches the reader’s attention to the unknown. The reader faces a question (“what was that / Far in the Maples, pale but not a ghost?”), and it disrupts the train of thought. It seems a spring vision of beauty, of flowering trees. But the fact that it is the month of March brings a jarring note. Still he is ready to accept the beautiful vision.

The speaker too, is enamoured by the beautiful distant vision. In his excitement he compares the vision of spring flowers to paradise in bloom. The pale hue in the distance is fair enough to be blooming white flowers. The unexpected delight that the distant sight evokes brings into their mind the luxuriant beauty of spring. The poet and his friend are so captivated by the beautiful vision so that they assume the lush beauty of May much in advance, that is, in March when signs of spring are merely incipient. Human beings long for momentary moods of happiness and sights of beauty in life. Sometimes we immerse ourselves in such fleeting moments of beauty mistaking such moments to be boundless.

Thus the speaker and his companion remain rapt in that strange world of beauty for a moment before reality rushes in. Both of them are deceived by the unreal image of beauty that imagination creates. Then truth dawns in the speaker's mind. They realise that what captured their attention was only a tree holding last year's leaves. It was a young beech tree retaining last year's dry leaves. They accept reality and come out of the momentary vision. Once they accept the truth they move on.

The poem employs the cycle of seasons to hint at the irrevocable cycle of life. Each May the bloom comes out and brings life to the death of winter. The poem is about a single moment when the characters see that life has changed. The phrase "and we moved on" marks the end of the moment that seemed boundless. It also suggests the disappointment in being out of the blissful moment of imagination and the return to everyday reality. There is a tension in the poem between movement and stopping. At the very beginning of the poem the companions stop walking. At the end of the poem, when the truth is revealed they resume their walk. In between they were in a boundless moment when they seek out the meaning of the distant sight. But it lays bare before them a truth about life as well. Captivating illusions and distractions abound in life. They are delightful but the reality of life, though dark and dismal, is something we cannot shun for long.

"A Boundless Moment" begins by referring to a sight that unexpectedly captures attention. But it leads the reader to look into the relation of human beings to nature. It pries into the mysteries of nature, especially the cycle of seasons. Nature's mood changes enigmatically. Along with it the colours of the fabric of nature transform proclaiming new seasons and hopes. But all the beauty and change in nature underlines the impermanence that is associated with nature and life as well. The poem gives an image of beauty, but this image is nothing more than an illusion. The two men think that they see flowers. But in fact they are only dead leaves clinging to a beech. So what captured their attention was only an illusion. When they realise this truth they turn again to the routine of life. The incident hints at the inherent limitations of human imagination. The ideal visions of imagination cannot persist for long as they are bound to encounter the truth of hard reality. Human desire and imagination can create visions for what seems a "boundless moment." But the unreal nature of such moments will be soon revealed, and it becomes a ceaseless moment of revelation about the hard realities of life. Such moments of realization are not tragic but they are dignified moments that provide insight into life. The vanishing of a vision of beauty evokes sadness but we are endowed with the truthfulness to accept reality. The speaker's bold acceptance of truth, even though it is harsh and disappointing, reveals the dauntless human spirit that faces reality.

31.4.4 Themes/ Questions for Discussion

- 1) Describe the strange experience of the speaker and his companion.
- 2) What revelation does the experience lead to?
- 3) The Implications of the title ‘A Boundless Moment.’

31.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read about the life and work of Robert Frost and about the unique features of his poetry, focusing on two of his poems. The discussion of Frost's concept and vision of poetry would have been helpful to you in understanding the poems. The first poem “After Apple Picking” is based on Frost's experiences as a New England farmer. From the routine event of the harvest season the poet takes you to the deeper philosophical realities about human life. The second short lyric “A Boundless Moment” too, takes you to a common experience and gives a deeper insight into life. We hope you enjoyed the poems and will read more of Frost's poems.

31.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise 1

- 1) Frost has remarked that his poems begin in delight and end in wisdom.
- 2) He met poets like Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves and Ezra Pound.
- 3) *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*
- 4) The outbreak of World War I in 1914 compelled him to return to his native land.
- 5) Frost received the Pulitzer Prize four times and honorary degrees from a number of universities including the Oxford and Cambridge. He was an honoured guest at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and was invited to travel to the Soviet Union as a member of a goodwill group in 1962.
- 6) For him poetry was a way of survival in the chaotic world. In his poems everyday aspects of life become a tool to discuss philosophical issues and complexities of life. So nature and human activities become metaphors to understand the deeper realities of life.

Self-Check Exercise 1

- 1) No He has not finished apple-picking.
- 2) Yes. The barrel of apples at the foot of the tree is only half filled. Unpicked apples are still there on the boughs.
- 3) The poem is not merely about apple-picking. The title implies that the poem focuses on what happens after apple-picking. The routine of apple-picking during harvest leads to deeper issues of seasonal change, renewal of life and death. Apple-picking become a metaphor for life itself, or for human obligations.
- 4) In the morning the speaker saw that the top layer of water was frozen in the drinking trough. He picked up a thin sheet of ice and looked through it. He

saw the frost-covered, hoary grass, distorted by the vision through the filmy ice. As the ice began to melt, he let it fall and break thus freeing himself from the unreal vision of the world.

- 5) In his dream the apples appear larger, an indication that reality gets transformed in dreams. As the apples in his mind's vision are magnified he can see every speck of reddish brown on them. In the dream his feet feel the pain of sanding on the ladder for a long time. He can even feel the pressure on his feet as the ladder sways round as the branches of the apple tree bend under his weight.
- 6) For a farmer the harvest season is a time of fulfillment. But the speaker is overtired of the great harvest. He is on the threshold of death and so the harvest of life or human achievements are insignificant.
- 7) As he falls asleep or loses consciousness, he is unable to determine if he is dying or merely sleeping. He is not sure if he is falling into the normal everyday sleep or the long sleep from which there is no return unlike the hibernating animals. Sleep is a common metaphor for death that Frost has employed in many of his poems. But as it is beyond human powers to foretell the advent of death it may just be some human sleep and nothing more.
- 8) The woodchuck's long sleep refers to hibernation in winter. It implies a contrast between the natural and human world.
- 9) The woodchuck's long sleep is just hibernation in winter. It is untroubled and assures regaining normal life in spring. With human beings it implies death, the long sleep that puts an end to life.

Self-Check Exercise 2

- 1) The poet's companion sees something faraway among the maples. It was a captivating sight and so he halts suddenly.
- 2) It is impossible to see the beauty of spring in the month of March. So the reference to March hints that the beautiful vision that attracted their attention is unreal.
- 3) The speaker is enamoured by the beautiful distant vision. He thinks it to be spring flowers and compares its exquisite beauty to paradise in bloom.
- 4) The strange world refers to the world of beauty that is unreal. It is a world that imagination creates but is a source of delight and escape from harsh realities.
- 5) The sight that captivated their attention was only a beech tree still retaining last year's dry leaves.

UNIT 32 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Structure

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- 32.2 William Carlos Williams
 - 32.2.1 A Note on Imagism
- 32.3 Spring and All
 - 32.3.1 Introduction
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- 32.4 A Widow's Lament in Springtime
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 - 32.5.4 Comprehension Questions
- 32.6 Let Us Sum Up
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32.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Write about William Carlos Williams' life, work and style.
- Discuss Williams' 'Spring and All', 'A Widow's Lament in Springtime' and 'The Dead Baby' in detail
- Understand 'Spring and All' and 'A Widow's Lament in Springtime' as two poems that treat the motif of spring differently.
- Understand 'A Widow's Lament in Springtime' and 'The Dead Baby' as two poems that treat death and its effects on the people around.

32.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will be introduced to William Carlos Williams' life, works and his influences briefly. A note on Imagism will inform you of the basic ideas of imagism as a literary and artistic movement and how Williams himself is an exemplary of the same.

The poem 'Spring and All' will show how the speaker uses specific images to develop one single image of the arrival and spread of spring after winter. The idea of transition is central to the reading here.

On the other hand, ‘A Widow’s Lament in Springtime’ shows the contrast in the season around the speaker and her own emotions and feelings. The juxtaposition of two stark ideas will be explored in this section.

Finally, ‘The Dead Baby’ will explore how the family of a baby awaits the arrival of the body of their child and how the mother and the father react differently to this event. The difficulty of coming to terms with the death of newborn child for causes unknown will be central to the ideas in this poem.

We hope you enjoy reading the unit.

32.2 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

William Carlos Williams was born in Rutherford, in 1883. A doctor by profession, Williams was serious about his medical career, while at the same time making immense contribution to the scene of avant-garde poetry. Born to a British father and a Puerto Rican mother, Williams was always someone who celebrated his mixed ancestry. At the age of 19, Williams entered the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Medicine in Philadelphia. While at medical school, Williams met and befriended both Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle. Pound played a crucial role in the development of Williams’ career as a poet.

He married Florence who was instrumental in sending some of his poems to *Poetry*, the Chicago magazine managed by Pound. Pound was impressed by the growth of Williams as a poet that he arranged for the publication of Williams’ *The Tempers* in 1913. His second book *Spring and All* contains several of his anthologized poems. On reading his most famous ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ Robert Warren and Cleanth Brooks remarked: “reading this poem is like peering at an ordinary object through a pin prick in a piece of cardboard. The fact that the tiny hole arbitrarily frames the object endows it with an exciting freshness that seems to hover on the verge of revelation.”

Williams was always known to be an innovator and experiments with his poetry. Most of his contemporaries including Pound were expatriates, but Williams remained in America, treating the patients of the Rutherford working class for most of his life. His verse is deeply influenced by his environment, both professional and otherwise. In joining the company of Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle, Williams went on to become an integral part of the Imagist Movement in poetry.

32.2.1 A Note on Imagism

Imagism was literary movement of the early twentieth century that initiated the ideas of literary Modernism. Imagist poetry is characterised by a ‘direct treatment of the thing’ without any ornate rendering of the idea. It favoured precision over description and thus encouraged the use of precise images. Pound described an image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”. In the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*, Pound, along with an essay on Imagism, Pound penned “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” which included:

- Direct treatment of the “thing”, whether subjective or objective
- To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
- To compose in a rhythm that reflects the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of metronome (fixed, regular rhythm).

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches-

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind-

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
One by one objects are defined-
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance-Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken

Self-check Exercise 2

1) Identify the visual images in this poem

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2) Do you think you end up with one visual made of several objects at the end of the poem? If so, how?

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32.3.3 Analysis

‘Spring and All’ is a classic poem by Williams from a collection by the same title. The poem is made up of several simple images that culminate in one image that stands sharply and quite brightly. The poem chronicles the transition period between the end of winter and the birth of Spring. It shows how the birth of life in Spring is not sudden but a process whose beauty is in the very aspect of growth and change inherent to the season. Written in 1921, the poem is also metaphorical of the near end of the World War I and the birth of a new moment in history.

On reading the poem, one can easily visualize the speaker having stopped by a hospital treating contagious diseases, to savour the landscape characterised by

the cold wind and the clouds sailing above in the sky. The contrast between the hospital (which stands for death, due to the nature of the contagious disease) and the birth of spring (which stands for new life) is indeed a sharp one. Yet another contrast is between the closed nature of the hospital and the openness that characterises the environment outside. The seasonal change described here is not a complete transformation from one to another, but remnants of Winter still persist, through which Spring makes its presence felt, quite slowly. The line “sluggish,/ dazed spring approaches” makes this image quite evident. Spring is not arriving with full of vigour and life, but quite dazed; its pace is sluggish, too. With the movement of time, each of these new things will begin to take better shape and defined outlines, almost as if waking from a deep slumber and straightening themselves.

The speaker sets the scene for the reader quite quickly enabling the reader to imagine a space just by the road close to the hospital. However, the reader is more likely to predict that the rest of the narrative is to chronicle the ‘contagiousness’ of the hospital. In fact, the word ‘contagious’ captures the whole mood of the poem quite aptly. What is indeed contagious the spread of spring in the landscape, although not at the moment when the speaker is looking around the space. While one might expect the disease to spread into the roads, a contrasting image is brought to the fore: that of clouds and blowing wind. However, notice how the cloud is not sailing but are surged by the wind. The opening lines therefore do not set a happy, cheerful and colourful setting, but a bleak one with a contagious hospital and clouds in the sky surged by the winds.

On looking downward, the speaker notices how the plants have dried, the leaves have fallen on the ground. These are, as the speaker suggests, a waste of dried weeds and trees are merely standing tall with nearly no leaves. In the stanza beginning with the lines “All along the road. . .” the speaker portrays how the landscape is characterised by a lack of life and vigour. However, with the lines “Lifeless in appearance, sluggish/ dazed spring approaches”, the poem shifts from a scene of lifelessness to the birth of new life.

The speaker notices the arrival of the season of new life, the first sign of life is seen the personified birth of the new leaves. This slow process begins to speed up . The use of the word ‘quicken’ to qualify the spring that was referred to as ‘sluggish’ and ‘dazed’ is to be carefully noted here. However, it is only a beginning. The new life is only peeping out but not yet fully overpowering the scene. The lines “Now the grass, tomorrow / the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf / One by one objects are defined “ make this idea clear. The change is happening in their roots, underground and they are slowly beginning to awake.

The poem can be read simply as a metaphor for change, transition and perhaps even the birth of a revolutionary idea, thought or moment in history.

32.3.4 Comprehension Questions

1) How does the speaker chronicle the birth of spring?
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2) Examine the use of contrasts by Williams to bring the central image of the poem.

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32.4 A WIDOW’S LAMENT OF IN SPRINGTIME

32.4.1 Introduction

Yet another poem placed in the springtime, the speaker here is not one who observes the birth of spring but a widow who no longer can associate herself with the beauty that spring brings with it.

32.4.2 Text

Sorrow is my own yard
where the new grass
flames as it has flamed
often before, but not
with the cold fire
that closes round me this year.
Thirty-five years
I lived with my husband.
The plum tree is white today
with masses of flowers.
Masses of flowers
load the cherry branches
and color some bushes
yellow and some red,
but the grief in my heart
is stronger than they,
for though they were my joy
formerly, today I notice them
and turn away forgetting.
Today my son told me
that in the meadows,
at the edge of the heavy woods
in the distance, he saw
trees of white flowers.
I feel that I would like
to go there
and fall into those flowers
and sink into the marsh near them.



32.4.3 Discussion

The tone of the poem here is established by the very opening word of the poem. This poem, too, like “Spring and All” uses several contrasts to establish the mood and tone of the poem. The speaker here is a widow who is grieving the loss of her husband and describing her sad state of mind. The title of the poem itself gives this idea. She recognises that the spring is a time of new growth, quite like the speaker in the previous poem. However, the difference lies in how the widow here is noticing how the same season of growth and life means something very different post her husband’s passing. While the season is characterised by several bright colours, the speaker notices how her feeling of grief is stronger than the colours that she no longer takes any joy in them. The title itself makes the contrast in the poem evident. The widow’s lament in springtime is cold, painful and morose. Thus the very renewal of spring has death built into its frame.

The poem opens with the lines “Sorrow is my own yard. . .” The metaphor here describes how she does not just feel the sorrow. It has now become so vast that it is indeed her yard. She sees the absent presence of her husband in her yard and metaphorically remarks that the yard no longer represents any life for her, but mere grief, sorrow and death. She notices the birth of new grass, which until now was filled with potential for growth and life, is characterised by a cold fire. The paradox here adds to the emotions felt by the widow. She remarks how, with the death of her husband, she feels the sorrow engulfing her completely and making her numb to the growth of life and vigour around her this time around.

Having lived for thirty-five years with her husband, the speaker is unable to fathom an existence without him. Hence, everything around her looks depressing despite the brightness in colour and light. Even though the plum tree is filled with flowers and the cherry blossoms brighten up other bushes, the speaker cannot relate to this new birth of life because of the death of her husband. It is this contrast that is brought out throughout the poem. She remarks that “the grief in my heart/ is stronger than they”. She also maintains that these were precisely the tiny little joys of her family that no longer excite her. One could easily imagine the husband and wife, perhaps enjoying their morning tea in the yard talking about the plums and cherry blossoms. Today, she’d rather forget those memories as they do not bring her happiness but only accentuate her grief.

She remarks that her son’s mention of the meadows with white flowers are where she would like to be, not to enjoy the landscape but to sink into the marsh land quite like the flowers that wither from those trees.

A closer look at the images in the poem shows how Williams treats contrasts and paradoxes effectively to be able to bring out the mood of the speaker in opposition to the surroundings. The use of white flowers against the red plums is an image that one cannot miss. The contrast is one that adds beauty to the image and makes the presence of both the colours felt. Similarly, the use of yellow and red also brings out the bright and light contrast of the flowers very clearly. However, this brightness of the flowers does not appeal to the speaker any longer as she has already mentioned how her whole yard has transformed itself into a space of sorrow. Despite the fact that her son is still with her, the tone of the poem suggests that the widow feels lonely in her yard, showing how she feels isolated in the outside world.

32.4.4 Comprehension Questions

1) How is the representation of spring different in both the poems discussed above?
2) What ideas of spring are contrasted in “A Widow’s Lament in Springtime”?
3) Examine the contrasting images and the effect it produces to the tone of the poem in “A Widow’s Lament in Springtime”.

32.5 THE DEAD BABY

32.5.1 Introduction

“The Dead Baby” is yet another poem that deals with the theme of death. Quite like “The Widow’s lament in Springtime”, the speaker in this poem characterises the mind of the family facing the death of their son. A parallel reading of Robert Frost’s “Home Burial” would prove to be useful in understanding two American poets’ treatment death by both the mother and father differently.

32.5.2 Text

Sweep the house
under the feet of the curious
holiday seekers—
sweep under the table and the bed
the baby is dead—

The mother's eye's where she sits
by the window, unconsoled—
have purple bags under them
the father—
tall, wellspoken, pitiful
is the abler of these two—

Sweep the house clean
here is one who has gone up
(unproblematically)
to heaven, blindly
by force of the facts—
a clean sweep
is one way of expressing it—

Hurry up! any minute
they will be bringing it
from the hospital—
a white model of our lives
a curiosity
surrounded by fresh flowers.

32.5.3 Discussion

“The Dead Baby” is not so much about the dead baby but the effect the baby’s passing has had on the parents. The poem begins with an assertion to “sweep the house clean” for all the guests who have arrived to grieve the little child’s death as well as the arrival of the dead body of the child too. The speaker is neither the mother nor the father of the child, but perhaps a relative, a close friend. This speaker observes a stark difference in the way both the mother and the father deal with their loss. The speaker’s description of the mother’s grief helps us visualize a deeply grieving mother sitting by the window, reminiscing the memories of her child. The lines “The mother’s eye’s where she sits/ by the window, unconsoled— / have purple bags under them . . .” show that the mother deals with her loss emotionally. The father, however, is more practical and knows that things have to go on, including making arrangements for the arrival of the mourners. He is, in our speaker’s eyes, “tall, wellspoken, pitiful / and abler of the two”.

But what exactly does the act of sweeping signify? Especially under the bed and under the table? The speaker here wants to sweep not just the house clean, but of the reminders of death itself. A symbolic way of moving on from the loss is described through a mindless act of sweeping. What makes the loss all the more difficult to fathom is that the baby has died without any complications, suggested by the word “unproblematically”. The parents merely have a set of facts to comprehend their child’s sudden death. Just like how the medical discourse sweeps the death of the child “by force of the facts”, the parents are also expected to sweep the house of any markers that remind them of the lack of causality in the child’s death. This only goes on to show how both the parents are in denial of their loss in the face of harsh reality and the terrors of life. The very act of sweeping shows how the event has affected the parents emotionally, although the father may not express it overtly.

Now that you have been given some ideas about the poem, reflect on the following questions.

32.5.4 Comprehension Questions

- 1) Reflect on how the theme of death is treated in “A Widow’s Lament” and “The Dead Baby”?

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- 2) In both “A Widow’s Lament” as well as “The Dead Baby”, the dead subject is not within the narrative of the poem but lies outside it. What do you think is the reason for this?

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- 3) What is the significance of the constant reference to the action of sweeping in the poem?

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32.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have introduced you to one of the key figures of Modernist American Literature, William Carlos Williams. Here, we have examined how in all three poems, Williams uses situations, places and people that are realistic and that all of us find easy to relate to. Through this, you must be able to read and understand how Williams uses many images towards working towards establishing one single image that speaks like a painting.

32.7 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise 1

- 1) An artistic and literary movement that developed in Europe and America, modelled on the art movements in Europe at the time. Several key figures including Pound and H.D. contributed to strengthening this movement both through their poetry as well as critical reflections.
- 2) They both reflect on how Williams' "Red Wheel Barrow" is like looking at an object through a small pin prick on a cardboard.

Self-check Exercise 2

- 1) Look at those images that stir the sense of sight: the hospital, the surroundings, the sky, the landscape and the traces of spring in the midst of a fading winter.
- 2) Yes, all the images together set up the image of a fading winter and the birth of spring that brings with it freshness and life.

Self-check Exercise 3

- 1) Spring not as a sudden season that brings with it new life, but a slow and sleepy season that slowly picks up speed to change the face of the landscape.
- 2) Winter-spring; hospital-landscape outside; sluggishness- quickens

Self-check Exercise 4

- 1) "Spring and All" chronicles the birth of spring in the eyes of the speaker; "A Widow's Lament in Springtime" shows how the speaker is unable to associate with the mood of the season due to her husband's death.
- 2) Spring as a season of life; here represents death for the speaker.
- 3) Bright colours on the trees and the lack of life and cheerful emotions in the speaker; spring as engulfing a cold feeling in a season of brightness and warmth.

Self-check Exercise 5

- 1) Both poems look at death of a family member; denial in both the poems as far as accepting death of the loved one is concerned; death as life-altering.
- 2) Both poems look at the effect the death has had on the immediate family and not much to the dead person itself; shows what the dead person meant for both the family members.
- 3) Sweeping as cleaning the reminders of death, escapism and therefore denial of death itself.

UNIT 33 WALLACE STEVENS

Structure

- 33.0 Objectives
- 33.1 Introduction
- 33.2 Wallace Stevens
 - 33.2.1 Style
- 33.3 The Snow Man
 - 33.3.1 Introduction
 - 33.3.2 Text
 - 33.3.3 Analysis
 - 33.3.4 Comprehension Questions
- 33.4 The Emperor of Ice-Cream
 - 33.4.1 Text
 - 33.4.2 Discussion
 - 33.4.3 Comprehension Questions
- 33.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 33.6 Answers to Self-check Exercises

33.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Write about Wallace Stevens' life, work and style.
- Discuss Steven's 'Snow Man' and 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' in detail.

33.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we briefly introduce you to Wallace Stevens' life and work and discuss two select poems: 'The Snow Man' and 'Emperor of Ice-Cream'. We suggest that you through the unit section by section as exercises that will aid your comprehension of the poem are part of the reading.

In 'The Snow Man', we show how Stevens, although a modernist, is greatly influenced by the Romantics and hence shows Romantic tendencies in the treatment of his subject matter. Unlike other modernist poets, say the Imagists, Stevens deals with his subject through abstraction.

In 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' we see how the speaker urges one not to treat death with all the bleakness associated with it, but instead accept its inevitability with cheer. We also see how Stevens treats the female subject in this poem and understand how Stevens' gendered reading opens up crucial questions about the representation of female subjects in his poetry.

We hope you enjoy the unit.

33.2 WALLACE STEVENS

Wallace Stevens is one of the most prominent figures of Modernist poetry in America. Most readers find Stevens difficult to understand Wallace Stevens was

born and in Reading, Pennsylvania. He completed his high school from Reading and then entered Harvard from where he studied French and German, read philosophy and wrote several poems. He went on to edit Harvard Advocate, a magazine in which T. S. Eliot later published his early poems. Stevens also met several important figures in Modern American poetry including Witter Bynner and George Santayana. In fact, Santayana’s combined interest in poetry and philosophy resembled Stevens’ own preoccupation with poetry and philosophy. Taking after his lawyer father, he even completed a law degree and worked with several law firms. In 1916, he joined the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. He was employed there for the rest of his career.

Stevens began publishing his poems in Poetry and other magazines. But it was not until 1923 that he completed his volume of poetry *Harmonium*. It is in this collection that many of his famous lyrics are found.

33.2.1 Style

Modernist poetry, especially of the Imagist kind of Williams and Pound tries to present reality through images, as they are. But Wallace Stevens’ form of modernist poetry instead changed representation to things of the imagination that played a chord with reality. Although a modernist, Stevens exhibits aspects of Post-Romantic lyricism in most of his poetry. This is because his most common cited influences apart from the Romantics have been the transcendentalist tradition of Emerson and Walt Whitman, and the French symbolist tradition of Baudelaire, Mallarme, and Valery. Thus, his style is largely eclectic and lacks an agenda for poetry as that of the Imagists. In fact one clearly can notice how Stevens presents his lyricism with a modernist innovation. It is this feature of his poetry that enables one to distinguish his style from many other modernists of his time like Pound, Eliot, Williams among others.

Most of his poems explore the relationship between the self and the external world and the mind as attempting to order and shape the world. Christopher Beach remarks: “A central philosophical theme which runs in various permutations throughout Steven’s poetry is that of the tension, opposition or interplay between reality and the imagination”.

Stevens’ poetry is also a significant move away from the Imagist tradition. This is because Stevens’ poetry does not articulate the objectivity and lack of sentimentality of the Imagists but one that invokes rather abstract modes of poetry and thought. His belief was that the theory of poetry is the theory of life. This makes the art of writing poetry in itself into a very grand enterprise. It is because Stevens believed that everything around us is a construct and that reality itself is a fiction of the mind that most of his poetry is an articulation of philosophical abstractions that the mind engages in, making his poetry often too difficult to comprehend in one reading. Now, take a look at the following questions based on Stevens’ style.

Self-check Exercise I

- 1) What are some of the ways in which Stevens may be distinguished from other Modernists of his time?

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33.3 THE SNOW MAN

33.3.1 Introduction

‘The Snow Man’ is one of the many poems of Wallace Stevens’ which looks at the season of winter. The common notions of winter are that it is cold, bleak, lifeless and gloomy. The speaker of Snow Man urges one to transform into a snowman himself to be able to see the beauty of the wintry surroundings. Let us now turn to a reading of the poem. We suggest that you read the poem aloud to be able to sense the tone and mood of the speaker.

33.3.2 Text

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Self-check Exercise 2

1) Pick out the visual and auditory images from the poem.

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2) Identify words in the poem that give an idea of nothingness.

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3) If you were to visualize this poem, how would you characterise the settings, the people and things around the speaker?

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33.3.3 Analysis

The speaker here dramatizes how the mind works in ordering and understanding reality. Before we can delve into the poem, let us ask ourselves: Who or what is a snowman? A snowman is an inanimate figure often made in snow. (Notice that this word is a compound, unhyphenated word as opposed to the word in the title of the poem). However, the snow man referred to in Stevens’ poem refers to a person with a ‘mind of winter’. At the outset, one might notice a detachment in the voice of the speaker. But, on closer reading, intensity in feeling the reality around is visible.

Observe how the whole poem is one single sentence that articulates a seemingly simplistic idea: “One must have a mind of winter” to behold “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is”. The syntax of the poem is symptomatic of the various logical and philosophical turns that human mind takes to comprehend reality. In this one sentence, a movement from the sensory experience of sight to that of sound to ultimately ‘behold’ a ‘nothingness’ is significant.

“The Snow Man” is a record of a man who comprehends winter by feeling the bareness and the absence of flowers and leaves that is winter. All the branches of the trees around only manifest themselves in the images of winter and snow: “One must have a mind of winter”/ says the speaker of Snow Man, “To regard the frost and boughs/ Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;” For Stevens, it requires a snowman, made of snow, resting in snow to understand the reality that a land of leafy trees and sunny warmth is not permanent and thus one must live in the present. The snowman must now quell his desire of yearning the warmth and for this, he must acquire a mind of winter and not dwell in the misery of winter. He must arrive at a time when he can call winter beautiful and it would indeed be a long time but this comes at a cost: an annihilation of his present self, thus rendering “nothing himself”. The “Nothing that is not there” is the absence of the warmth of leafy trees and sunlight; and “the nothing that is” is the winter, which is beautiful as it is – in its nothingness. It is indeed this kind of an abstraction that poets like Pound, Eliot and others avoided in their modernist poetry.

If one were to attempt a simplistic, reductive reading of the poem, we may get this: To be able to overcome the loss of all that the season of summer gives – the bright shiny days, the warmth, the leafy trees and plants –and all that the winter is – snowy days, snow crusted pines, coldness in the wind and the body – one must turn oneself into a snowman who, by being an inanimate object in the

wintry surroundings, is able to nullify the effects of the absences / nothings that characterize the winter and dispel the misery associated with the absence. The evolution of the one in the beginning of the poem to a snowman who watches the dazzle of the snow crusts in the January sun or mutely listens to the cold air all alone is an important development that Stevens makes. Stevens himself has described this poem in one of his letters as “an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with the reality in order to understand it and enjoy it”. However, such an enjoyment comes at price of effacing the human and becoming a snowman.

In several poems on winter, Stevens often posits the notion of nothingness-as-something. Here, too, in becoming a snowman, in possessing a mind of winter, the absence of things (nothings like no warmth, no leaves; and no-things) is transformed into something perceptible by turning into a snowman with no ears to not hear the misery in the coldness of the wind. It is in dispelling misery and pain and coldness by turning into something like snow itself that winter can be enjoyed.

George S. Lensing in “Stevens’ seasonal cycles” comments about the final irony of human effacement and nothingness menaing something as “an arrival at pure being that allows for no consciousness of its cleanest efficacy”. Thus, one can imagine a solitary man standing in wintry surroundings and becoming one with the reality around him by becoming the very nothing that had given him misery and bleakness. He may not be in the company of the human but his misery becomes one with and isin the company of the snowy reality that surrounds him.

33.3.4 Comprehension Questions

- 1) Examine how “The Snow Man” moves from concreteness to abstraction that is still located in the concrete.
- 2) Why do you think the speaker uses the nothingness of the winter to qualify the nothingness of the snowman?
- 3) What must one become to be able to enjoy the wintry surroundings? How can one remain unaffected by the misery associated with the absence of warmth in winter?

33.4 THE EMPEROR OF ICE-CREAM

33.4.1 Text

Call the roller of big cigars,
 The muscular one, and bid him whip
 In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
 Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
 As they are used to wear, and let the boys
 Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers.
 Let be be finale of seem.
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
 Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
 On which she embroidered fantails once

And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Glossary:

- Whip** : to move fast and quick in a specified direction; often done with curds and cream.
- Concupiscent** : lustful, sexual desire
- Wenches** : young girls, prostitutes
- Dawdle** : waste time, be slow

33.4.2 Discussion

‘The Emperor of Ice-cream’ is one among Stevens’ many obscure poems. The poem provides a thematic contrast between joys and pleasures of life on the one hand and death on the other. The poem is structured into two stanzas. Notice how the first stanza is characterized by life, celebration and mirth while the second is characterized by death, stillness and is devoid of activity.

Let us now begin to look at the poem closely. As mentioned earlier, the poem is divided into two distinct stanzas in terms of ideas. The first is characterized by a set of assertions and commands leading to celebration and mirth while the second is a complete opposite of the first. We see that the whole poem is almost like a set of commands given by a person of authority. From the last line of the two stanzas, one deduces that the authority is indeed an emperor, a king. However, the emperor is not any emperor but one who rules over the kingdom of ice-cream. While this can sound trivial, the emperor himself makes frivolous commands: he commands the muscular man to whip curds in the kitchen. This is incongruous with his physical appearance. Besides, the speaker also introduces a lustful desire with this image of whipping curds through the word ‘concupiscent’. The reader now knows that the kitchen is not merely an space where food is cooked but also several worldly desires. We encounter a scene where young girls are flirting with boys and wasting their time; young boys are at the scene with flowers in old newspapers: this is a scene of a party called by the emperor of ice cream.

In the second stanza the celebration is contrasted with a corpse lying in a room. The emperor commands the corpse be covered with a sheet. The sheet is not a shroud that is usually used to cover corpses but one taken from the dressing table of the woman herself. While the table has no knobs and needs fixing, the sheet is one on which the dad woman had once embroidered fan tails. However, the sheet is not long enough to cover the woman completely—her feet protrude but are cold and establishes her death. The woman subject here is mute, dead and ‘cold and dumb’ thus rendering her voiceless to celebrate the kingdom of the ice cream and its emperor.

The emperor suggests that between life and death, between that which is present and that which is not, one must choose the former. It is reality and not appearance that rules the world, materiality (life, lust, desire) over lack of materiality (death), impermanence (life, mortality and even the ice cream) over permanence (inevitability of death) hence the lines ‘Let be be finale of seem’.

‘Be’ here refers to reality and ‘seem’ refers to appearance. The only emperor, therefore, is the emperor of ice cream who even commands the spotlight to be on him as he asserts “Let the lamp affix its beam,/ The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.” (Even if it is the cold emperor of life, sensuality and appetite.)

To make for an easier understanding of the poem, Helen Vendler has tried to provide a first person narrative of the poem.:

“For purposes of experiment, I have put the details the poem gives us into the form of a first-person narrative; I see the poem as a rewritten form of this *ur*-narrative, in which the narrative has been changed into an impersonal form, and the linear temporal structure of narrative form has been replaced by a strict geometric spatial construction – two rooms juxtaposed. Here (with apologies) is my conjectural narrative *ur*-form of the poem, constructed purely as an explanatory device:

I went, as a neighbor, to a house to help lay out the corpse of an old woman who had died alone; I was helping to prepare for the home wake. I entered, familiarly, not by the front door but by the kitchen door. I was shocked and repelled as I went into the kitchen by the disorderly festival going on inside: a big muscular neighbor who worked at the cigar-factory had been called in to crank the ice-cream machine, various neighbors had sent over their scullery-girls to help out and their yard-boys bearing newspaper-wrapped flowers from their yards to decorate the house and the bier: the scullery-girls were taking advantage of the occasion to dawdle around the kitchen and flirt with the yard-boys, and they were all waiting around to have a taste of the ice cream when it was finished. It all seemed to me crude and boisterous and squalid and unfeeling in the house of the dead – all that appetite, all that concupiscence.

Then I left the sexuality and gluttony of the kitchen, and went in to the death in the bedroom. The corpse of the old woman was lying exposed on the bed. My first impulse was to find a sheet to cover the corpse; I went to the cheap old pine dresser, but it was hard to get the sheet out of it because each of the three drawers was lacking a drawer-pull; she must have been too infirm to get to the store to get new glass knobs. But I got a sheet out, noticing that she had hand-embroidered a fantail border on it; she wanted to make it beautiful, even though she was so poor that she made her own sheets, and cut them as minimally as she could so as to get as many as possible out of a length of cloth. She cut them so short, in fact, that when I pulled the sheet up far enough to cover her face, it was too short to cover her feet. It was almost worse to have to look at her old calloused feet than to look at her face; somehow her feet were more dead, more mute, than her face had been

She is dead, and the fact cannot be hidden by any sheet. What remains after death, in the cold light of reality, is life – all of that life, with its coarse muscularity and crude hunger and greedy concupiscence, that is going on in the kitchen. The only god of this world is the cold god of persistent life and appetite; and I must look steadily at this repellent but true tableau – the animal life in the kitchen, the corpse in the back bedroom. Life offers no other tableaux of reality, once we pierce beneath appearances. (p 50-51, Vendler, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire*).

The point that the speaker of ‘Ice-cream’ then makes is that one can either choose to be cold or join the sensuality and appetite in the kitchen, for, the only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream. This is a poem that brings the simultaneous cohabitation of both life and death on the same plane.

33.4.3 Comprehension Questions

<p>1) What kind of a persona would you attribute to the emperor of ice cream here?</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
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33.5 LET US SUM UP

So far, we have looked at two poems of Wallace Stevens. ‘The Snow Man’ is a poem that urges one to absorb oneself in the beauty of the wintry surroundings even at the cost of removing all that is human. Transforming the self by absorbing it into the other is at the heart of the poem’s philosophy. ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ on the other hand examines both life and death and favours life over death.

We hope this unit has helped you understand some philosophy of Steven’s poetry and his style and encourages you read some more.

33.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise 1

- 1) Look at the poetry of Williams, Pound and others in this course. Stevens attempt to not result in a derivative form of modernist poetry but one that was synthesized from American tradition of transcendentalists.

Self-check Exercise 2

- 1) pine-trees crusted with snow; behold the junipers shagged with ice, the spruces rough in the distant glitter; auditory images: sound of the wind, in the sound of a few leaves,
- 2) images of winter; bare; nothing
- 3) Think of a snowy setting with trees covered in snow and no human activity and a solitary person in these surroundings.

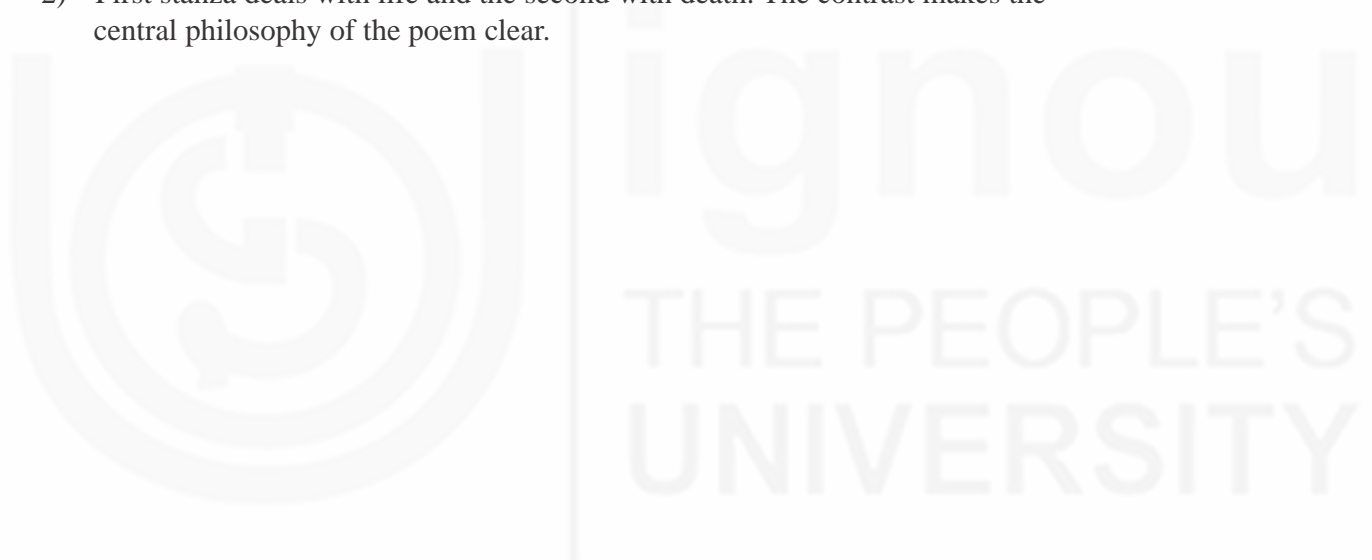
Self-check Exercise 3

Wallace Stevens

- 1) Look at how the poem begins with concrete images of winter which are all used to qualify a nothingness – a lack of life – that winter is. It is this contradiction / paradox that gives the poem its central meaning.
- 2) Look at how the speaker is equating a real snowman with no ears and eyes to a man who must become like the snow man who turns a deaf ear and blind eye to harsh reality of winter and become one with the nothingness of winter to enjoy it.
- 3) Look at how the speaker urges an effacement of the human and absorb one's self with the surroundings outside completely to be able enjoy the beauty of winter.

Self-check Exercise 4

- 1) Pay attention to the tone of the poem. The emperor is authoritative, assertive yet appears frivolous and trivial with his commands. However he is espousing a larger philosophy of being happy about reality than appearance.
- 2) First stanza deals with life and the second with death. The contrast makes the central philosophy of the poem clear.



UNIT 34 LANGSTON HUGHES

Structure

- 34.0 Objectives
- 34.1 Introduction
- 34.2 Langston Hughes (1902-1967): A Brief Biography
 - 34.2.1 The Harlem Renaissance
 - 34.2.2 Hughes and African Folk Music
 - 34.2.3 Hughes and the Black Arts Movement
 - 34.2.4 Hughes' Poetic Theory
- 34.3 The Negro Speaks of Rivers
 - 34.3.1 Introduction
 - 34.3.2 The Text
 - 34.3.3 Analysis of the Poem
 - 34.3.4 An Appreciation
- 34.4 Young Gal's Blues
 - 34.4.1 Introduction
 - 34.4.2 The Text
 - 34.4.3 Analysis of the Poem
 - 34.4.4 An Appreciation
- 34.5 Mother to Son
 - 34.5.1 Introduction
 - 34.5.2 The Text
 - 34.5.3 Analysis of the Poem
 - 34.5.4 An Appreciation
- 34.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 34.7 Suggested Reading
- 34.8 Answers to Self-check Exercises

34.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

- discuss Langston Hughes' life, career, major works, poetics and his association with various movements
- analyse and appreciate the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"
- analyse and appreciate the poem "Young Gal's Blues"
- analyse and appreciate the poem "Mother to Son"
- discuss the use of African-American dialect of English in the poems

34.1 INTRODUCTION

According to R. Baxter Miller, Langston Hughes "was perhaps the most wide-ranging and persistent black American writer in the twentieth century." Miller's view means that Hughes was not merely a poet; he was, in addition, a fiction writer, dramatist, librettist, writer of Broadway musicals, essayist, children's

author, lyricist, radio and television teleplay writer, columnist, editor, public speaker and reviewer. To quote Baxter again, “He wrote for and beyond his time.”

Hughes’ career spanned over a period of fifty years. He was a product of the socio-cultural milieu of the African-Americans [Nowadays, we do not use the terms *blacks*, *Negroes*, etc., to denote the descendants of the Africans in America. However, you may find them used in some quotations in this Unit] between the 1920s and 60s. He was associated with the Harlem Renaissance of the 20s and the Black Arts Movement of the 60s. The cultural events of each decade kept on shaping him as a writer and, to some extent, as an African-American activist. In the 1920s he began his career writing blues and jazz poetry. In the next decade, the decade of the Great Depression and communism in America, he was passionately grappling with the issue of the Afro-Americans’ equality in a white society. In the forties, he published some of his finest lyrics “as artistic relief to the racial lynching at the time.” Some of his best short stories appeared in the 50s. The Black Arts Movement of the next decade gave him the opportunity to project himself as a social activist.

Hughes was a benefactor in more ways than one. With his help many young African-American writers could publish their literary pieces in major periodicals. He was instrumental in liberating American literature from the plantation traditions, which mostly presented the submissive and suffering Afro-American. He wrote with the purpose of unifying the African-Americans with the white Americans even as “He helped charm the American audience to the future of ethnic quality and pluralism.”

In the following section we shall know more about the life and works of Hughes.

34.2 LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-1967): A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

James Langston Hughes was born on 1 February 1902 in Joplin, Missouri (America). His father was James Nathaniel Hughes and his mother’s name was Carrie Langston Hughes. The poet’s maternal grandfather, Charles Howard Langston, had a special liking for literature and Hughes inherited this liking. Charles’ brother, John Mercer Langston, was an autobiographer; he published his life history in *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capital (1894)*. Carry Hughes, too, wrote poetry and she used to deliver monologues in costume. You must have noticed from the short description of Hughes parental lineage that he grew up in a literary environment.

James Hughes, the poet’s father, studied law through the distance mode, like you. He wanted to take the Oklahoma territory bar examination but was denied permission by an examining board consisting of only white people. So in 1889 he moved onto Joplin with his wife. They lost their first child there in 1900. Langston Hughes was born two years later. Faced with poverty and the burden of supporting 18-month old Langston Hughes, James Hughes left the US for Mexico in 1903. He could earn money there and thus support his wife and son who were still in the U.S. Carry did not go with her husband. Because she could not get a regular Job, she moved from city to city seeking some work. She would take the young Langston Hughes with her only occasionally. For about nine years Carrie left him with her mother, Mary Leary Langston, who lived in Lawrence.

However, little Langston visited his mother briefly at Topeka or Colorado and even accompanied her to Mexico in 1908 to visit his father.

While young Hughes lived a hard life with his grandmother, his cousins lived in luxury in Washington D.C. Unlike the other women in Lawrence, Mary Langston did not do domestic service to earn money. She rented the rooms of her house to the students of Kansas University and sometimes she rented out her entire house while she stayed with a friend.

In 1907 Carry took Langston Hughes to a library in Topeka where he fell in love with books. One of the reasons for the sudden liking was that one could borrow books there without paying money. Years later, Hughes wrote about the impact of books on him: "Even before I was six, books began to happen to me, so that after a while there came a time when I believed in books more than in people which, of course, was wrong."

When he lost his grandmother in April 1915, Hughes lived with his mother briefly. By then Carrie had married Homer Clark. When Clark moved on seeking a job, Carrie left Hughes with Auntie Reed, her friend, and her husband.

When Hughes was in the seventh grade, he secured his first regular job which involved cleaning the lobby and toilets in an old hostel near his school. This job experience later helped him write the poem "Brass Spittoons." In 1916, while living with his mother, stepfather and stepbrother, he entered the Central High school at Cleveland. During the 4 successful years there, he wrote poems for the student magazine, *The Belfry Owl*.

Hughes was with his father in Mexico in the summer of 1919. There he realized that he disliked his father's materialistic outlook. He was depressed most of the time and even thought of suicide. In July 1920, he visited his father again and stayed with him till September 1921. His father wanted him to join a European university but he preferred Columbia University, where he enrolled in 1921 as a student with his father's permission. However, quite contrary to his expectations, the environment and the teaching at the University did not impress him at all. So he missed classes to attend Broadway shows. He couldn't go on like that for long; he dropped out of Columbia and took up various odd jobs. He also began to be attracted towards the African-American literary and cultural revival called the Harlem Renaissance (We will know more about the renaissance in a subsection of this biography).

By 1921, Hughes had started publishing literary pieces in major literary magazines. The January 1921 issue of *The Brownie's Book* carried two of his poems. Similarly, its July issue contained *The Gold Piece*, Hughes' one act play for children. Let us recall that he was still a teenager while publishing them. A poem that he wrote in 1923, "The Weary Blues", was a significant one, for it was written in the pattern of blues, a kind of folk song. (In another subsection we will learn more about blues). The title of the poem was soon to become the title of his first collection of poems.

In 1923, Hughes undertook a sea travel to Africa by working in the ship by which he was sailing. On board the ship, he threw a box of books into the sea. The books, according to Buxter Miller, "reminded him of the hardships of his past: attics and basements in Cleveland, lonely nights in Toluca dormitories at Columbia, and furnished rooms in Harlem." Hughes' first reaction on seeing Africa was "My Africa, Motherland of the Negro." He returned to the US late that year. Next year he visited Paris and Italy.

In 1924, Hughes met Arna Bontemps. They admired each other and collaboratively produced books and anthologies. While working as a busboy at Wardman Park hotel he met the American poet Vachel Lindsay. After reading some of the poems by Hughes, Lindsay published a favourable article on him in a newspaper.

When Hughes won a poetry prize in 1925, Carl Van Vechten got some of Hughes' poems published in the form of an anthology (*The Weary Blues*) from Alfred A. Knopp in 1926. Hughes met Arthur Spingarn, a lawyer, and his sister-in-law Amy Spingarn. His friendship with them, initiated through Vechten, lasted for many decades. *The Weary Blues* evoked mixed responses from critics. To Alain Locke, Hughes appeared to be "the spokesman for the black masses."

In February 1926 he joined Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, as a student. While being at the University he wrote one of his finest poems "Mullato" and it appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. The poem, according to Hughes, dealt with the "White fathers and Negro mothers in the South." Hughes also began to write and publish short stories, like "The Childhood of Jimmy", during this time. He graduated from Lincoln University in June 1929.

Hughes' meeting Charlotte Mason, an elderly white lady, in 1927 proved beneficial to him. With her support as literary patron he began to work on his first novel *Not without Laughter* and it was published in 1930. However, towards the end of the year, the relationship between the patron and the poet became strained because of their divergent views on political philosophy and race.

When he was almost 30, Hughes took the decision to earn his livelihood from writing. In 1931 he received a 1000-dollar grant from the Rosenwald Fund. With the money he went on a trip to the Afro-American colleges in the South. The tour, Baxter Miller says, "deepened Hughes' commitment to racial justice and literary expression." The trip also deepened his social commitment. After this tour, in 1932, Hughes visited Russia where he met the Hungarian-born British writer Arthur Koestler. Their discussions on emotion and creativity were beneficial to Hughes and their meeting, to quote Miller again, "renewed his [Hughes'] leftist inclinations." Similarly, a meeting with Marie Seton also reinforced his leftist thinking. In the 1930's, keeping oneself away from the leftist ideology was difficult in America. The Great Depression of the decade drove many writers and intellectuals to the communist fold. However, Hughes was never a member of the Communist party. Significantly, *The Ways of White Folks*, his first collection of short stories, appeared in 1934.

Between 1932 and 1934, Hughes earned much money through his enormous literary output. He sent a substantial part of the money to his mother, who was physically unwell then. On 22nd October 1934 his father died in Mexico but he could not attend the funeral because he got the news of the death late.

When the Spanish Civil War was on, in 1937, Hughes joined the *Baltimore Afro-American*, a daily, as a correspondent. While reporting the war he happened to meet many white American writers, like Hemingway and the critic Malcolm Cowley, who were visiting Spain. He also met the French novelist Andre' Malraux and the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.

"Hughes' work continued to earn public recognition from 1938 to 1967, the year of his death", says Miller. That means, he was actively involved in socio-political and literary activities till his death. In 1939 he founded the New Negro Theater in

Los Angeles. In 1940 he was able to publish the first part of his autobiography *The Big Sea*. Its second part, entitled *I Wonder as I Wander*, came out in 1956. He founded the Skyloft Players and produced his musical *The Sun Do Move* (1942). He wrote a weekly column in the *Chicago Defender* in which he published “the tales of Jesse B. Semple, later called Jesse B. Simple — a folk philosopher who would capture the hearts of thousands of readers.” In 1946 he won a medal and a prize of 1000 dollars from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Next year he was visiting professor of creative writing at Chicago University. In 1951 he published his book-length poem, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. On March 26, 1953, Hughes was questioned by Senator Joseph’s subcommittees for “subversive activities.” The questions were on his radical past. In the early 1960’s Hughes visited Africa and Europe again. *Ask your Mama* (1961), “Hughes’ crowning achievement”, was a satirical response to the anger of the 1960’s against all kinds of inequality that prevailed in American society. He was also a part of the Black Arts Movement and the Civil Right movement in the decade.

On 6 May 1967, Hughes admitted himself to the Polyclinic Hospital in New York with an infection of the prostate gland and a heart condition. In order not to receive any special consideration as a writer, at the hospital he registered his name as James Hughes. Later, an African-American orderly informed the hospital authorities that Hughes was suffering because of poor emergency care. Proper care came when it was too late. On 22 May he died. As Miller points out, “The African American folk poet died by the theory he had lived by.” During his long writing career, Hughes dealt with a large number of themes including free speech, transitoriness, and assimilation; nationalism, racism, integration, and poverty.”

In the following subsections let us briefly learn about some movements with which Hughes was associated, his interest in Afro-American folk music and his aesthetic views.

34.2.1 The Harlem Renaissance

The period of the Harlem Renaissance was, roughly, from 1919 to early or mid-1930s. According to some, the publication of *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* marked its beginning and the stock market crash of 1929 marked its end. The Renaissance was originally called the New Negro Movement. The place Harlem, in New York City, was an Afro-American neighbourhood, with a large number of them settling there as migrants from the American South. Here they were not victims of racism whereas in the South slavery was an accepted practice. For the uneducated, Harlem offered jobs while the educated class made it the centre of Afro-American literature and culture. A white American writer, Ridgely Torrence, staged his *Three Plays for the Negro Theatre* which “featured African-American actors conveying complex human emotions and yearnings.” The same year saw the founding of the Liberty League and the newspaper *The Voice* by Hubert Harrison. According to the Wikipedia, “Contributing factors leading to the Harlem Renaissance were the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities, which concentrated ambitious people in places where they could encourage each other, and the First World War, which had created new industrial work opportunities for tens of thousands of people. Factors leading to the decline of this era include the Great Depression.”

Langston Hughes is considered to be an important thinker and writer of the Harlem Renaissance. He lived in Harlem for long and his literary outlook was influenced by the Afro-American life and culture there. With a strong sense of racial pride, he made significant contributions to the shaping of the political and literary basis of the Renaissance. It was he who published the Manifesto-essay of the movement, namely, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1927), in the journal *Nation*. The Manifesto “skillfully argued the need for both race pride and artistic independence.” His entire literary and non-literary output underlines the importance of equality, condemnation of racism and injustice and the celebration of African-American culture, humour and spirituality. For example, the first two volumes of his poetry—*The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927)—contain poems that effectively blend Afro-American jazz and blues.

34.2.2 Hughes and African Folk Music

Hughes was deeply interested in African folk music. His love for the music was natural because of his African ancestry and lineage. Of the many forms of the music, the blues was a type that he used in his poetry. The blues has its origin in Africa and in the 20th century America, it has been associated with the work songs of labourers like stevedores, field hollers and with the shouts of slaves. The blues do not share common characteristics. “The earliest blues-like music was a ‘functional expression, rendered in a call-and-response style without accompaniment or harmony and unbounded by the formality of any particular music structure.’”

Many American writers have attempted to mix the essence of this musical form in to their works. Langston Hughes was one such writer. According to Edward Waldron, “In his blues poetry Langston Hughes captures the mood, the feel and the spirit of the blues; his poems gave the rhythm and the impact of the musical form they incorporate. Indeed, the blues poems of Langston Hughes are blues as well as poetry.”

Waldron has quoted Simon Campbell’s definition of the blues which goes thus: “The blues are simple, elemental. They have the profound depths of feeling that is found in any race that has known slavery, and the American Negro is no stranger to suffering.” Adding to this definition, a blues marker Clarence Williams says: “. . . blues, as we know them today were always written about love, someone’s baby leaving them, hard luck dogging one’s tail, and the ‘misery roun yo door’” The religious counterpart of the blues is the spirituals. Both forms are means for the slaves to give vent to their pent up feelings against their white masters. In that sense both are necessary releases for them.

You may recall that the first poetry collection of Hughes was *The Weary Blues* (1923). The title poem is an example of Hughes early use of blues in his poetry. The poem deals with a piano player in Harlem and the poem captures the essence of night life, people and folk forms. The poem has the typical call and response pattern of the blues. The speaker of the poem, the piano player, is alone but the piano talks back to him. The theme of his song is his troubles. The playing and singing, assuming the piano’s response, releases his dammed up anger against the white oppressors and thus he attains peace of mind. The poem evokes the African- American ethos in lines like these:

Sweet Blues!
Coming from a Black man's soul
O blues!

Hughes has included a set of blues poems, "Blues for Men", in his poetry collection entitled *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942). In the poem "In a Troubled Key", Hughes underscores the necessity for the Afro-American to release his pent-up emotions. The singer of the poem, who has been badly treated by his woman, sings:

Still I can't help lovin' you,
Even though you do me wrong.
Says I can't help lovin you
Though you do me wrong—
But my love might turn into a knife
Instead of to a song.

His suppressed anger and despair at the ill-treatment has been transformed into a song so that he does not indulge in any violent act.

Walder has explained the mood and the purpose of using the blues in poetry: "... the mood of the blues is often one step away from death—either murder or suicide—and that the presence of the blues form makes it possible for the anguished one to direct his sorrow inward into song and find happiness in the release." [On the **YouTube** you can listen to African-American singers singing blues songs.]

34.2.3 Hughes and the Black Arts Movement

The Black Arts Movement (BAM), also called the Black Aesthetics Movement was the aesthetic branch of the Black Power movement. It was called a sixties Movement. LeRoi Jones, the well-known African-American writer, started it in Harlem. According to the *Time* magazine, the Movement has been the "single most controversial moment in the history of African-American literature – possibly in American literature as a whole." Drawing inspiration from the Movement, African-Americans began to establish their own publishing houses, magazines, journals and art institutions. Universities started courses in African-American studies. The prominent figures associated with the movement include Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Maya Angelou, Hoyt W. Fuller, and Rosa Guy.

One of the important achievements of the Movement was that it revolutionized literature by bringing in the voices of the oppressed people. Before it, "the literary canon lacked diversity, and the ability to express ideas from the point of view of racial and ethnic minorities was not valued by the mainstream." Theatre groups, poetry performances, music and dance were received greater attention during the time of the Movement. Through these mediums they were able to educate the people the value of the art of the minorities, like the African Americans themselves. For propagating the worth of their literature and culture, the representatives of the Movement travelled extensively reading poetry.

James Smethurst, an Afro-American scholar, thinks that Hughes played some role in shaping the BAM. Smethurst says: "If one looks to uncover linkages between the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s and the earlier radicalisms of the 1930s and 1940s, the work of Langston Hughes as a writer,

editor and cultural catalyst during the 1950s and 1960s is a good place to start. Not only was his writing a crucial forerunner of Black Arts poetry, drama, essays, and short fiction, but Hughes tirelessly promoted the careers of the young (and sometimes not so young) militant black arts then, providing practical, moral, and emotional support and encouragement.”

34.2.4 Hughes’ Poetic Theory

Like the poet Allen Ginsberg, about whom are you going to study in the next Unit, Langston Hughes was also influenced by some of his literary predecessors. The writers who influenced him in shaping his own theory of writing, according to Steven C. Tracy, are Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe and WEB Du Bois. Tracy argues that these writers “sought to bring to bear upon their art a humanity and a sense of freedom and justice that Hughes recognized and with which he identified and that he sought to incorporate into his twentieth-century vision of art.”

You might have noticed that one of the striking features of Hughes’ poetry is its simplicity. It is a striking point to be noted because he was a poet who lived through the High Modernist period. You might remember, perhaps, that one of the characteristics of Modernist poetry is its obscurity (consider, for e.g., the poems of TS Eliot). In spite of being an active writer in the 1920’s and 30’s, he did not make his writing difficult to understand. According to Tracy, Hughes inherited the plain style that has been there in American Literature since the publication of *The Bay Psalm Book* (1640). The style, Tracy argues, “has been synonymous with guilelessness and directness.” The tradition of plain writing continued through some of the writers who influenced Hughes. He admired Whitman for the latter’s “open and democratic” writing. The older writers included the lower classes and their dialects in their writing. Hughes was very early impressed by Mark Twain’s *Adventures of the Huckleberry Finn*, for it presented in a plain style the superiority of the African Americans as human beings in comparison with the white Americans. Twain’s use of the African-American dialect also impressed Hughes. In his works, to quote Tracy again, “Twain was experimenting with the social and linguistic resonance of dialects, as well”.

Harriet Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) also dealt with Afro-Americans’ life of bondage in America. The moral implications of the novel appealed to Hughes. “In Stowe, Hughes recognized an artist of courage and symbol who placed morality at the centre of her art and attempted to use her writing to serve the broader interests of mankind.” What drew Hughes to Du Bois was the latter’s intellect and education, integrity and commitment.

When we examine Hughes’ works, including his poems, we notice that he has derived much from these writers’ plain style and themes. But at the same time there were other influences as well. His Afro-American origin and his firsthand knowledge of the prejudice and discrimination against the black community had a part to play in the shaping of his aesthetics. His interest in the leftist ideology further contributed to his creative outlook. Again, Hughes’ interest in African-American folk culture and music was partially instrumental in shaping his art. He used his aesthetics with a purpose: to speak for the voices that have been silenced. However, his concept of literary art does not advocate hate for or violence against the white population. But it certainly argued for the unity of the racially marginalized. Steven Tracy argues: “Exploring and affirming the pan-

American component of the human experience, particularly the African American dimension of the American experiment: this was the aim Hughes's entire artistic harvest. Implicit in that affirmation was a rejection of the social and literary pretensions that divided the African American lower and upper classes, emphasizing a commonality of colonized experience that united—or should have united—darker peoples in America and around the world.”

As has already been mentioned, Hughes was a prolific writer. For your reference a select list of the important works of Langston Hughes is given below (Source: Wikipedia):

Poetry collections

[On **YouTube**, you can watch Langston Hughes reading some of his poems. For example you can hear him reading the poem “Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Mother to Son”]

The Weary Blues (1926); *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927); *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* (1931); *Dear Lovely Death* (1931); *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (1932); *Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play* (1932); *Let America Be America Again* (1938); *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942); *Freedom's Plow* (1943); *Fields of Wonder* (1947); *One-Way Ticket* (1949); *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951); *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1958); *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961); *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times* (1967); *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1994)

Novels and short story collections

Not Without Laughter (1930); *The Ways of White Folks* (1934); *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950); *Laughing to Keep from Crying* (1952); *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953); *Simple Stakes a Claim* (1957); *Tambourines to Glory* (1958); *The Best of Simple* (1961); *Simple's Uncle Sam* (1965); *Something in Common and Other Stories* (1963)

Non-fiction books

The Big Sea (1940); *Famous American Negroes* (1954); *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956); *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America*, with Milton Meltzer (1956); *Famous Negro Heroes of America* (1958); *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP* (1962)

Major plays

Mule Bone, with Zora Neale Hurston (1931); *Mulatto* 1935 (renamed *The Barrier, an opera*, in 1950); *Troubled Island*, with William Grant Still (1936); *Little Ham* (1936); *Emperor of Haiti* (1936); *Don't You Want to be Free?* (1938); *Street Scene*, contributed lyrics (1947); *Black Nativity* (1961); *Five Plays by Langston Hughes* (1963); *Jericho-Jim Crow* (1964)

Books for children

Popo and Fifina, with Arna Bontemps (1932); *The First Book of the Negroes* (1952); *The First Book of Jazz* (1954); *Marian Anderson: Famous Concert Singer*, with Steven C. Tracy (1954); *The First Book of Rhythms* (1954); *The First Book of the West Indies* (1956); *First Book of Africa* (1964)

Self-check Exercise I

- 1) Read the biography of Langston Hughes given in Wikipedia and collect more information about his political views.

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- 2) Do you find any similarities between the life of Langston Hughes and the life of Alan Ginsberg? What are they?

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- 3) Do you think that the use of blues helped Hughes to write a different kind of poetry?

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34.3 THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS

34.3.1 Introduction

This poem is one of the most anthologized poems of Langston Hughes. In July 1920, Hughes visited his father in Mexico. The train by which he was travelling was crossing the Mississippi River and going to St.Louis. The noisy movement of the train, the muddy water in the river and the summer clouds touched his heart in a special way. They evoked many ideas in his mind, concerning beauty and death, hope and despair. They also stirred his heart to think about the history of the Afro-Americans from its earliest times to the 19th and 20th centuries. As he travelled, Arnold Rampersad says, “A phrase came to him, then a sentence. Drawing an envelope from his pocket, he began to scribble. In a few minutes Langston had finished a poem.”Remember, he was only 17 years old when he wrote this poem. The poem was dedicated to WEB Du Bois and it first appeared in the journal *Crisis* in 1921.

The poem contains references to four rivers with which the African-American history is tied up. The rivers also evoke in the poet memories of slave trade. As

Miller points out, “The muddy Mississippi made Hughes think of the roles in human history played by the Congo, the Niger and the Nile, down whose water the early slaves once were sold. The poem also alludes to Abraham Lincoln’s historic journey down the Mississippi which was instrumental in shaping his anti-slavery attitude. Thus the poem, while expressing the Afro-Americans’ disturbing memory about their days of slavery, underscores the antiquity of their race and the depth that the Afro-American’s character attained through varied experiences over centuries. The poem may also be considered as a critique of dominant cultures that have been insensitive to human suffering.

34.3.2 The Text

I’ve known rivers:
 I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
 flow of human blood in human veins.
 My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
 I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
 I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
 I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
 went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
 bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:
 Ancient, dusky rivers.
 My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Glossary:

- The Euphrates** : It is the longest and one of the most historically important rivers of Western Asia. Together with the Tigris, it is one of the two defining rivers of Mesopotamia. Originating in eastern Turkey, the Euphrates flows through Syria and Iraq to join the Tigris in the Shatt al-Arab, which empties into the Persian Gulf.
- dawns** : here, civilizations
- the Congo** : It is a river in Africa and the world’s deepest river with measured depths in excess of 220 m (720 ft). It is the second largest river in the world by volume of water discharged. Additionally, its overall length of 4,700 km (2,920 mi) makes it the ninth longest river.
- lulled** : caused to feel sleepy
- the Nile** : is a major north-flowing river in northeastern Africa, generally regarded as the longest river in the world. It is 6,853 km (4,258 miles) long. The Nile is an “international” river as its water resources are shared by eleven countries, namely, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt.^[3] In particular, the Nile is the primary water resource and life artery for Egypt and Sudan.

- the Mississippi** : a river flowing entirely through the USA. Its length is 4070 Kms
- Abe Lincoln** : Abraham Lincoln, the American President who abolished slavery
- New Orleans** : In 1828, a teenaged Abraham Lincoln guided a flatboat down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. The adventure marked his first visit to a major city and exposed him to the nation's largest slave marketplace. It also nearly cost him his life, in a nighttime attack in the Louisiana plantation country. That trip, and a second one in 1831, would form the two longest journeys of Lincoln's life, his only visits to the Deep South, and his foremost experience in a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse urban environment.
- dusky** : dark in colour

[Explanation for references to Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile and New Orleans are partial quotations from the Wikipedia and other sources on the Internet. You can get more interesting information about them from the sources.]

34.3.3 Analysis of the Poem

The poem is a first person (singular) narrative. If the speaker 'I' in the poem is Langston Hughes himself, then the pronoun can stand for any Afro-American who shares the poet's views. The poem appears to be a proud proclamation of his race's close connection with the evolution of human history and civilization. But at the same time it hides in it the atrocities that the African race had to face over centuries.

There are references to four rivers in the poem and three of them flow through the dark/African continent. When the speaker says "I have known rivers", he is stressing the fact that the Afro-American's knowledge of rivers is different from that of any others because his life has always been closely associated with them. He doesn't say 'I know rivers' but 'have known' them. The present perfect tense indicates the Africans' long and close association with rivers. Further, the word "known" indicates his deep and firsthand knowledge of them; he does not simply know 'about' them. And these rivers, because they originated with the earth, are older than human beings ("older than the/ flow of human blood in human veins.")

The rivers mentioned in the poem are deep. But the depth can also refer to their long history of continuous flowing. The soul of the African, who too has a long history, is deep like the river; the history of his existence has been made complex through colonial experiences, dislocations and hardships.

The speaker goes on to talk about the antiquity of his race: "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young." As you might know, Mesopotamia is considered to be the cradle of all western civilizations and it was located between the two rivers Euphrates and Tigris. The speaker of the poem argues that his ancestors existed on the banks of Euphrates, thereby implying that the African's origins can be traced back to the origins of the earliest civilizations ("dawns"). Next, the speaker refers to his race's peaceful existence on the banks of the Congo river: "I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep." The river

is presented, as Rachel DuPlessis says, “as a pastoral, nourishing, maternal setting.” For the African, the sound of the flowing river was like a lullaby.

The next river is the Nile whose name is closely associated with the history of Egyptian civilization. Egypt is also known for the Pyramids. But the Pyramids hide beneath them the toil of the Africans. The speaker subtly suggests that his people were also involved in the building of the ancient pyramids, may be as slaves or as peasants. For the monumental work granite had to be transported through the Nile and the Africans were supposedly helpful in doing the work and thus, as the speaker implies, they “raised the pyramids above it [the Nile].”

By mentioning the river Mississippi, an American river, the speaker is turning the history of the Africans to the recent times, that is, the 19th and 20th centuries. The river, unlike the previous ones, is described as “muddy.” The quiet existence of the African was disturbed when colonization and slave trade began, when his people were transported to the US by the Mississippi River. Slavery was legally accepted until, at the end of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln abolished it through his Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. His visit to New Orleans as a young man had given him a dreadful firsthand knowledge of slavery. The speaker closes the poem by asserting once again that he has known rivers and that his knowledge of them, like his experience, is deep.

34.3.4 An Appreciation

This short seemingly simple poem is a fine representation of the complex history of the African-Americans. The poet has effectively connected the history with 4 rivers. At the creation of man, the river Euphrates was one of the headwaters of the main river that flowed from the garden of Eden (Genesis 2: 10-14). While Euphrates connects the Africans to the beginning of the world and civilisation, the Nile and the pyramids suggest their not so pleasant and arduous advancement with civilization. Finally, the Mississippi connects them with the recent past in American history and their existence in the new continent as slaves till the 20th century. Over the centuries, the African has seen the rise and fall of civilizations and his surviving spirit has continued even in the US, despite colonisations and the consequent racial discrimination.

The ‘I’ in the poem is not a complaining individual but, like the ‘I’ in Whitman’s poems, a pleasant speaker for his race. He narrates the Africans’ common past. The changing of the Mississippi’s colour into golden yellow in the sunset perhaps alludes to the slaves’ freedom gained through Lincoln’s proclamation. But centuries of slavery has left indelible scars in his memory. Thus he repeats the line “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” to suggest that “he is no longer the same man who ‘bathed in the Euphrates’” or “built [his] hut near the Congo”; he is now a black man who has toiled for the building up of civilizations and has experienced the pain of slavery and racism. The imprint of these experiences in his soul has made his character deep.

It is significant that the speaker does not explicitly talk about Africans’ slavery or the pains of racism; the poem has a pleasant surface. Thus bathing in Euphrates or building the hut near the Congo can be considered as normal human activities and they indicate undisturbed life. But raising the pyramids evokes images of the African slaves’ hard work in building them (some scholars believe that Africans were made to work as slaves in the erection of the pyramids, while some do not). And the references to Abraham Lincoln and New Orleans bring to mind

American Civil War and slavery. When the poem ends, he repeats that his soul is deep, also perhaps as a result of the wisdom he has gained through his suffering.

The poet uses many poetic devices in this short poem. For instance, we notice the use of simile in the line “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” Similarly, if we consider the speaker’s lines in their literal sense, then many of them will appear hyperbolic (“I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young” or “I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln/went down to New Orleans”). Again, the lines “I have known rivers” and “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” are used as refrains.

Self-check Exercise 2

1) Write a note on the theme of the poem.

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2) How does the poet link the history of the speaker’s race with the rivers in the poem?

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3) How is the language of the poem different from that of the other two poems?

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34.4 YOUNG GAL’S BLUES

34.4.1 Introduction

This poem has death, aging and loneliness as its themes. One cannot escape death. It evokes feelings of sadness and grief. It can also lead to the (in)significance of human existence. In this poem a young girl, after witnessing death and loneliness, is considering death as a desirable option in a world devoid

of love; she prefers death to growing old. This might sound unusual because for a young person life is full of hope and expectations. So when a young girl desires death, the cause of the desire has to be justified. This is what Hughes tries to do in this poem. Whether he is serious about the justification is something that we are going to see shortly.

34.4.2 The Text

I'm gonna walk to the graveyard
 'Hind ma friend Miss Cora Lee.
 Gonna walk to the graveyard
 'Hind ma dear friend Cora Lee.
 Cause when I'm dead some
 Body'll have to walk behind me.

I'm goin' to the po' house
 To see ma old Aunt Clew.
 Goin' to the po' house
 To see ma old Aunt Clew
 When I'm old an' ugly
 I'll want to see somebody too.

De po' house is lonely
 An' de grave is cold.
 O, de po' house is lonely,
 De graveyard grave is cold.
 But I'd rather be dead than
 To be ugly an' old.

When love is gone what
 Can a young gal do?
 When love is gone, O.
 What can a young gal do?
 Keep on a-lovin' me, daddy,
 Cause I don't wanna be blue.

Glossary:

gal	: girl
gonna	: going to
Hind	: behind
de	: the
po	: poor
gravel	: small rounded stones, often mixed with sand
wanna	: want to
blue	: feeling sadness

34.4.3 Analysis of the Poem

The opening of the poem itself is striking for it evokes thoughts about death. The young girl, the speaker of the poem, begins her song thus: "I'm gonna walk to the graveyard." At the outset the reader gets the hint that the theme of the poem could be death. She seems to be accompanying the funeral cortege of her friend

Miss Cora Lee. The reason why she is walking to the graveyard is, "...when I'm dead some/Body'll have to walk behind me."

She also says that she is visiting old Aunt Chew at the latter's poor house. Like the reason for going to the graveyard, there is a reason for visiting the old aunt: "When I'm old an' ugly/ I'll want to see somebody too."

In the third stanza we again get references to old age and death. She says Aunt Chew is lonely in her poor house and Cora lies cold in her grave. Comparing death and old age she says: "But I'd rather be dead than/To be ugly an' old." Being old means being ugly and lonely, so death is preferable.

Why does she prefer death? Perhaps because she does not seem to receive love, "love is gone". She underscores the fact that it is difficult to live without love. So she requests her dad to keep on loving her because she does not want to be sad.

34.4.4 An Appreciation

We have already seen that Langston Hughes was deeply interested in African-American folk music, especially the blues. You must have noticed that the poem we have just analysed has the word 'blues' in it. The word can mean 'feelings of sadness' but the structure and lines of the poem remind us of the folk music form called the blues. Interestingly, this poem is included in the collection *Fine Clothes to the Jews*, which contains many of Hughes blues poems.

The speaker of the poem should be an African-American woman. In order to make this clear, the poet has used certain spellings, forms of pronunciation and colloquial words typical of the African-American dialect of English. For example, look at the spellings 'ma' (my), 'de' (the) and 'Hind' (behind); similarly, note the pronunciations 'po' (poor) and 'goin' ' (going). Again, words like 'gal' and 'gonna' are examples of informal words used in speech only. Although these unusual linguistic features underline her African-American identity and dialect, her grammar is not faulty.

Let us now briefly examine how Hughes makes use of the blues in this poem. Remember, bringing the effect of blues in poetry is no easy task. According to Paul Oliver, an authority on folk music, "Blues is for singing. It is not a form of folk song that stands up particularly well when written down." So what poets do is to poetise the blues. But then there is another problem: Oliver adds, "... blues made literary read not like refined folk song but like bad poetry." Your study of the poem might have convinced you that Hughes' "Young Gal's Blues" is not a bad poem. If so, how does he succeed in blending the elements of the blues in the poem?

In David Chinitz's opinion, Hughes was interested in the blues because the music was "an expression of the resilience and tragedy of the African-American lower class." In the poem, the girl is talking of death aging and absence of love. She might be thinking of the racial discrimination practice by the white man against her people which indicates cruelty and lack of love. Death and racism are tragic subjects. However, we cannot be sure whether she is resilient.

Quoting Hughes' own words, Chinitz says: "The blues were 'sad songs' because they manifested the 'hopeless weariness' of an oppressed people; they were 'gay songs because you had to be gay or die'". The themes of "Young Gal's Blues" are really sad, for she is talking of the love that she longs to receive. In a sense, she is

representing her class of African-American girls who have suffered racial injustice and discrimination.

The structural pattern of the poem resembles that of the blues. In his “Note on Blues”, Hughes says: “The Blues . . . have a strict poetic pattern: one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the second line in repetition is slightly changed and sometimes, but very seldom, it is omitted.” In order to give the shape of poetry to his blues poems he alters this pattern; he breaks the first two lines into two lines each and also divides the final line so that a stanza will have six lines. Notice that the poem we are studying has six-line stanzas. However, let us not think that all poets will compose their blues poetry in this way; each one modifies the pattern according to his poetic sensibility.

Further, Chinitz points out that many of Hughes blues poems in *Fine Clothes* are sung by women. The speaker of our poem, for example, is a girl. And the humorous element present in blues is visible in the present poem, too. The young girl talks of old age and death in the first three stanzas and in the last stanza she is lamenting the absence of love in the world. This appears humorous because she is too young and has not suffered enough to be tired of life. Yet the lines reflect the hopelessness that creeps into the mind of the young Afro-American.

This is how Langston Hughes uses the blues music in the poem. He was so careful to blend the blues elements in such a way that the poetic qualities essential to a poem are not sacrificed.

Self-check Exercise 3

1) Write a note on the language of the poem.

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2) Why does the young girl desire death?

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3) Pick out the lines repeated in the poem. Why are they repeated?

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34.5 MOTHER TO SON

34.5.1 Introduction

This is another simple poem written by Langston Hughes. It was published in his first collection of poems, *The Weary Blues*. He was only 21 when he wrote it. Here, too, Hughes uses the language of the uneducated African-American but, as Baxter Miller points out, by using it he “shows how dialect can be used with dignity.”

The title might suggest that it is a dialogue between a mother and her son. However, critics like Baxter Miller and Aidan Wasley consider it as a dramatic monologue. As in the case of the other two poems we have just studied, the speaker of this poem also is a representative figure, an Afro-American woman/mother who has struggled hard in life. The poem reveals the woman’s (Hughes’, too) optimism and her acceptance of the fact that life is a struggle and that one should not give up on life even when it is full of difficulties. Hughes passes on this idea using a striking metaphor that has significance throughout the poem.

34.5.2 The Text

Well, son, I’ll tell you:
 Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
 It’s had tacks in it,
 And splinters,
 And boards torn up,
 And places with no carpet on the floor—
 Bare.
 But all the time
 I’ve been a-climbin’ on,
 And reachin’ landin’s,
 And turnin’ corners,
 And sometimes goin’ in the dark
 Where there ain’t been no light.
 So, boy, don’t you turn back.
 Don’t you set down on the steps.
 ’Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.
 Don’t you fall now—
 For I’ve still goin’, honey,
 I’ve still climbin’,
 And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

Glossary:

ain’t	: am not/ is not/are not/ has not
tacks	: small sharp nails with a flat end
splinters	: small sharp broken pieces of wood, glass, etc.
landin’s	: landings; areas of floor or passage
honey	: an address showing endearment; a pleasant person
set	: sit
kinder /kinda	: kind of (a common expression in the Afro-American dialect, meaning ‘slightly’, ‘in some ways’)

34.5.3 Analysis of the Poem

The poem opens with a mother's address to her son. As mentioned earlier, the son is an imagined listener rather than one who is actually present. This imagined listener/audience makes the poem a dramatic monologue. She tells her son that (as an African-American woman), life was not easy for her; it was not a crystal stair with strong smooth steps. During her life's journey, she had to walk on sharp nails, broken and pointed substances which lay scattered on the stairs. She means to say that she had to bear experiences that pierced her heart and hurt her like sharp objects. Similarly, sometimes her walk was dangerous since the steps on the stairs were broken. She had to stop and think about ways of going ahead and her barefooted walk on the rough steps ("with no carpet") only caused pain and suffering.

After narrating these painful experiences she underwent, the mother explains how she faced them. She says they could not stop her from climbing the stairs ("I'se been a-climbin' on"), that is, from going ahead in life. There were landings for her but there were corners, too, which seemed to block her way ahead; there were occasions when she was totally without light ("And sometimes goin' in the dark"), meaning there were times she had lost all hope and future lay dark before her. But she did not stop her walk and came thus far overcoming all obstructions that were in store for her.

Having faced a tough life she is capable of advising her son:

So, boy, don't you turn back
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you find it's kinder hard

She is advising her son not to give up on life or stop going ahead just because it appears slightly hard. She encourages the son by giving her own example: even after suffering so much over the years, her struggle has not ended: she is still climbing the remaining steps of her life arduously: "And life for me ain't been no crystal stair."

34.5.4 An Appreciation

"Mother to Son" is a dramatic monologue which takes its readers to different levels of meaning. Its structure and content appears simple but it has something to tell everyone and it, probably, throws light on Hughes' apprehensions about his prospective career as a young Afro-American.

We do not know why the African-American mother is narrating her woes to her son. Perhaps the son asked her to narrate them to him; or, he must have complained about life at a frustrating moment. So the mother begins: "Well, son, I'll tell you" and begins her story of struggles. Life for her was no crystal stair, she says repeatedly.

When Hughes wrote this poem he was just beginning his career as a poet and he was an educated man, too. So he may not speak English the way the mother in the poem speaks. Then the question is, why does he make an elderly (African-American) woman his narrator? According to Aidan Wasley, "we can see the speaker of 'Mother to Son' as representing a kind of collective voice, the voice of the generations of African-Americans whose troubled history . . . 'ain't been no crystal stair.'"

That means the speaker-mother, by narrating her own story of hard struggle, is narrating the story of her race beginning from their homelands and ending in America where it still has not ended (“And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair). The African-Americans had to walk on tacks, splinters, torn up boards, etc. In the United States they had to live in narrow dirty tenement houses and fight poverty. Yet, the mother and thousands like her climbed on their difficult stairs. Their future, she tells the son and by extension to countless young African-Americans, depends on this willingness to struggle; they should not “set down on the steps” accepting defeat. Because they still have to climb, they need to be inspired by their traditional spiritual, “We shall overcome someday.” Here, it is quite desirable for the readers of the poem to take the mother’s advice for themselves.

Hughes has very effectively planted the story of the woman within a central image—the crystal stair. Wasley equates this stair with the stairway/ladder that Jacob, the Old Testament patriarch, had seen in a dream. Jacob had to run away from home to his uncle’s house to save himself from the anger of his brother, Esau, whom he had cheated. On his way, Jacob reached a place in the evening and because it was dark he slept at that place keeping a stone as pillow under his head. While sleeping he had a dream in which he saw a stairway/ladder with its foot on the earth and the top touching heaven. He also saw God’s angels walking up and down the stairs. Standing at the top God spoke to Jacob: “I am the Lord, the God . . . I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth and you will spread out” in all the four directions (This event in Jacob’s life is described in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, chapter 28 and verses from 10 to 15).

How can this event in Jacob’s life be related to the poem we are studying? Jacob’s descendants are the Israelites (Jews). They had to be captives in Egypt and the Pharaohs put them under slavery for many centuries. While suffering in Egypt they all the time longed for the land that God had promised Jacob. This story of Jacob was very popular among the African-Americans when they toiled in the Southern plantations before the Civil War. Like the Israelites, they were also yearning for freedom and a peaceful life in the promised land of America. As Wasley points out, “The heavenly stairway became a powerful image of liberation and salvation, attainable only through suffering and faith in God.” Wasley guesses that Hughes might “have been very familiar with the associations of Jacob’s ladder with the struggle for freedom and equality of blacks in America.” It is significant to note that one of their best-known traditional spiritual songs was “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder.” The song “speaks of climbing ‘higher and higher’ to become ‘soldiers of the Lord’” and it also exhorts the singers to “Keep on climbing, we will make it.” It ends with the question, “Children do you want your freedom?” In the context of these details, the mother in the poem attains larger significance. She is a wise woman advising her people, scattered across Northern America, to keep climbing and not to sit on the steps. The image of the crystal stair, thus, evokes “simultaneously the painful history of blacks in America while pointing to the tradition of faith and hope that has sustained them through it all.”

As mentioned earlier, we may identify the son in the poem with the poet himself. When Hughes wrote this poem he was a very young poet struggling to formulate the basis of his art. He might have been wondering whether he should write about his own people, their struggles and longing for absolute freedom in America or ignore his African roots. These problems were not easy to solve and if we read “Mother to Son” keeping in mind these issues the poet faced, then we discover

that “the poem suggests that the son’s frustration and despair is that of the poet, [who is]faced with the impossible task of writing poetry that truly speaks to and for the African-American experience.” The mother’s exhortation in the poem then attains another level of meaning. As an African-American poet, Hughes is advised to boldly accept his status as an African-American and sing of his race’s history drawing extensively from their art forms—spirituals, blues, jazz, etc. Also, see how the mother’s advice is apt to solve the poet’s dilemma: “So, boy, don’t you turn back/ Don’t you set down on the steps/’Cause you find it’s kinder hard.” She knows that his task is not easy and his poetry cannot be about a smooth crystal stair.

Again, in a very general sense we can consider the son as anybody who is tired of life’s hardships. The mother’s advice to him/her is not to accept defeat but to keep on going in the face of stiff oppositions and adverse circumstances.

In this poem, too, as in “Young Gal’s Blues”, we find the use of the African-American dialect. Words and expressions like *ain’t a-climbin’, reachin’, set down, kinder, I’s*, etc., illustrate this fact. They also point to the mother’s lack of education and her son’s difference in terms of education. The influence of the blues also is visible. Thus the poem has heavy rhythmic beats, repeating lines and the narration of the African-Americans’ sad struggle. While distinguishing the blues from the spirituals, Hughes says: “Unlike the Spirituals, the Blues are not group songs . . . they are usually sung by one man or one woman alone.” He goes on to point out that “the Blues are songs about being in the midst of trouble, friendless, hungry, disappointed in love, right here on earth.” This poem is also sung by a woman and it talks of hardships and unfavourable circumstances.

Self-check Exercise 4

1) What features of the dramatic monologue do you find in the poem?

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2) Comment on the significance of the crystal stair as a metaphor in the poem.

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3) Is this a poem of hope?

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34.6 LET US SUM UP

We have studied three poems by Langston Hughes. They reflect his concern for and interest in the African-American race. The first poem, “Negro Speaks of Rivers”, is an assertion of the historical antiquity of the race. The poem, through the speaker, briefly but pointedly narrates the history of the Afro-Americans from the dawn of civilizations to the 20th century. The progress of the race is associated with four rivers and it subtly reveals the losses the race had to suffer because of its dislocation from its original places.

In “Young Gal’s Blues” a young girl is discussing death, old age and the absence of love among people. Thoughts about these subjects lead her to express her desire to die rather than to live. We do not know whether Hughes wants us to take the girl seriously, for she appears to be too young to be tired of life or to think about death.

The third poem, “Mother Speaks to Son”, expresses the hope of an Afro-American woman who has suffered a lot in her life. She tells her son that life for her was not a crystal stair. The steps of the stair she had to climb during her life’s journey were not smooth. At each step she had to face some kind of hurting obstruction. But that did not deter her from going ahead in life. She is a direct contrast to the young girl in the previous poem. The present poem expresses no cynicism; it is a song of hope.

34.7 SUGGESTED READING

Some of the books on Hughes that you may refer to are:

- 1) Berry, Faith. 1983. *Langston Hughes, before and beyond Harlem*. Westport, Conn.: Hill.
- 2) Chinitz, David. 1996. “Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes”, *Callaloo*, vol. 19 (1), pp. 192.
- 3) Emmanuel, James. 1967. *Langston Hughes*. New York: Twayne.
- 4) Mikolyzk, Thomas. 1990. *Langston Hughes: A Bio-Bibliography*. New York: Greenwood.
- 5) Miller, Baxter. 1989. *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- 6) Rampersad, Arnold. 1986-1988. *The Life of Langston Hughes*. 2 vols. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 7) Tracy, Steven. 1988. *Langston Hughes and the Blues*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- 8) Waldron, Edward. 1971. “The Blue Poetry of Langston Hughes”, *African American Review* vol. 5 (4), pp. 140-149.
- 9) Wasley, Aidan. 1998. “An Overview of ‘Mother to Son’”, in *Poetry for Students*.

34.8 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

All the answers given below are according to the serial numbers of the questions

Answers to the questions on Hughes' biography

- 1) This you can do on your own. Just Google 'Langston Hughes.'
- 2) The childhood of both the poets was unhappy. Hughes' mother could not take care of him properly. He did not get his father's attention. Ginsberg's mother was mentally unstable. His father was strict and traditional in outlook. Both the poets had enrolled at Columbia University and Hughes was a dropout. Both were prolific writers.
- 3) Writing poems in the pattern of the blues is not easy. Yet Hughes attempted it and could give a peculiar kind of structure and music to his blues poems. The section "Langston Hughes and the blues" will help you complete this answer.

Answers to the questions on the poem "Negro Speaks of Rivers"

- 1) The poem deals with the history of the Afro-Americans in two parts and the history is skillfully linked with the names of rivers. The poem deals with the theme of the African-Americans' dislocation from their local habitats and their exploitation by the so-called advancing civilizations.
- 2) The Euphrates and the Congo rivers are associated with his peaceful life in the African continent. The Nile and the Mississippi bring in the theme of slavery and the dislocation of the African-Americans from their places of origin.
- 3) The language of the poem conforms to the spelling, grammar and usage of contemporary English. It is not written in the African-American dialect. We see the use of the dialect in the other two poems.

Answers to the questions on "Young Gal's Blues"

- 1) The poem contains spellings and words which are dialectal. For more details see the second paragraph of the section 'Analysis of the poem'.
- 2) She desires death because she is dejected by the sight of death, old age and the thought of loneliness.
- 3) The lines repeated are: 2, 7, 13, and the first two lines of the last stanza. This kind of repetition gives the poem the musical quality of a folk song in which repeating lines is a common feature. For more details, read the section on blues and the appreciation of the poem.

Answers to the questions on "Mother to Son"

- 1) A dramatic monologue appears as though there is a speaker and a listener or listeners, but there is no real listener. The speaker's words in the poem generally reveal his/her character and temperament. In Hughes' poem the son is only supposedly there and hence does not respond to his mother. So his is an imaginary presence. Also, the woman's words clearly reveal the resilience of her character.
- 2) The entire poem revolves round the metaphor of the crystal stair; we find its presence throughout the poem. It signifies life's progress, the hardships life brings and the need to climb up, rather than climb down, in the face of adversities.
- 3) Surely, this is a poem of hope. It enables one to keep hope about future even as one meets with adverse experiences in life.

UNIT 35 ALLEN GINSBERG

Structure

- 35.0 Objectives
- 35.1 Introduction
- 35.2 Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997): Biography
- 35.3 Text: ‘A Supermarket in California’
 - 35.3.1 Introduction
 - 35.3.2 The Text
 - 35.3.3 Analysis of the Poem
 - 35.3.4 Aspects of Technique
- 35.4 Text: ‘Sunflower Sutra’
 - 35.4.1 Introduction
 - 35.4.2 The Text
 - 35.4.3 Analysis of the Poem
 - 35.4.4 An Appreciation
- 35.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 35.6 Suggested Readings
- 35.7 Answers to Self-check Exercises

35.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

- discuss Allen Ginsberg’s life and poetics
- analyse the poem “A Supermarket in California”
- appreciate the poem “Sunflower Sutra”

35.1 INTRODUCTION

The attempt in this Unit is to give a general introduction to Allen Ginsberg—the poet, his life, poetics and important works. It helps you understand his characteristics as a man and poet. You will discover that Ginsberg’s life has a bearing on his poetry and that his career as a poet is shaped by other poets and movements. The Unit has also analysed two of this well-known poems selected from one of his earliest collections, *Howl and Other Poems*.

The first poem, “A supermarket in California”, gives a rather bleak picture of America. The speaker’s imaginary encounter with Walt Whitman in a supermarket is an event in the poem that enables him to make a critique of America and its values. The introduction of Whitman enables the speaker to think about and comment on an America that was more humane and value-based.

“Sunflower Sutra”, the second poem, gives a better vision of America and you will see in it the poet expressing his optimism about the inherent power and beauty of American society and culture. Indeed in the first half of the poem we come across the frightening vision of a thoroughly industrialized and polluted America but the horror of that vision is reversed in the latter half with a sermon of the speaker that is encouraging and edifying.

You may go through each section carefully and try to assimilate the ideas presented in it. This will help you do the exercises/tasks correctly.

35.2 ALLEN GINSBERG (1926-1997): BIOGRAPHY

Irwin Allen Ginsberg was born on 3rd June 1926 in Paterson, New Jersey. His father, Louis Ginsberg, was a high school teacher and an old fashioned and modestly successful poet. Very early in his life Ginsberg's father instructed him in writing poetry which was mostly old-fashioned. It took quite some time for Allen to get out of his father's poetic influence and start experimenting with techniques and themes. According to John Tytell, under Louis' influence, Ginsberg "was imitating Renaissance forms with an ornate, overstylized language that was often woodenly lifeless. When Louis Ginsberg criticized the inadequacies of these early attempts, he also discouraged any tendencies toward experimentation." The poetic qualities that Louis upheld included caution, reserve, moderation and pragmatic realism.

Right from her early adulthood, Ginsberg's mother, Naomi, was mentally unstable and had to be in psychiatric asylums frequently. She was a Russian émigré and a communist. Because of her frequent mental illness Ginsberg had to remain with her when he was supposed to be at school. She feared assassination and believed that her mother-in-law would poison her. Her schizophrenia drove her into such desperate hallucinations that she believed that President Roosevelt placed wires in the ceilings and even in her brain to spy her. There were occasions when she could not recognize her own son, Ginsberg. She died at the Pilgrim State Mental Hospital on Long Island in 1956. Paraphrasing John Clellon Holmes' opinion, Tytell says: ". . . Ginsberg's relationship with his mother was the source of his wound, the axis around which his madness, homosexuality, and poet-nature all revolved." Ginsberg's poem "Kaddish" is an elegy on the suffering of his mother as a mad woman and it was a bold thematic experiment in that it was not a complete eulogy; it revealed "Naomi's negative qualities" as well.

After his schooling in Paterson Ginsberg moved on to Columbia University to study law but was expelled for writing obscene lines on the dust accumulated on the window of his dormitory room. He was readmitted to Columbia University after a few months on producing a letter from a psychiatrist. He returned as an English Major student and graduated from the university in 1948. During this time at Columbia, Ginsberg was also making friends with people like Lucien Carr, Herbert Huncke, David Kramerer, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady and many others. After graduating from Columbia, Ginsberg did many jobs – dishwasher at Bickford's Cafeteria, Book reviewer for Newsweek Market research Consultant, reporter for a labour newspaper in New Ark.

As a young man who had lived through World War II, Ginsberg had his own ideas about history. He felt that till 1948 it was possible for his generation to think about God, country, war against Hitler, etc. But the terribly destructive War brought with it disillusionment and despair. America represented the 'System' where anarchy was the law. For young people like Ginsberg, Louis Simpson quotes him, the country was

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and
unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under
the stairways! Boys sobbing in arms! Old men
weeping in the parks.

Those who couldn't be one with the system turned "into hipsters, hopheads, and poets."

As mentioned earlier, Ginsberg had started writing poems very early in his life under his father's influence. His study of the New Critics at Columbia, however, did not help him evolve his own poetics. It took a long time for him to break away from influences and imitations and to discover his own poetic style. There were a couple of poets who influenced him in positive ways.

One of the earliest poetic influences on William Ginsberg was William Blake. In fact in 1948, he had a "Blake vision", says Thomas Merrill, "that oriented the spiritual and vocational direction of his life for the next fifteen years." The vision occurred when he was going through a sense of isolation and worthlessness. Tytell describes the experience thus:

One day he was relaxing in bed, reading Blake . . . and as he came he experienced a sweepingly blissful revelation. He saw "Ah-Sunflower" [Blake's poem], the poem over which he had been musing, as a manifestation of the universe freed from body, that is, as a psychospiritual transportation, a departure from corporeal awareness that allowed ineffably ecstatic energies to pervade his consciousness—something between what Buddhists might call Nirvana and the "terrible beauty" of Yeats' "Easter 1916". Simultaneously, he heard a deep, grave voice sounding like "tender rock" reciting "Ah!Sun-Flower," and a few moments later "The Sick Rose."Hearing these lyrics of mutability rendered through no apparent physical agency that Ginsberg could perceive shocked him out of his torpor, the lethargy caused by refusing to end a phase of his life. Catalyzed to the vitality of the universe, he would now see his own poetic attempts as part of a tradition of magic prophecy.

Ginsberg was careful enough to lead a normal life after this vision lest he should be branded as a mad man. Eventually, he understood the revelation in psychological terms. Tytell believes that Ginsberg's social concern in his life and poetry is an outcome of the Blake vision. As it was for Blake, for Ginsberg too poetry was a transforming power. In a poem like "September On Jessoro Road" Ginsberg has used Blake's early metrical devices.

Another writer who strongly influenced Ginsberg was the American poet William Carlos Williams. Williams "had a long and abiding prosodic influence on Ginsberg", says Merrill. Some of the earlier poems of Ginsberg was corrected by Williams, especially those included in *The Gates of Wrath* and *Empty Mirror*. While still a student at Columbia, Ginsberg attended a poetry reading session of the poet at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. As a student Ginsberg had been imitating Marvel and the English Romantic poets. In New York he heard Williams ending his poem "The Clouds" in mid-sentence. That was a revealing experience for Ginsberg, for Williams was writing poems the way he [Williams] talked. For Ginsberg, Simpson quotes, Williams' reading of the poem "was like a revelation of absolute common sense in my entire universe of complete bullshit!" Later, Ginsberg sent some of his early poems (like "Ode to the Setting Sun", "Ode to Judgement", etc), to Williams which were all imitations of Marvel, Blake, etc. When he returned the poems, Williams made a comment: "In this mode, perfection is basic, and these are not perfect."

In the days to come, Ginsberg and Williams discussed metre and rhythm of poetry. According to Simpson, these discussions worked. Ginsberg now realized

that anything can be the subject of poetry. In “Paterson” (1949), we notice the emergence of the original Ginsberg:

What do I want in these rooms papered with vision of money?
 How much can I make by cutting my hair? If I put new heels on
 my shoes . . .
 what war I enter and for what a prize! The dead prick of
 commonplace obsession
 harridan vision of electricity at night and daylight misery of
 thumb-sucking rage. . . rage

The long lines clearly indicate that Ginsberg was not simply imitating Williams, who preferred short lines. The lines further show their affinity to those of Walt Whitman, who had been an early influence on Ginsberg. It was his high school teacher Francis Durbin who had introduced Whitman to him. At that point of time, Ginsberg says, “I . . . was lonesome; but I first read Whitman there.” For Ginsberg, Whitman was “a vast mountain so big . . .”

In his poetry collections *Planet news* (1968) and *The Fall of America* (1972) Ginsberg uses a travelogue style even as they contained descriptions of the American Continent. According to Helen Vendler, the collections constitute “the largest attempt since Whitman to encompass the enormous geographical and political reality of United States.”

Ginsberg and the Beat movement: Ginsberg’s name is often associated with the Beat movement, of which he too was a founder member, the others being Jack Kerouac, Lucien Carr, David Kammerer, William S. Burroughs, Hal Chase and Herbert Huncke. The origins of the Beat movement may be traced to Columbia University where it took shape in the meetings of the people mentioned above. It was in the summer of 1948 that Ginsberg, who was then living in an apartment in Harlem, was introduced to the word ‘beat’ by Huncke . The word meant “exhausted, out of it and therefore blessed.” The phrase ‘Beat Generation’ was coined by Kerouac. The beatniks became popular poets in the 1950’s and the common features that characterized them include rejection of commonly accepted standards, innovations in style, use of drugs, homosexual relationship, interest in Eastern religions, scorn for materialism and a direct treatment of the human condition.

The beatniks did not acknowledge any external social authority but obeyed an inner authority. The so-called ‘civilized’ life that modern society promoted, according to them, was an immense lie because of the gap existed in it between the self and neighbor. Dissociating themselves from such a society they tried to maintain an interpersonal fidelity.

Zen Buddhism was of particular interest to them because of the concept of holiness in it: “Every impulse of the soul, the psyche, and the heart was one of holiness. Everything was holy if understood as such” In Zen Buddhism, evil is not antithetical to good; they are two sides of the same coin. One has to accept both, rather than accepting one and denouncing the other. Human beings are called so because of the presence of good and evil in them. Zen supports ‘natural humanity’ which is often suppressed by an artificial ideal. What the Beat writers attempted in their works was to deal with this natural humanity. What society branded as immoral and vulgar were the true and intimate aspects of a human being’s life: “Many beat writers, especially Ginsberg, flaunt their most intimate acts and feelings—masturbation, sodomy, drug addiction, erotic dreams—in

aggressively explicit street language. . . . To the beats such expression is the denial of shame itself, a manifesto that nothing human or personal can be degrading.” Some of them, like Ginsberg and Kerouac, have claimed religious illumination.

A close study of Ginsberg’s life and poetic career will show that he was a typical member of the Beat group. He questioned accepted ideals; his poetic style, as we will see shortly, was different from that of the other writers of his time; he experimented with drugs because he felt drugs helped him get out of stereotype feelings and to closely identify with other human beings and with nature. Quoting Tytell, Louis Simpson says: “Generally . . . Ginsberg used drugs as an aid to ‘releasing blocked aspects of his consciousness which are expressed in his poetry, like the Moloch vision in “Howl”, which was induced by peyote, or “Kaddish”, written while using amphetamines.”” As we have already seen, Ginsberg was a homosexual and was deeply interested in Eastern religions (in the following section we will see more about this); he was not materialistic, for as late as 1980’s, Merrill says, he lived “in modest style in his \$260-a-month tenement apartment on the lower East Side of Manhattan.” He did not use flowery or highly figurative language in his poetry; rather, one finds themes being treated in a direct, raw manner. We shall see that, too, in another section.

Ginsberg and India: By 1961, Ginsberg’s reputation — notoriety, too, with the publication of *Howl*— as a poet had grown internationally and that year he visited many European and Eastern countries like India and Japan. His Buddhist belief became firmer during this visit to India and the visit has been documented in his *Indian Journals: March 1962-May 1963*. During his sojourn in India (with his homosexual friend Peter Orlovsky) he visited the sadhus in Benares and the Krittibas, young rebel poets of Calcutta led by Sunil Gangopadhyay, and funeral ghats where he meditated on life and death. Krittibas poets attracted Ginsberg’s attention because he found his own past in their outrageousness and genius. Ginsberg visited India again in 1971, especially West Bengal in the aftermath of a flood and famine there, which resulted in the writing of the long poem “September on Jessore Road.”

According to Thomas Merrill, the stay in India in 1961 “was a decisive point in Ginsberg’s spiritual development, for it marked his abandonment of the gods, devils and angels that had haunted his visions since the Harlem Blake Experience fifteen years before.” This giving up of the divine was indeed a great change because the conversion was from his theistic Judaeo-Christian belief to non-theistic Buddhism. About the effect of this spiritual conversion, Ginsberg said: “at present as Buddhist I see an awakened emptiness (*shunyata*) as the crucial term. No God, no Self, not even Whitman’s universal Self.” Ginsberg became a Buddhist formally in 1972.

Ginsberg’s poetics: When he began writing his poems, Ginsberg’s guide was his father. Then he was under the influence of Blake, William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman. Although he liked the three renowned poets, it will be unfair to say that he was blindly imitating them. He might have displayed his interest in Whitman’s prose rhythm, but that has not affected the younger poet’s originality. It took him some time to develop his own writing style and his association with the Beat movement certainly helped him evolve his own poetics.

Unlike many of the poets of his and previous times, Ginsberg was skeptical of reason in poetry. Reason was often referred to as ‘tyrant’ in his writings. What he

has attempted to do in his poetry is to give a balanced view of modern human experience by minimizing the interference of reason. His attempt was to:

live
in the physical world
moment to moment
I must write down
every recurring thought
stop every beating second

The poet is represented here as a divine recorder, capturing with his sensory perceptions what is in front of him at the time of writing. Merrill summarises this process thus: “The physical world is the writer’s sounding board and his heartbeat strikes against it so as to produce recurring thought . . . what is suggested . . . is the concept of the poet as diarist . . . “ Let us remember that a diary note is not written according to any particular form. It is the recording of a train of thoughts or events that pass through the mind or before the eyes. Such dairy notes are frank, authentic and unpretentious.

For Ginsberg, form is “never more than an extension of content.” When poetry is written in this way it reflects reality itself, it is not a mere description of reality. Being self-conscious while depicting reality in poetry has its drawbacks. According to him, he writes in the *Indian Journals*, “the problem is to write Poetry . . . which sounds natural, not self conscious.”

Throughout his life Ginsberg was a champion of free speech and his open discussion of sexual themes in his poetry and elsewhere underlines this fact. He was a spokesperson for gay rights; he was a communist and visited communist countries like Russia and China. He lived dangerously clinging to the ideas he believed in. Ginsberg died on 5 April 1997 in New York. Some of his major works are:

Howl and Other Poems (1956); *Kaddish and Other Poems* (1961); *Empty Mirror: Early Poems* (1961); *Reality Sandwiches* (1963); *Planet News* (1971); *The Gates of Wrath: Rhymed Poems 1948-1951* (1972)

Self-check Exercise I

- 1) Read the biography of Allen Ginsberg given in Wikipedia and collect more information about his poetic style and technique, his social and political activism and his final years.

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- 2) Do you think that Ginsberg would have been a more successful poet if he had followed his father’s advice one how to write poetry? Why?

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- 3) Can you write down the names of some poets (you have studied about) who were influenced by other poets?

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35.3 A SUPERMARKET IN CALIFORNIA

35.3.1 Introduction

Ginsberg wrote this poem in 1955 when he was residing in California. It appeared in his celebrated and controversial collection *Howl and Other Poems*. In this collection we find Ginsberg experimenting with long lines which may be called Whitmanesque. Quite significantly, Walt Whitman appears in this poem as the chief character. This experimentation with line has found its full expression in the title poem “Howl”. The poem manifests Ginsberg’s characteristic style of writing.

“A Supermarket in California” is an ode to Whitman while it also indicates the prospective themes that Ginsberg is to deal with in his poetry. Whitman was unconventional in life as well as in writing. He violated accepted notions of metered lines, structure and themes. Being influenced by the Romantics, Whitman had a special liking for nature and its innocence. Living in the 19th century he had witnessed nature’s slow destruction with the advancement of industrialization in America. He advocated freedom, both physical and spiritual. Consequently, they became two important themes in his poetry. What we find in Ginsberg’s poetry is a more advanced treatment of the themes, for he lived in the 20th century during which period Whitman’s anxieties about the ill-effects of industrialization had attained astounding proportions. False standards of morality also had become disgusting. When he published *Howl and Other Poems* in the 1950’s, he had to face ‘obscenity trial’. The imminent loss of essential American culture and society had been a major concern in Whitman’s poetry and it finds fuller expression in the writings of Ginsberg. In short, Whitman’s thematic and stylistic influence on Ginsberg’s poetry is significant, but this in no way means that the latter was not an original poet.

35.3.2 The Text

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for
I walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache
self-conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went
into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families
shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the
avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and you, Garcia Lorca, what
were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber,
poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery
boys.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the
pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?

I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans
following you, and followed in my imagination by the store
detective.

We strode down the open corridors together in our
solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen
delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in
an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the
supermarket and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The
trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be
lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love
past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher,
what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and
you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat
disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

Berkeley, 1955

Glossary:

fatigue	: a feeling of tiredness
penumbras	: areas of light shadows
avocados	: green pear-shaped fruit
artichokes	: round green vegetables that have fleshy leaves arranged like the petals of a flower. Each leaf can be removed and the fleshy bottom part of it eaten
odyssey	: a long exciting journey on which a lot of things happen
driveway	: a piece of hard ground that leads from the road to a person's garage or front door

35.3.3 Analysis of the Poem

Like an ode, the poem opens with an address in which the speaker (the speaker can be the poet himself. According to Thomas Merrill, "As with no other poet, Ginsberg's poems are his most comprehensive and intimate biography. Little is left out.") invokes the name of Walt Whitman. The speaker's mind has thoughts about Whitman and he is talking to the older poet (who died in 1892). At the beginning of the poem we see the speaker walking on a moonlit night down the

side streets of California. Physically he is uncomfortable; he is fatigued and has a headache. Psychologically, too, he seems to be downcast, for he is dreaming of Whitman's "enumerations" and is in search of "images." His search leads him to a "neon/ fruit supermarket." Let us recall that Whitman's poetry contains long lists (enumerations) of people, objects, events and phenomena.

The speaker to find something organic in the supermarket but the phrase 'neon (a chemical element that reacts with nothing) fruit supermarket' seems to invalidate the hope. In a sense the speaker is going back to the past, history represented in Whitman, seeking answers for the economic and social maladies the modern world has thrown up. As he enters the supermarket he is forced to exclaim, "What peaches and what penumbras!" 'Peach' is a fruit but 'penumbra' is an area of shadow. That is to say, although the fruit and vegetables displayed in the supermarket are organic and seem to symbolize nature and domestic life, beneath them lurk secrets (shadow); beneath the displays of nature and domesticity there are dark secrets which are the harsh realities that industrialization has brought with it. The speaker further refers to families — husbands, wives and babies — who are "shopping at night." The word "night" further deepens the meaning implied in the word 'penumbras.' The first stanza ends addressing Garcia Lorca, a Spanish leftist poet and an admirer of Whitman.

The speaker enters the supermarket with thoughts about Whitman but now, in the second stanza, we see his imaginary encounter with Whitman. He says: "I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking/among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys." Unlike the families described in the previous stanza, Whitman is alone and childless. The expressions 'poking among the meats' and 'eyeing the grocery boys' seem to have sexual connotations and sexual motifs were not unusual in Whitman's poetry. In fact, he allegedly had homosexual interests. Interestingly, Lorca too had similar interests. The questions that Whitman asks in the middle of the stanzas seem to denote the closeness and familiarity that existed between people during his time. In his time people could ask about the details of the food items they bought and the sellers could also answer questions like, "Who killed the pork chops?/ What price bananas?" However, in Ginsberg's supermarket such questions need not be asked and even if they are asked the storekeeper or salespersons don't seem to know the answers. The customers there mechanically collect their goods and exit. It is a place where human emotions of friendship, warmth and concern are totally absent. Another terrible outcome of industrialization! The supermarket is a society that is devoid of humanity.

Yet Whitman seems to offer the speaker the vision of a way of life that has beauty and that goes beyond the drabness of mass commodities. The speaker follows Whitman everywhere in the supermarket and in the company of the latter the former tastes "artichokes" and possesses "every frozen delicacy". The line "We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy" is significant in that the speaker and Whitman can form a company that is based on a sense freedom and love and bond, something the other customers in the supermarket are unable to enjoy. In other words, the poet and the speaker manifest their sense of freedom by secretly tasting the artichokes without paying for them, "never passing the cashier." It is a kind of life resembling the natural world which Whitman has always glorified in his poetry. The speaker and Whitman appear to be unaffected and are beyond the expectations of a highly commercialized supermarket where cash, payment, profit, loss, etc., are valued dearly.

However, the third and the final stanza breaks this brief moment of togetherness and freedom. The stanza begins with the speaker's question: "Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour." The speaker has to leave the supermarket before its doors are closed and with that, he realizes, his imaginary association with Whitman will end. The beautiful way of life that his imaginary company with Whitman provided him in the supermarket, the pleasure of unfettered/secret enjoyment, now appears unrealistic. What the speaker has to confront outside the supermarket is the modern world of mass culture, competition and commoditization of human beings. Everything is for sale and has a price to be paid. He now considers his 'odyssey' to the supermarket "absurd". Whitman's vision of a natural world/society and natural man seems to be impractical in the modern industrialized world. Their stroll through silent streets outside the supermarket will only lead them to loneliness. The stark realities of a highly industrialized modern society prevent them from dreaming of the lost America of love, where they could be happy in their silent cottage. The symbols of the consumer society — blue automobiles and driveways — will remind them of the strictly compartmentalized, conformist and coldly formal life of modern nuclear families. The members of these families cannot think of an experience with a dead poet who was a visionary. His America was based on love and it had not become totally consumerist.

In the last four lines of the poem the speaker compares America to Hades, the mythological land of the dead. In Greek mythology, Charon is the ferryman who would carry the dead in his boat across the river Styx to their final abode in the Underworld. The closing lines of the poem seem to imply that Whitman's journey to eternity in the boat was incomplete, for "Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a / smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of/ Lethe." (Lethe is one of the five rivers of Hades. If one drank its water one passes into total oblivion). The moderns, victims of capitalism and consumerism, about which Whitman had predicted long ago, have forgotten him. He is left stranded on a smoking bank and is a forgotten hero. The old world that the poet, "courage teacher", sang about has lost its significance in a consumerist society.

35.3.4 Aspects of Technique

Ginsberg is known for his use of the free verse form in his poetry. Often his lines resemble those of Walt Whitman for whom he had great admiration. As in the case of Whitman's poetry, Ginsberg's poetic works also do not conform to the structural forms of poetry like the sonnet or the ode. In other words, he is less concerned about pure metrical compositions.

"A Supermarket in California" begins with an apostrophe or a direct address (Whitman) which is a characteristic feature of an ode. However, it does not have all the properties of an ode, especially its metrical features and stanza form. Yet the poem has its own rhythmic pattern close to prose rhythms. The long lines in "Supermarket" remind one of Whitman's lines in such poems as "Song of Myself" or "A Passage to India". Whitman also dealt with unconventional themes and Ginsberg's poem is also unconventional with its liberal treatment of sexuality.

Whether the poem "A Supermarket in California" contains autobiographical elements or not may be debatable. However, it is a fact that Ginsberg stayed in Berkeley, California, for nearly two years and the two poems prescribed for you were written during that period. Like the New Critics we may say that the poet's

biography is rather irrelevant while studying a poem and in that sense the poem has a speaker and that may not be the poet. Yet one might find some resemblances between the speaker and the poet and hence one might find the point of view of the poem as the poet's as well. The fact that the speaker's companion in the poem is none other than Whitman points to Ginsberg's entry into it. Similarly, as already mentioned, the unconventional subject of his poem, a supermarket, underlines his predilection for Whitman. Whitman's style of enumerating objects and events is a characteristic feature of Ginsberg's writing, too. The appearance of Garcia Lorca in the poem and his involvement with communist ideology may be related to Ginsberg's leftist leanings which he inherited from his mother. Let us also recall that Whitman and Lorca were allegedly homosexuals while Ginsberg was explicitly so. In "Supermarket" we find Ginsberg using sexually-charged expressions while explicitly talking of Whitman.

At a glance, the supermarket may easily be identified as the poem's setting, yet as we finish reading the poem we notice that the poem begins and ends on the street. Inside the supermarket there are vegetables and people including families and they are seen under the glare of neon lights. Outside there is "the full moon", of course, but the reader cannot ignore the references to night and shade. The joy that people find under the artificial neon lights is transient, while outside the supermarket nights of uncertainties are awaiting (the series of questions beginning with, "Where are we going, Walt Whitman" and the image of Whitman stranded on a smoke bank illustrate this fact). It is also noteworthy that there are punctuations of wonder (exclamation marks) in the first stanza which become questions in the second and third stanzas. Proper punctuation marks to convey life's uncertainties!

As has already been noted, the immediate setting of the poem is the supermarket but its location is in California, a sprawling city. Further, towards the end, there occur thoughts about a lost America and the reader is made to travel with the speaker from the particular (the supermarket and California) to the general, thereby implying that the supermarket is a microcosm of the American consumerist society that has become "the lost America of love."

The speaker enters the supermarket not to buy anything, it appears, but to shop for images. Yes he suffers from "hungry fatigue" but his purpose is to be inspired by the supermarket which, he seems to think, has become a mini version of the consumerist American society. Indeed his visit appears to be successful, for the poem is full of images that adequately characterized Ginsberg's America. His imaginary encounter with Whitman provides him the occasion to think of the lost values of his country.

This is evident in the fact that inside the supermarket the speaker and Whitman form a society of their own which is in direct contrast with the discipline of that place which involves buying, paying bills, etc. With Whitman, the speaker is able to violate, briefly, of course, the norms of the supermarket society and celebrate their freedom: "We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy/ tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy and never passing the cashier." Further, Whitman's activities in the supermarket, with homosexual overtones ("eyeing the grocery boys", "poking among the meats", etc.), are man's natural instincts that are stifled by a society that pays only lip service to morality. Sexual freedom is something that the Beat poets valued and the poem is also an example of Ginsberg's Beat attitude.

Self-check Exercise I

1) Can you prepare list of the objects that Ginsberg gives in the poem?

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2) What is the main theme of the poem?

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3) What can you say about the stanza form of the poem?

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4) Pick out any two images/symbols from the poem and briefly state their significance

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35.4 SUNFLOWER SUTRA

35.4.1 Introduction

The poem is essentially the description of a sunflower which has withered in a very badly polluted locale. In it Ginsberg uses a number of words and phrases that describe the devastating encroachment of industrialization upon what is natural. The first part of the poems describes the destruction of the flower but the closing is a contrast; the flower, although withered, is not a symbol of helplessness or powerlessness. The poet wants his readers, along with the characters in the poems, to understand the fact that nothing/no individual is so

helpless as to be wiped out by destructive agencies. The essential spirit of all living things and beings has the power to withstand all forms of physical/materialistic onslaught

35.4.2 The Text

I walked on the banks of the tincan banana dock and sat down under the huge shade of a Southern Pacific locomotive to look at the sunset over the box house hills and cry.

Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusty iron pole, companion, we thought the same thoughts of the soul, bleak and blue and sad-eyed, surrounded by the gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery.

The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky, sun sank on top of final Frisco peaks, no fish in that stream, no hermit in those mounts, just ourselves rheumy-eyed and hungover like old bums on the riverbank, tired and wily.

Look at the Sunflower, he said, there was a dead gray shadow against the sky, big as a man, sitting dry on top of a pile of ancient sawdust—
—I rushed up enchanted—it was my first sunflower, memories of Blake—my visions—Harlem and Hells of the Eastern rivers, bridges clanking Joes Greasy Sandwiches, dead baby carriages, black treadless tires forgotten and unretreaded, the poem of the riverbank, condoms & pots, steel knives, nothing stainless, only the dank muck and the razor-sharp artifacts passing into the past—

and the gray Sunflower poised against the sunset, crackly bleak and dusty with the smut and smog and smoke of olden locomotives in its eye—
corolla of bleary spikes pushed down and broken like a battered crown, seeds fallen out of its face, soon-to-be-toothless mouth of sunny air, sunrays obliterated on its hairy head like a dried wire spiderweb,
leaves stuck out like arms out of the stem, gestures from the sawdust root, broke pieces of plaster fallen out of the black twigs, a dead fly in its ear, Unholy battered old thing you were, my sunflower O my soul, I loved you then!

The grime was no man's grime but death and human locomotives,
all that dress of dust, that veil of darkened railroad skin, that smog of cheek, that eyelid of black mis'ry, that sooty hand or phallus or protuberance of artificial worse-than-dirt—industrial—modern—all that civilization spotting your

crazy golden crown—
and those blear thoughts of death and dusty loveless
eyes and ends and withered roots below, in the
home-pile of sand and sawdust, rubber dollar
bills, skin of machinery, the guts and innards
of the weeping coughing car, the empty lonely
tincans with their rusty tongues alack, what
more could I name, the smoked ashes of some
cock cigar, the cunts of wheelbarrows and the
milky breasts of cars, wornout asses out of chairs
& sphincters of dynamos—all these
entangled in your mummied roots—and you there
standing before me in the sunset, all your glory
in your form!

A perfect beauty of a sunflower! a perfect excellent
lovely sunflower existence! a sweet natural eye
to the new hip moon, woke up alive and excited
grasping in the sunset shadow sunrise golden
monthly breeze!

How many flies buzzed round you innocent of your
grime, while you cursed the heavens of the
railroad and your flower soul?

Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a
flower? when did you look at your skin and
decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive?
the ghost of a locomotive? the specter and
shade of a once powerful mad American locomotive?
You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a
sunflower!

And you Locomotive, you are a locomotive, forget me
not!

So I grabbed up the skeleton thick sunflower and stuck
it at my side like a scepter,
and deliver my sermon to my soul, and Jack's soul
too, and anyone who'll listen,

—We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread
bleak dusty imageless locomotive, we're all
beautiful golden sunflowers inside, we're blessed
by our own seed & golden hairy naked
accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black
formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by our
eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive
riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening
sitdown vision.

Allen Ginsberg
Berkeley, 1955

Glossary:

- tincan** : a metal container in which food, drink or paint is put
box house : houses which look like boxes, without enough space inside
gnarled : twisted and oddly shaped
rheumy-eyed : having moist and watery eyes

bums	: persons having no permanent home or job
clanking	: producing a sound like the noise we hear when metal objects bang together
treadless tires	: tyres without the pattern of grooves on it that stop them slipping
unretreaded	: (of a tyre) which has not been given a new outer surface
dank	: unpleasantly damp and cold
muck	: dirt or unpleasant substance
crackly	: making a lot of short harsh noises
smut	: dirt such as soot which makes a dirty mark on something
obliterated	: destroyed completely
grime	: dirt which has collected on the surface of something
phallus	: male sex organ
protuberance	: a rounded part that sticks out from the surface of something
innards	: here, the parts inside the car (the word means the organs inside the body of a person or animal)
wheelbarrow	: a small cart with one wheel and handles that is used for carrying things in the garden, etc.
sphincters	: rings of muscle that surround an opening to the body and that can tighten to close this opening
hip	: bright red (from the word 'rosehip')
specter/spectre (Br E)	: a ghost; something frightening
scepter/scepter (Br E)	: an ornamental rod that a king/queen carries on ceremonial occasions as a symbol of power

35.4.3 Analysis of the Poem

Ginsberg wrote "Sunflower Sutra", too, at Berkeley, California. The poem contains some of his frequently dealt with themes. The devastation of the American landscape by the encroachments of modern industrialized society constitutes the central idea of the poem. However, while a poem like "America" ends on a pessimistic note, "Sunflower Sutra" ends on a positive note; it ends with the speaker's assertion that he will preach a sermon to himself, Kerouac and, significantly, to "anyone who'll listen."

When the poem opens we find its speaker (Ginsberg?) sitting "under the huge shade of a Southern/ Pacific locomotive." He is watching "the sunset /over the box house hills." The view should give him joy but watching it in the presence of an ugly urban landscape only makes him cry. The speaker is not all alone; Jack Kerouac also is sitting beside him. They are alike in their thoughts and feelings: "we thought the same thoughts/ of the soul, bleak and blue and sad eyed..."

They cannot enjoy the beauty of the sunset because they are surrounded by objects ("the gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery") that are symbolic of ruthless urbanization. In Romantic poetry we come across sunset, hills, trees, etc. which are objects of pure beauty and joy, but here they have lost their charm in the context of an ugly urbanized landscape. The image of trees presented in lines

8-9 does not evoke any organic feeling in the readers; the image is presented to underline the ugly mechanization of America. The speaker and Kerouac, thus, are “surrounded by the gnarled steel roots of trees of/ machinery.”

In the next lines the ill effects of industrialization is depicted. The water in the river has become oily, perhaps because of the industrial waste flushed into it. Fish cannot live in it. The mountains that overlook San Francisco cannot be the peaceful abode of a hermit who wants to cut himself off from the buzz of the city. Even the mountain landscape appears to have been encroached upon. The speaker and Kerouac watch this bleak landscape. They describe themselves as “rheumy-eyed and hungover like old bums/ on the river bank, tired and wily.” They don’t seem to have any escape from this terribly mechanized society; while hating it they have to be a part of it, too.

It is at this moment Kerouac tells the speaker, “Look at the Sunflower.” The speaker could not imagine the presence of a sunflower in that polluted environment. Unable to believe such a presence, he sees the flower as something unnatural,” a dead grey shadow . . . big as a man.” As he rushes up to see it, memories well up in him about his auditory vision of Blake (while reading the poem “Ah! Sunflower”) followed by his life in New York:

It was my first sunflower, memories of Blake. . . . past

The objects described in these lines are hideous symbols of urbanization, mechanization and industrialization and New York happens to be the most urbanized city.

The Sunflower that Kerouac shows, which should have revived the speaker’s spirit, has no charm since the vicious and polluted environment surrounding it has destroyed its beauty:

and the gray Sunflower poised against the sunset,
crackly, bleak and dusty with the smut and smog
and smoke of olden locomotive in its eye.

In the subsequent description the personified flower is not presented as something beautiful but as something that has been destroyed chemically. It looks like a “battered crown”; the seeds in it have fallen off and the dried leaves of the plant stick out of the stem like arms. In short the flower, and the plant on which it stands, is not an object of beauty but an object made ugly and mercilessly devastated by industrial waste.

In the lines that follow (line 41 onwards) the speaker lists the pollutants that have caused the destruction of each part of the personified flower:

all that dress of dust, that veil of darkened railroad
skin, that smog of cheek, that eyelid of black
mis’ry, that sooty hand or phallus or protuberance
of artificial worse-than-dirt—industrial—
modern—all that civilization spotting your
crazy golden crown

In another listing of objects, with obvious sexual overtones, the speaker makes it clear that the plant has not been growing from a layer of natural soil but from the home-pile of sand and sawdust; its roots were entangled in the skin of machinery, the guts and innards of the weeping coughing car, the smoked ashes of some cock cigar, the cunts of wheelbarrows and the milky breasts of cars, etc. Ginsberg uses

these sexual images to express, as a Beat poet, his anger at a mechanized urban society that has hardly any respect for what is beautiful and artistic.

Having described its pitiable and ugly existence, in the last thirty odd lines, the speaker expresses his admiration for the sunflower. He is rather reluctant to acknowledge that any kind of industrial invasion can destroy what is beautiful, organic, original and artistic:

and you there
 standing before me in the sunset, all your glory
 in your form!
 A perfect beauty of a sunflower! A perfect excellent
 lovely sunflower existence! A sweet natural eye
 to the new hip moon, woke up alive and excited
 grasping in the sunset shadow sunrise golden
 monthly breeze!

The speaker has reasons for refusing to accept the disfigurement of the flower. According to him, the flower has inherent beauty and strength that can withstand all attacks on it. Once again the personification of the flower is made prominent. Although the flower is covered with grime, “many flies buzzed round” it. The speaker’s objection is that the flower does not assert its beauty and strength as Sunflower; it has been cursing the destructive external force and itself:

How many flies buzzed round you innocent of your
 grime, while you cursed the heavens of the
 railroad and your flower soul?

The speaker exhorts it not to forget its original identity as a sunflower and not to consider itself a locomotive, the very cause of its, and America’s, destruction:

Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a
 flower? when did you look at your skin and
 decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive?
 the ghost of a locomotive? the specter and
 shade of a once powerful mad American locomotive?

The frequent references to the ‘locomotive’ in the poem have special significance in American history. When it was first introduced, nobody thought that the industrialization process it signalled would have such terrible impact upon the American landscape. Thus even Whitman, an ideal poet for Ginsberg, sang in praise of its arrival in his “A Passage to India.” He thought it would connect people across America and would be a means to witness America’s varied landscape. So he sang:

I see over my own continent the Pacific Railroad, surmounting every
 barrier;
 I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte, carrying freight
 and passengers;
 I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-
 whistle,
 I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the
 world.. .
 Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel
 Tying the Eastern to the Western sea. . .

The destructive impact of the locomotive is now manifested in the crass industrialization and the all-encompassing pollution of the landscape. Thus, even Ginsberg's personified sunflower decides to think of itself as "an impotent dirty old locomotive/ or the ghost of a locomotive."

However, the speaker's present attempt is to revive the withered spirit of the flower and instilling in it enough faith to assert its beauty and power. With this intention he makes a clear distinction between what is beautiful and what is despicable:

You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a
sunflower!
And you locomotive, you are a locomotive, forget me not!

With this address he picks up the battered, "skeleton thick" sunflower and keeps it by his "side like a scepter"—a symbol of power.

The final section of the poem (the last 9 lines) is the speaker's sermon to himself, Kerouac "and anyone who'll listen." Once again the locomotive and sunflower are used as powerful symbols. The locomotive (industrialization), the speaker exhorts, certainly has had its annihilating impact on the sunflower (beauty/art), but the damage is only external; beneath the layers of grime the flower has its original beauty and strength that are inviolable. It is significant that the poet is using the second person (inclusive) pronoun 'we', giving his sermon a kind of universal significance in the whole of America, perhaps even outside it. The process of industrialization may take frightening proportions but the spirit of America handed down over centuries remains invincible:

We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread
bleak dusty imageless locomotive, we're all
beautiful golden sunflowers inside, we're blessed
by our own seed and golden hairy naked
accomplishment. . .

Human beings cannot be made up of industrial waste, the covetousness of the corporate world or the violence of war. The spirit of America and every American is a sunflower.

35.4.4 An Appreciation

The word 'Sutra' in the title of the poem is significant. 'Sutra' is a Buddhist form of literature. This kind of literature contains works whose contents are a string of aphorisms. An aphorism, as you may be aware, is a short phrase or line that says something true or wise; it is, according to MH Abrams, "a pithy and pointed statement of a serious maxim, opinion, or general truth." Ginsberg's poem is not merely aphoristic, it is much more complex but, as in the case of Sutra, the message it conveys is simple and truthful.

The sunflower as a symbol receives elaborate treatment in the poem, although it mainly stands for America and its indomitable spirit. Like the sunflower in the poem America has been tarnished and battered yet, the poem implies, it has in it inherent power to reconstruct and reinstate itself. Although outwardly it is battered, it still has its beauty within it. What is needed is people's understanding of the fact that America can regain its inherent beauty. America's beauty lies in its core values which include freedom of expression and progressive political and social thought. Like a romantic poet-seer, Ginsberg reveals this beauty to a country that has lost its core values.

The poem may be considered as a prophetic poem. A prophetic poem has its tradition in the prophetic literature of the bible. The Old Testament prophets, inspired by the Spirit of God, often warned the people of Israel, who turned unfaithful to God, against the wrath of God upon them. The poems “America” and some sections of “Howl” are prophetic in nature. However, in “Sunflower Sutra” one comes across Ginsberg’s vision of a Romantic society in which Industrial devastation is totally absent, a society which has the capability to return to its original beauty. The fact that the closing lines of the poem resemble a sermon further underscores this prophetic quality of the poem.

The poem, like many others by Ginsberg, has different kinds of long lines which do not essentially adhere to any specific metrical or rhythmic pattern. It has the rhythm of breath. Such lines help him pass on his message to his leaders clearly. Each Stanza contains a couple of lines that drive in a truth. This gives the poem the quality of a Sutra.

John Tytell finds some similarities between Blake’s sunflower in “Ah-Sunflower” and Ginsberg’s “Sunflower Sutra”. According to him, the latter poem “is an elegy of glorious optimism for a dead sunflower.” Both the poems deal with mutability and transience of living objects and the surety of death. The critic informs us that the sunflower that Ginsberg sees is the flower of industry and as such it looks ugly. It is, the poet says, “the flower of the world, worn, brittle, dry yellow—miracle of gravel life spring(ing) to the bud.” A poem like “Howl” has a repetitive base form (for e.g., the repetition of the pronoun ‘Who’). In “Sunflower Sutra”, without any such repetition, Ginsberg builds up a kind of increasing rhythmic tempo. What the poet attempts to do in the poem is to present, to quote Tytell again, “a paean to the life-force within the heart of the wasteland, the sordid details of junk, treadles tires, used condoms, and abandoned tin cans and industrial grime, enveloping the dessicated sunflower in which Ginsberg chooses to believe, vigorously asserting his belief by seizing the skeleton stalk and holding it at his side like a scepter.”

The last part of the poem is a verse paragraph and it closely resembles Whitman’s verse. One of Whitman’s disciples, Dr. Richard Bucke, has recorded a mystical experience that his master had around 1853-54. This experience, like Ginsberg’s Blake vision, “resulted in an ecstatic sense of ineffable joy, a knowledge of the unity of the universe, of the bonds existing between men and all living things.” The impact of the experience is perceivable in Whitman’s celebration of life and fellow men. His poems revealed his ability to sympathetically identify with and love everything—living and non-living—in the universe. Whitman’s celebration of life everywhere and his ability to see beauty in everything is so intense and open that rational individuals might even find it sentimental. This celebration of life is visible in Ginsberg’s eulogy of the dead flower and the optimism that he develops out of it.

Self-check Exercise I

- 1) Can you explain how “Sunflower Sutra” is different from “A Supermarket in California”?

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35.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

A lot of biographical and critical works/articles on Ginsberg are available. You may also get a long list of them if you Google 'Bibliography on Allen Ginsberg.' Some of the books you may refer to are:

- 1) Cargas, Harry, 1972. *Daniel Berrigan and contemporary protest poetry*. New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press Services.
- 2) Merrill, Thomas, 1988. *Allen Ginsberg*, Boston, Massachusetts: Twayne Publishers.
- 3) Morgan, Bill, 2006. *I Celebrate myself: The somewhat private life of Allen Ginsberg*. New York: Viking/Penguin.
- 4) Protuges, Paul, 1978. *The visionary poetics of Allen Ginsberg. California: Ross-Erikson*.
- 5) Ruskin, Jonah. 2004. *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's howl and themaking of the beat generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 6) Simpson, Louis. 1978. *Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell*. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- 7) Tytell, John. 1976. *Naked angels: The lives and literature of the beat generation*. New York: McGraw Hill Book Company.

35.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self check exercise on Ginsberg's biography. All answers are according to the Serial numbers of the questions.

- 1) He had a poetic style of his own; used long free verse lines; in his techniques he resembled Walt Whitman (e.g., Cataloguing of objects, events, etc.)
- 2) Perhaps not, because Ginsberg's father wrote highly traditional poetry. Ginsberg's time, especially during the Modernist period and after World War II, was socially and culturally a very complex age in the history of America and it demanded a kind of new poetry that challenged all ideas of conventional poetry.
- 3) Think of the poets you have already read in this course. For e.g. you may think of the influence of the Metaphysical poets on TS Eliot's writing.

Answers to the questions on "A Supermarket in California".

- 1) For example, the last three lines of the first stanza contain a list; you may also make a list of the phrases that the poet uses to describe Whitman.
- 2) You will find the answer to this question in the section 'Analysis of the poem.'
- 3) The Stanzas resemble the stanzas written by Whitman; the number of lines in the stanzas varies; lines are long.
- 4) The Supermarket itself is a symbol (read the section 'Aspects of technique' Carefully); the 'blue automobile' in the third stanza can be considered as a symbol of the consumerist society.

Answers to the questions on “Sunflower Sutra”.

- 1) The first poem is less optimistic than the second one (Read the analyses of the two poems). The sermon in the second poem underlines the poet’s hope for America.
- 2) The poet refers to many objects that can cause environmental pollution. For example, ‘busted rusty iron’, ‘oily water’ and ‘dank muck’. You can find more such expressions in the poem.
- 3) Blake’s poem is given below. Both the poems are about flowers and their destruction. The destruction of the sunflower is caused by man but of the rose by nature (the worm); does Blake’s poem end on an optimistic note like Ginsberg’s?

The Sick Rose
by William Blake
O Rose, thou art sick:
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does they life destroy.

- 4) The sunflower itself is a symbol and its symbolic value is described in the Analysis. The ‘locomotive’ and ‘scepter’ are also symbols.

BEGE-106 Understanding Poetry TOPICS COVERED Block-1 Early Modern English Poets Unit-1 Why Read a Poem? and, How to Study Understanding Poetry?Â High Modernist, Postmodernist and Recent Poets Unit-21 William Butler Yeats Unit-22 T.S. Eliot Unit-23 Philip Larkin Unit-24 Ted Hughes Unit-25 Seamus Heaney Block-6 The American Poets-I Unit-26 Ralph Waldo Emerson Unit-27 Walt Whitman Unit-28 Edgar Allan Poe Unit-29 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Unit-30 Emily Dickinson Block-7 The American Poets-II. Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamedâ€” Let it be that great strong land of love Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme That any man be crushed by one above.Â A poet, novelist, fiction writer, and playwright, Langston Hughes is known for his insightful, colorful portrayals of black life in America from the twenties through the sixties and was important in shaping the artistic contributions of the Harlem Renaissance. More Langston Hughes >. sign up for poem-a-day.