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# UNIT 1 THE POSTWAR AMERICAN NOVEL

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we shall see the whole phenomenon of the postwar American novel, the novel of the late 1940's and 1950's when a new set of writers with a distinct philosophy and fictional mode emerged on the American literary scene-Saul Bellow, Norman Mailor, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth. Understanding Barth substantially requires understanding the intellectual and artistic phenomenon of the postwar fiction. Not that the phenomenon exhausts Barth's creativity but Barth's individualist response is a part of a broader response of the novelists in the late 1940's and 1950's to the impact of the second world war and to the emerging cultural scene in America. Hence, we begin with postwar American novel for a fuller understanding of John Barth and his novel, *The Floating Opera*.

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## 1.1 THE POST SECOND WORLD WAR AMERICAN NOVEL

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In a seminal essay called, "The Literature of Exhaustion", John Barth sums up the postwar literature as the literature of exhaustion. The genre is minimally American, for the postwar experience is largely Euro-American. The effective American participation in the war and the emergence of America as a cultural center for many of the refugee European writers enabled America to experience the war intellectually. The Europeanization of the American novel is simply its cultural expanse beyond its national boundaries. The catastrophe of the war brought a cynical disillusionment about the modernist values of liberal individualism. These values became particularly strong after the first world war with the enthusiastic American responsiveness to the European modernism. There was disillusionment with the first world war too, but that was more in the nature of a concern for the negation of human values in the war. The first world war did not bring in cynicism as did the second world war but intensified humanist concerns whereas the second world war, which was a sheer holocaust made humanist convictions almost impossible. The American novel in the aftermath of the war presented a new intellectual ambience vastly different from that of the predecessors. Saul Bellow, Norman Mailor, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth reshaped the American novel in

the postwar years. Theirs was a renaissance necessitated by the postwar cultural perspectives. Together, they heralded a new phase in the American fiction, a phase that became markedly clear not only in their writings but also among the novelists who came into prominence during the sixties and the subsequent decades. The significance of these writers is comparable to that of Mark Twain and Henry James who shaped the American fiction in the 19th century and to that of Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne who constituted another phase in American fiction in the 19th century. More importantly, Bellow, Mailor, Pynchon and Barth present a contrastive tradition to the modern champions of American fiction in the early 20th century like Earnest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Scott Fitzgerald.

One understands the postwar fiction of Bellow, Mailor, Pynchon and Barth only if we see what the earlier postwar fiction of Hemingway, Faulkner and Fitzgerald was like and what Bellow and others were subsequently looking askance at that tradition in fiction.

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## 1.2 THE AMERICAN NOVEL SINCE THE 1920'S

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The twenties began a modern or modernist period in American literature. More than any other genre of art, novel received a powerful fillip from the European tidings of modernist thought and imagination. In the 19th century, Henry James laboured hard to give a European form and sophistication to the American novel. William Dean Howells' endeavours in the direction of literary realism/naturalism. Their efforts, among other things, brought a sea change to the literary scene in America at the turn of the century. The ethos of the ever expanding Frontier having ended by 1900, and America having grown into an industrial giant by 1920, America was particularly receptive to the European strain of literary realism/naturalism which appealed to the American imagination for its scientific temper and method, particularly because the American nation owed its economic boom in the early 20th century to the various advances in Science.

The American novel since the 1920's presented a new canon vastly different from the 19th century American novel of, essentially, rural and Frontier America. The early American novel of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser strove in the direction of perfecting realistic/naturalistic art.

There was another wave of modernist individualism, as opposed to modernist realism/naturalism cherishing the irrepressible human will and the infinite powers of human intellect and imagination. This was largely an inheritance from the 19th century rationality and individualism intensified with the keen modernist perceptions of the world, and an equally felt, modernist self-awareness. Consequently, one notices in the American fiction of the twenties a growing complexity of human character, unknown in the 19th century literature, at odds with the emerging socio-cultural situation and at odds with the traditional American morality of puritanism. This discomfort becomes conflictual with the invasion of Marxist ideology into the capitalist ethos of the American socio-economic situation and Freudian awareness of one's own sexuality into the realm of personal and social morality conditioned by puritanism.

The early twentieth century novel recognizes, as never before, the manifold challenges man faces in his situation and also asserts, for the first time, infinite human capacity to face up to the challenges. Furthermore, modernism posited a positive concern for the minutiae of everyday life.—the trivial and the actual is given a significance hitherto unknown. A Hemingway hero lives his life nonchalantly in the immediacy of experience unencumbered by any ideas or concepts. The only thing to do is to see what one could make of oneself in the given

situation. Faulkner believed in the little things of life "sublimating" what he called "the actual into the apocryphal"

The concern for the actual is realism but the heightened concern of the self-assertive human mind has tragic implications. In fact, the tragic predicament of the 20<sup>th</sup> century man, particularly the 20<sup>th</sup> century American lay in the growing modernization of his situation and the growing modernism of his mind. The American novel emphasized the human and the situational possibilities of tragedy. Tragedy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century European literature was the sheer pathos of the human situation. Man was a pitiable victim of his situation with no capacity either to challenge his situation or to assert his dignity.

The modern American novel is significant for the tragic affirmation of human dignity. Hemingway's characters are all losers but heroes of lost causes. As a Hemingway character puts it, "a man can be destroyed but not defeated". Hawthorne refused to accept "the end of man" and asserted that human will does not simply "endure" but would "prevail" itself against all failures. For Fitzgerald, tragedy is the very process of civilization, of its romance and realism and of its exuberance and irony.

More than the power of its realism and tragedy, Modern American novel acquires the strength of the genre. Under the realistic and naturalistic mode, it acquired a precision and compactness of form and simplicity, naturalness and directness of expression and emerges as a powerful medium of cultural statement and reflection.

As the American novel enters the thirties, the economic depression of the decade brought overwhelming Marxist perspectives of economic determinism overshadowing its human values. Marxist perspectives intensified naturalism in the novel and when Marxism is the overriding passion, naturalism took the shape of regionalism and ethnic literature. So much so, realism/naturalism became the predominant mode of American fiction either to present a slice of life or the repressive pathos of living in an age of machine or to assert the indefatigable human and its infinite promise.

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### 1.3 THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON AMERICA

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The second world war was catastrophic not only for the devastation it caused but for exploding the modernist edifice built in America from the twenties through the forties. The first world war created a humanist aversion for the destruction the war caused but did not stifle civilizational values. The second world war brought a cynical attitude towards the very process of civilization. The self-confident and vibrant modernism that explained the western world finds itself at the crossroads calling for a redefinition of human identity. The notion of man-made world gives way to an apprehension of a self-destructive human world. Though America came out unscathed in the second world war, the fact that the nation was the residence for many refugee intellectuals from Europe felicitated America's intellectual involvement in the war.

The war traumatised the European intellectuals to no end. In sheer desperation, they gave up all conventional modes of thinking and embraced a sort of intellectual and artistic iconoclasm. The successful American intervention in the war made the European context come irresistibly to the American thinking. The result was an emphatic response to the holocaust of the war and a weariness with its own cherished values which in the succeeding decades emerged as a critical reappraisal of its own cultural values.

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## 1.4 AMERICA IN THE POSTWAR YEARS

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The Europeanization of America was rather unprecedented for the nation in the postwar years. Rather suddenly, America looked uncomfortable at its own philosophy of individualism. The shift in national or cultural attitudes is not entirely due to the European factor. Quietly over the decades, America walks past the stage of an individualist industrial society and emerges as a postindustrial mass society. It was the socio-psychologist, David Reisman who pinpoints, for the first time a revision in the cultural format of the nation. America has become an "other-directed lonely crowd in the place of its traditional individualistic "inner direction". Several economists and anthropologists follow Reisman: the American has become an organizational man. And the nation an "affluent society" with "mass culture" or "mass leisure" The fifties came to be known as the gilded age in American history.

An affluent mass society is no unmixed blessing as America witnessed during the fifties and the sixties. Affluence notwithstanding, mass society puts a heavy premium on the creative and aesthetic instincts of man—"homogenization" of language and behaviour and their disjuncture from ideas and feelings. The fifties were incipiently explosive in America for what was a revolt against mass society begins in the fifties mainly as a rejection of representational/realistic values in art, a rejection that becomes explosive during the sixties. The fifties witnessed non-representational paintings of Jackson Pollock, Martha Graham's dance. Jack Kerouac, who coined the term, beat, a word that came to refer to a whole young generation which rejected all social values and preferred to live as nomads, begins the most unorthodox writing America witnessed. In a path-breaking fictional effort, *ON THE ROAD* (1957), he fashions out spontaneity in the place of order and control, as the artistic value. Writing, for Kerouac, should be an undisturbed flow in a wild form that would purify the mind and achieve a sort of orgasm for the writer. Kerouac finds a companion in Allen Ginsberg who believed that music and poetry based on nothing but chance and spontaneity would combat the sheer falsehood of homogenized culture.

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## 1.5 THE POSTWAR AMERICAN NOVEL

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The changing cultural patterns of the nation make the novelist in the post second world war period seek to bypass the culturally ingrained individualism and the established literary values of realism/naturalism. In fact, he inherits a singular task—combating what has become the modernist despair of the post war years. The post war fiction of the first and second world wars assumes a contrastive pattern. The novel in the aftermath of the first world war passionately sought modernist values whereas the novelists in the aftermath of the second world had to fight the despair these values have brought. One could still cherish modernism as Saul Bellow does while the world negates it in every possible way. Bellow held the last flicker of humanist hope.

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## 1.6 SAUL BELLOW

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Saul Bellow is the most outstanding of the postwar novelists who belongs, by his faith and commitment to the human values, to the prewar novelists like Hemingway and Faulkner but the frustrating experience with the everfailing civilizational values aligns him with Norman Mailor, John Barth and Pynchon. A Jewish moralist to the core, though does not write ethnically, Bellow sees a tendency to slip into a moral

abyss where it should be humanly possible to transcend the distraught postwar situation. Likewise, he holds on to the modernistic novel for all its realism and intellectuality instead of debunking it like his contemporaries as unrepresentative of the postwar situation.

Bellow's novels in the postwar period, *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Victim* (1947) and *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) present sheer despair of living in postwar America. His heroes, Joseph, Asa Leventhal, Augie March go about life with an intellectual and moral sensitivity but only to be continually frustrated and thwarted by the engulfing human chaos. With divisive and alienating contexts between man and man, humanism of the Enlightenment type or of the modern liberalism does not work. On the other hand, a positive unconcern for all these values appears to register success in the contemporary world. *Dangling Man* debates with his ironic spectator about joining the war into which he is listed, a war which is inauthentic in terms of its professed values. Jobless, living on wife's income and alienated from everyone around him, life doesn't offer any authenticity either. Finally, he joins the army as inauthentically as, he, otherwise, lives.

The significant thing about Bellow's earliest novel is the powerful modernist perspectives it throws on contemporary living- its immobility, inaction, purposelessness and waste. Joseph couldn't do anything other than a critical self-condemnation. Bellow's second novel, *The victim* moves into the realm of interpersonal relationship where well-meaning concern and compassion for others could be a premium on their lives, for the nature of contemporary living does not admit these qualities. The lot of Bellow's hero, Asa Leventhal has a tremendous sense of guilt for intending to better the lives of others, who succeed rather callously in life. Of course, they do not know why they succeed. In one of Bellow's best novels, *The Adventures of Augie March* the intellectual adventure into the realm of liberalist and romantic thought proceeds simultaneously with the growing immorality, a situational requirement of contemporary existence.

More than any other postwar novelist, Bellow dramatises the utter contrast between the modernist human tradition contemporary man continues to cherish the contemporary postwar situation that doesn't admit modernist or individualist perspectives. The agony lies in hoping for individualism in a mass society.

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## 1.7 NORMAN MAILOR: WAR AS A CIVILIZATIONAL VALUE

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Saul Bellow persists with human values, with a ray of hope, in the postwar situation that negates human values in every possible way. His contemporary, Norman Mailor deciphers war, besides being human catastrophe, as a civilizational value of war and domination of one over the other. For Mailor, war has not produced the state of dehumanization in the 1940's but itself a product of civilized society whose inherent sadism existed before and after the war. Mailor's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), possibly the first and the best of the postwar novels, chronicles the second world war both as a political fact of the American nation and a personal fact of the American character.

*The Naked and the Dead* presents the American invasion of a tiny Japanese island called Anapopei. The particular infantry regiment of the American army, that leads the attack on the Japanese island, consists of men who present a broad spectrum of human possibilities. At the one end is general Cummings who runs the power machine of the war.-power of decimating any number of people in or through war. Hoping for the war to bring totalitarian power and the historical condition of middle ages, Cummings sees a vision of "renaissance of real power in the postwar period. Allied to him and partly used by Cummings as an instrument of his grandiose plans

for a brutal attack on the island is Sergeant Croft, who on account of a mishap in life, emerges as the cynical killer of the invading American army.

In the course of the invasion, war emerges not only at a physical level with the Japanese but psychologically manifests itself in the racial animosities of the American character. The Irish officer abuses the Jewish American soldier, Roth as a Jewish bastard making the latter feel that the target of war is turned inwards towards him. It was a moment of truth to Roth--- the war he is fighting belongs to human character rather than to the battling nations. In another inversion, rather a positive one, of the emotive relationship that should exist among the American soldiers, Sergeant Brown displays compassion for the dying Japanese soldier. Equally a moment of truth for Brown that the divisions made by war are arbitrary and superficial and do not simply exist at a purely human level.

That the war is fought not only physically with the Japanese but more inimically with American soldiers becomes clear in Cummings and Sergeant Croft's manipulating to send Lieutenant Heron, a liberal who hated Cummings and Croft's cynical pursuits of power, on the reconnaissance mission resulting in the latter's death. Cummings doesn't win the war but the victory comes unmasked through Dalleson. Similarly, Croft has to withdraw the reconnaissance mission as his men rebel against the impossible task.

Roth, Brown and Hearn had moments of truth in the novel when they become targets of the hysterical animosity of the fellow American soldiers, for whom the enemy targets lie within their army though outwardly and physically they fight the Japanese.

The naked and the dead emerge as two clear cut categories in the novel. The liberal minded Ruth, Brown and Heron who had their moments of truth are the naked for they have seen the perversion of the war wherein the enemy is cynically killed or the power hungry officers target their soldiers for enmity. For the Generals and Sergeants who successfully lead the war machine are the dead. They remain stagnant or dead in the cynical pursuit of power and war is the only one context for the exercise of power. The prewar and the postwar are as warlike in the cynical pursuits of power games, nations and individual play.

Mailor's is a grim vision of the world as well as of the postwar America. The moments of truth or understanding that Mailor presents are minimal and contrastive to the overall deadness of human feeling and understanding that one finds in postwar America.

Unlike Bellow who presents the possibility of human transcendence in a desperate situation, Mailor presents a virulent critique of civilizational values implying that a resurgence of romanticism could alone correct the negation of human values.

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## 1.8 JOHN BARTH

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Among the novelists who ushered in the postwar novel, Bellow and Mailor, with different perspectives, may be called the novel's progenitors. John Barth and Thomas Pynchon are the formulators of the tradition of the postwar novel. Barth exploring the Bellowian concern for the inauthenticity of human existence and Pynchon carrying forward the mailoresque critique of civilizational values. Pynchon writes in the 1960's when the postwar novel assumes the form of an experimental novel. Barth is particularly significant in the postwar novel for he writes in the immediate postwar period-the fifties which offer crucial transition to the intensely reflective sixties that mark a stage in American literature like the twenties did earlier.

It fell to the lot of John Barth to formulate, in the first instance, the axioms literature has acquired by 1950s. As Barth sees it, literature has ceased to be creative having exhausted its perceptive and literary faculties. The cultural change necessitates new artistic and literary forms as the new cultural norms remain inaccessible to the traditional literary forms which could only present the outlived cultural norms. Barth calls it the literature of "exhausted possibility" or "the literature of exhaustion".

Barth's focus on the primacy of literary form in generating cultural reflection makes him, to a certain extent, theoretician of the new postwar literature. New modes of thinking break up conventional forms of art or the conventional forms of art block new modes of thinking. The literature of exhaustion points the "used upness" of certain forms of exhaustion of certain possibilities". Barth writes:

....to be technically out of date is likely to be a genuine defect: Beethoven's Sixth Symphony or the Chartres Cathedral if executed today would be merely embarrassing. A good many current novelists write turn of the century type not only in more or less midcentury language about contemporary people and this topic makes them considerably less interesting.<sup>1</sup>

A technically up-to-date writer, Barth feels, alone capture contemporary reality.

"An artist's mode or form", for Barth, is a "metaphor for his concerns ---- it is a paradigm or metaphor for itself. Not the form of the story but the fact of the story is symbolic; the medium is the message."

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## 1.9 JOHN BARTH : THE EUROPEAN INSPIRATION

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Barth views Jorge Luis Borges and Samuel Beckett as ideal literary artists who are technically up-to-date and in tune with the spirit of the times. In an age of "final solutions and felt ultimacies", Barth notes, they deal with "ultimacy both technically and thematically". Both Borges and Beckett write at a point of cultural and artistic history wherein creativity has reached a dead end and a creative writer has to turn upon the very used up cultural and literary artifacts and make the very used upness, quite ironically, into a powerful cultural and literary statement. In fact, Barth writes, as Borges and Beckett have proved, irony by itself produces great literature and originality in literature is quite often a myth. Barth writes:

An artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work- paradoxically because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his reputation, in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to have enabled to live, spiritually and physically in the finite world. Literary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies and it may well be that the novel's time as a major art form is up, as the "times" of classical tragedy, grand opera, or the sonnet sequence came to be. No necessary cause for alarm in this at all, except perhaps to certain novelists, and one way to handle such a feeling might may be to write a novel about it.<sup>2</sup>

Borges, Barth observes, never admits that anyone has a claim to originality in literature-"all writers are more or less faithful of the spirit, translators and annotators of preexisting archetypes".<sup>3</sup> A continual renewal of literary forms by way of reshaping the existing literary forms to meet the situational requirements of time becomes a greater literary effort than attempting something original at a time originality and creativity have reached a dead end.

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## 1.9 JOHN BARTH: THE NOVELISTIC VISION

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Barth embarked on his novelistic endeavours with a conviction that, in his literary efforts, he has to explore novel as self-conscious genre, for the artistic medium he uses itself is the message. Similarly, in the ambience of negated cultural values, he seeks life as self-consciously as he makes his literary endeavours-----“to acknowledge what I am doing while I am doing it is exactly the point”, as one of Barth’s characters puts it.

While ushering in the self-conscious tradition in novel, Barth recognizes the weight of modernist tradition. Frank D. MC Conell writes:

In Barth’s fiction, two complementary impulses are held in a precarious balance which, while it often creates dilemmas of vertiginous complexity, is also one of the truly original and valuable achievements of recent American writing. For Barth, this task means not simply to write stories which blatantly or cynically point out the fact that they are stories: rather it means to reclaim the humanizing power of literature, of story, in an age which appears in many to have lost its ability to feel that power. It is a self-consciousness which, like Bellow’s, insists upon the primacy of tradition, of the perennial myth of consciousness, over our daily lives: but which, at the same time, like Mailor’s, searches strenuously for the radical articulation of the individual mind, the outsider’s vision, which can at once corrode and refine the structures of the human tradition.<sup>4</sup>

However, as Barth shares the dominant concerns of Bellow and Mailor, he brings in a more acute awareness of the ability of the medium, than the cultural values shaping it, to offer self-critical reflection. Frank D. Mcconnell further writes:

To describe Barth’s universe in terms of Mailor’s or Bellow’s emphasis Barth’s central position within the mainstream of American fiction but in it can also distort the dimensions of his talent. The deepest “influences” upon his work are not Mailor, Bellow or indeed any American novelist of this century. Perhaps more than any writer of his age, he is a *literary* man: that is, a man for whom the tradition itself is a matter of the highest concern, delight and –may be- despair. The novel, for Barth, is not a distinct cultural or political mode of expression, not a form of self-testing and existential risk, but primarily a version of the most archaic and inexhaustible of human activities, story or myth. Barth’s fiction develops, quite logically, toward an exploration of the primal power of story telling itself, and a corresponding effort to return the forms of contemporary narrative to an approximation of the earliest, world creating power of myth, legend and epic.<sup>5</sup>

Barth is primarily interested in delineating the human situation. The changing parameters of human situation and concern is one aspect of Barth’s concern. More importantly, he is concerned with literature, particularly with the novel, its ability to mirror the whole spectrum of human concern and its ability to be an analogue to life in all its complexity.

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## 1.10 SUMMING UP

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The postwar American novel is a phenomenon by itself. It is self-conscious and self-explorative. It tries to shape up itself as a distinct genre that explore itself as much as it explores the cultural situation. It is modern but doesn’t carry the burden of the tradition of modernism. It is contemporary but continues tradition, though self-critically. More importantly, it is a product of the times and looks beyond its time and attempts to reshape and reformulate the intellectual and aesthetic norms of the times.



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## 1.11 REFERENCES

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1. John Barth "The Literature of Exhaustion" *The Atlantic Monthly* p.30 August 1967.
2. Ibid p.32
3. p.33
4. Frank d. mc Conell *Four Postwar american novelists. Bellow, maiolor, barth and pynchon.* The University of chicago press. Chicago 1977. P109.
5. Ibid Ibid p.109-10.

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## 1.12 KEY WORDS

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| <b>Apocryhal:</b>          | Something that is inauthentic and spurious. originally referred to religious writings considered inauthentic and unacceptable in terms of religious authority.   |
| <b>Canon:</b>              | a standardised discipline in thought, belief and genre or discipline. Originally referred to accepted biblical laws.   |
| <b>Genre:</b>              | Class or Category of artistic endeavors having a particular form, content or technique. Genre particularly means a distinct literary type.   |
| <b>Jorge Luis Borges:</b>  | A twentieth century Argentinian writer who influenced John Barth greatly.  |
| <b>Modern:</b>             | Attitudes based on the approaches of Scientific method, objectivity and rationality.   |
| <b>Modernism:</b>          | Modernism assumes a different stance from modernity or modernisation in that opposes the dehumanization of on account of techonological progress Modernism believes in believes in the validity of one's immediate situation as against the traditional values and the significance of a subjective response to the situation. The most important of modernist assumption is the belief that art is the best expression of human authenticity. |
| <b>Realism/Naturalism:</b> | Realism is a belief in objective and verifiable truth. Naturlism is the truth. Naturalism is the application of the perspectives of natural science of human nature and behaviour as aspects of modernism, realism and naturalism presented man as a victim of his instincts as well as a victim of technological and societal forces.   |

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### 1.13 QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss the broad differences between the Post First World War American novel and the Post Second World War American novel.
2. Examine the process of the Europeanization of the American novel.
3. Critically examine the contribution of Saul Bellow and Norman Mailor to the evolution of the Post Second World War American novel.
4. Examine the centrality of John Barth in the American novel since the Second World War.

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### 1.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

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1. John Barth "The Literature of Exhaustion" *The Atlantic Monthly* August 1967. Barth discusses how literature in Europe and America has reached the point of intellectual and aesthetic dead end by the time of Second World War.
2. Frank D. Mc Connell *Four Postwar American Novelists. Bellow, Mailor, Barth and Pynchon*. University of Chicago press. Chicago. 1977. Mc Connell discusses Saul Bellow and Norman Mailor, Barth and Pynchon as the early formulators of the tradition of post Second World War American Novel.
3. John O Stark *The literature of Exhaustion* Duke University press. Durham, Nc. 1974 Stark discusses the literature of Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov and John Barth as one particular phenomenon after the Second World War.
4. Charles B. Harris. *Contemporary American Novelists of The Absurd* College of University Press. New Haven. Conn. 1971. Harris discusses the fiction of Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth as novelists of the Absurd.