

Block

4**EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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BLOCK 4: EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

In this block we are going to discuss:

- A critical background to 20th century American poetry;
- An analysis of TS Eliot's "Ash Wednesday";
- Ezra Pound's selected poems;
- The poetry of William Carlos Williams;
- The poetic contributions of Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes.

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UNIT 14: BACKGROUND

Structure

- 14.0 Objectives
- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Critical Trends in Early 20th Century American Poetry
- 14.3 Imagism
- 14.4 New Criticism
- 14.5 Women in Early 20th Century American Poetry
- 14.6 Check Your Progress
- 14.7 Select Reading List

14.0 OBJECTIVES

- Acquire an in-depth knowledge of the forces that shaped 20th century poetry and the beginning of the Renaissance in American Poetry
- Get a bird's eye view of who constitute early 20th century American Poets and their contribution to the field of poetry in America and the world at large
- Achieve a systematic understanding of how different poetics work to configure and transform the poetic genre of early twentieth century literary landscape
- Analyze and correlate the public space, political form and cultural practice of early twentieth century reflected in the poetry

14.1 INTRODUCTION TO EARLY 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

Poetry, in particular, and literature, in general, derives its meaning from the cultural context, the social climate and the political forces that influence both the readers and the writers of poetry. American poetry, particularly in the early twentieth century thus imbibed the diversities of the American way of life in multiple ways. It brought together in the form of poetry, aesthetic and thematic variety in multiple linguistic and rhetorical choices. Among the different forces that shaped early twentieth century American poetry, World War 1 can be identified as one the major forces that affected thoughts and ideas of poets and the people who read and appreciated poetry. The war changed the world into a practical field where strife for food got the better of the other comforts of life. Romantic notion of relationships gave way to a more practical and convenient mode of lifestyle. Poets started writing about these changing landscape both physical and mental. In the mental arena there was a push away from the formal structure and style to a free metric. The Victorian ornateness gave way to direct emotional expression. The new social order brought in by the war left its indelible mark on American poetry and gave birth to a new genre which is followed to this day.

The conventions of the composite moral and the collective ethical of the Victorian era was rejected for a more personal and unconventional style and sincere expression of emotion. American poetry of the early 20th century under the leadership of Ezra Pound embarked on a journey on the lines of language and began a movement under the banner of imagism which prompted presentation with clarity. Abstract notions of beauty was replaced by direct description and images. Any extra use of words especially adjectives were avoided and instead the emphasis was on clear presentation of objects and images. The poetry which fits into this example is one of William Carlos Williams born in 1883 and died 1963 in the poem –

This is just to say

By William Carlos Williams

I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me they were delicious so sweet and so cold.

Early 20th Century American poetry came under the modernist influence which gave structural features to English poetry such as free verse and multiculturalism which till to this day remains the hallmark of modern poetry written in English. The American tradition of making an attempt to open-mindedly accept change and innovation and to acknowledge the poet's work as intellectual property having economic and aesthetic benefits were laid down during this period. America attracted both human talent and economic resources from all over the world. Both these forces changed not only the physical world in which poets wrote but the idealist world also went through major changes in accepting others including immigrants. Cultural traits from foreign lands as far as the Orient including India and Japan was accepted as exotic influences and poets did not shy away from inculcating them in their creation. The classic example was the use of 'Shanti', in the closing lines of Eliot's *Waste Land*. Ezra Pound was influenced by poetry from China and Japan and included them in his own creative writing. Poets like Rabindranath Tagore were given recognition through the Nobel Prize and thereby bringing nonnative poets to the world stage

The effects of the war led to positive developments such as industrialization which brought with it migration and urbanization. Provocative unpoetic subjects became trendy themes for poetry in early twentieth century America. The poem Hotel given below written by Harriet Monroe elucidates the urban themes on which early 20th Century American poetry was written.

Hotel

by **Harriet Monroe**

The long resounding marble corridors, the shining parlors with shining women in them.

The French room, with its gilt and garlands under plump little tumbling painted loves'. The Turkish room, with its jumble of many carpets and its stiffly squared un-Turkish chairs.

The English room, all heavy crimson and gold, with spreading palms lifted high in round green tubs.

The electric lights in twos and threes and hundreds, made into festoons and spirals and arabesques, a maze and magic of bright persistent radiance.

The people sitting in corners by twos and threes, and cooing together under the glare. The long rows of silent people in chairs, watching with eyes that see not while the patient band tangles the air with music.

The bell-boys marching in with cards, and shouting names over and over into ears that do not heed. The stout and gorgeous dowagers in lacy white and lilac, bedizened with many jewels, with smart little scarlet or azure hats on their gray-streaked hair.

The business men in trim and spotless suits, who walk in and out with eager steps, or sit at the desks and tables, or watch the shining women.

The telephone girls forever listening to far voices, with the silver band over their hair and the little black caps obliterating their ears.

The telegraph tickers sounding their perpetual chit—chit-chit from the uttermost ends of the earth.

The waiters, in black swallow-tails and white aprons, passing here and there with trays of bottles and glasses.

The quiet and sumptuous bar-room, with purplish men softly drinking in little alcoves, while the bar-keeper, mixing bright liquors, is rapidly plying his bottles.

The great bedecked and gilded café, with its glitter of a thousand mirrors, with its little white tables bearing gluttonous dishes whereto bright forks, held by pampered hands, flicker daintily back and forth.

The white-tiled, immaculate kitchen, with many little round blue fires, where white-clad cooks are making spiced and flavored dishes.

The cool cellars filled with meats and fruits, or layered with sealed and bottled wines mellowing softly in the darkness.

The invisible stories of furnaces and machines, burrowing deep down into the earth, where grimy workmen are heavily laboring.

The many-windowed stories of little homes and shelters and sleeping-places, reaching up into the night like some miraculous, highpiled honeycomb of wax-white cells.

The clothes inside of the cells—the stuffs, the silks, the laces; the elaborate delicate disguises that wait in trunks and drawers and closets, or bedrape and conceal human flesh.

The people inside of the clothes, the bodies white and young, bodies fat and bulging, bodies wrinkled and wan, all alike veiled by fine fabrics, sheltered by walls and roofs, shut in from the sun and stars.

The souls inside of the bodies—the naked souls; souls weazened and weak, or proud and brave; all imprisoned in flesh, wrapped in woven stuffs, enclosed in thick and painted masonry, shut away with many shadows from the shining truth.

God inside of the souls, God veiled and wrapped and imprisoned and shadowed in fold on fold of flesh and fabrics and mockeries; but ever alive, struggling and rising again, seeking the light, freeing the world.

Meaningful participation with capitalism was the hallmark of poetry of this period be it that of Ezra Pound or even that of Harriett Monroe. Poetry that had till now considered to be aesthetics was far removed from the influence of economic realities. However, during this period slowly and steadily American poets reaped the practical benefits of a modern world rather than succumbing to their dreamy dreary past. Poetry had to accept the challenges of modernity and could utilize the opportunity to fortify itself. Poetry was a reflection of the cultural capital of an American society with its preponderance of economy. The intellectual and emotional bonding to modernity with its instrumental values started at this momentous period in early twentieth century America.

It was during this period that Harriet Monroe established the literary journal *Poetry a Magazine of Verse* that was termed as being instrumental in “poetry renaissance” of early 20th century America. With the help from 100 prominent Chicago business leaders to sponsor the magazine by committing to 50 dollars a year for a five-year subscription Monroe launched *Poetry* magazine on September 23, 1912. The 5,000 dollars was enough to sustain the publication while upholding its promise to contributors of adequate payment for all published work. By 1914 she accepted a salary of 50 dollars per month from the magazine for more than 10 years, raising it to 100 dollars per month in 1925. By then, the magazine had featured dozens of world-renowned poets and provided consistent and important vehicles for definite schools of poets particularly the Imagists. This journal provided a forum to writers to publish their poetry and thus gain American exposure and a new poetic voice for modern age which was garnered in America, a tradition which continues till now in American poetry. The journal pursued an open door policy which read as “may the great poet we are looking for never find it shut or half shut against his ample genius! To this end the editors ... desire to print the best English verse which is being written today, regardless of where, by whom, or under what theory of art it is written.” A poet’s work as intellectual property having economic and aesthetic benefits was the idea that came to the forefront during this period of economic upheaval in American society.

During the early 20th century American poets rather than pledging their affinity to the grand old English tradition of romanticism and Victorian elitism looked around the globe. Poetry brought the mass-literate modern American to appreciate culture from a wider perspective. Early twentieth century American poetry accepted the challenges of time and came up with classic contributions which include poetry of Ezra and Pound. The rejection of the grand old English tradition and making an attempt to open-mindedly accept change and innovation in poetry was the hallmark of early American poetry. American poetry took the world as its stage introducing Rabindranath Tagore from India and adopting the Chinese and Japanese poetic styles. This helped poetry written in English a wider audience and spread the message that poetry in America can benefit from other ethnic cultures and need not be confined to the grand old English tradition.

American poetry which was till now influenced by London as the cultural capital, was slowly and steadily moving to American soil with New York attracting many American poets. English metamorphosed into a world

language with many immigrants to the new land of America adopting it as their language of choice giving birth to a variation which was typically American and different from the English which had its origin in an island in Europe. The foundation of the dichotomy that persists between American and British even today was perhaps laid in the early twentieth century when both English language and literature were getting reshaped in American soil.

The early twentieth century saw the birth of the unique genre of poetry which in the words of Emerson “was a poetry of the new lands, new men, new thoughts, that were America.” Although Emerson had died by the beginning of the twentieth century his ideas had sown the seeds of what to come in the next centuries in American poetry.

One of the most famous movements in the early 20th century American poetry was the Renaissance originating in a cosmopolitan community of Harlem in New York City. Around the 1920s a few African American writers brought forth this unique movement through their writings on African culture and made place for this rich strand of art and culture into American way of life. Among them quite a few wrote poetry and include Countee Cullen (1903-1946), Langston Hughes (1902-[1967]), and Claude McKay (1890-1948). Langston Hughes Poetry ‘If-ing’ is one such poem given below. This poem blended English Language and African thoughts in the most enjoyable and entertaining expressions possible.

If-ing

by Langston Hughes

If I had some small change
I'd buy me a mule,
Get on that mule and
Ride like a fool.

If I had some greenbacks
I'd buy me a Packard,
Fill it up with gas and
Drive that baby backward.

If I had a million
I'd get me a plane
And everybody in America'd
Think I was insane.

But I ain't got a million,
Fact is, ain't got a dime—
So just by *if*-ing
I have a good time!

Langston Hughes is considered as one of the main proponents of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes's wrote poems along with novels, plays, short stories and even essays. As the above poem shows his description of simple joys

with ideals and stereotypes. This movement was focused on the advocacy of black intellectual and cultural life that took place in the 1920s particularly in Harlem and other cities in America. Harlem was the centre of African-American intellectuals who started this movement to revive the art of their community. This became the now famous Harlem Renaissance. Another member of this Renaissance was Claude McKay and her poem America given below speaks of the pathos of everyday life.

America

by Claude McKay

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate,
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

McKay's poems challenged white authority while celebrating Jamaican culture. McKay was open about his hatred for racism and often compared American and Jamaican life style to highlight the plight of African people and culture in American society. One of his most discussed poem is 'If we must die' where racial discrimination is challenged in no mean ways. Defending the rights of Africans and protecting them from torture and abuse McKay was never afraid to voice his views of radicalism in America. McKay was one of the poets who did not adopt modernism which had become fashionable in American literature by the time he was writing. McKay instead took to sonnets to express his modern and radical ideas. His love for African culture and art is believed to have developed from his intimacy with French artistes.

Another prominent voice of this Renaissance was Countee Cullen who was educated with White influences and made a place for himself in the academic world dominated by Whites and yet his exposure to black ideas came from the informal education that he was exposed to. The Ballad of the Brown Girl took him to Harvard University and his published volume of poetry was the famous 'Color'. Many other poets won grants and scholarships and brought in a consciousness which brought is modernism in African American literature. While McKay challenged white authority Cullen was accused of running away from racial spirituality, together they sustained the renaissance and gave a new voice to African American literature.

Anne Spencer was another poet who is often described as an activist of the Harlem Renaissance. She touched on themes of race and feminism in a style which was simple and yet profound. Often drawing on nature to express human emotions she published during the 1920s and was constantly in touch with the intellectuals connected with the Harlem Renaissance although she lived and wrote in Virginia. Her work was notably featured in Alain Locke's famous anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Her poems were included in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, which was edited by another figure of the Harlem Renaissance, *James Weldon Johnson*. During her lifetime, Spencer was able to publish over 30 poems. After her death in 1975, much of her work was published in *Time's Unfading Garden: Anne Spencer's Life and Poetry*. She was later featured in *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*. In the later half of the twentieth century, much of Spencer's lost work was found and published by other famous poets.

Translation by Anne Spencer

We trekked into a far country,
My friend and I.
Our deeper content was never spoken,
But each knew all the other said.
He told me how calm his soul was laid
By the lack of anvil and strife.
"The wooing kestrel," I said, "mutes his mating-note
To please the harmony of this sweet silence."
And when at the day's end
We laid tired bodies 'gainst
The loose warm sands,
And the air fleeced its particles for a coverlet;
When star after star came out
To guard their lovers in oblivion—
My soul so leapt that my evening prayer
Stole my morning song!

The early 20th century American poetry saw women writing poetry and some of them were discovered and published much later. Among the many women Amy Lowell is often cited as the poet who campaigned for imagist poetry and embraced the principles of imagism in her own poetry.

The Taxi

Amy Lowell

When I go away from you
The world beats dead
Like a slackened drum.
I call out for you against the juttred stars
And shout into the ridges of the wind.

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Early Twentieth Century

Streets coming fast,
One after the other,
Wedge you away from me,
And the lamps of the city prick my eyes
So that I can no longer see your face.
Why should I leave you,
To wound myself upon the sharp edges of the night?

Another women poet Marianne Moore who famously gave Muhammed Ali's record 'I am the greatest' can be the perfect poet to conclude an exhaustive history of early 20th century American poetry. Her poem 'Poetry' given below helps to get a bird's eye view of what Moore thought of poetry.

Poetry

By Marianne Moore

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are
important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect
contempt for it, one discovers in
it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important
not because a
high-sounding interpretation can be put
upon them but because they are
useful. When they become so derivative
as to become unintelligible, the
same thing may be said for all of us,
that we do not admire
what we cannot understand:
the bat holding on upside down or in quest
of something to
eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse
taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching
his skin like a horse that feels a flea,
the base-
ball fan, the statistician— ... nor is it valid
to discriminate against 'business
documents and school-books'; all these phenomena are
important. One must make a distinction
however: when dragged into
prominence by half poets, the result

is not poetry,
 nor till the poets among us can be
 ‘literalists of
 the imagination’-above
 insolence and triviality and can
 present
 for inspection, ‘imaginary gardens with
 real toads in them’, shall we have
 it. In the meantime, if you demand on
 the one hand, ... the raw material of poetry in
 all its rawness and
 that which is on the other hand
 genuine, you are interested in
 poetry.

The famous line from this poem ‘imaginary garden with real toads in them’ is often quoted by critics to explain what the first lesson in poetry ought to be.

To conclude, early twentieth century was a period during which American poets had sown the seeds of globalization and multiculturalism where a plurality of voices including women and immigrant made a place for themselves. The American spirit which was an amalgamation of multiple cultural traits found words in poetry, English language and thereby literature in the form of poetry morphed into a unique genre which went to the common man. The educated readers growing from mass literacy movements fortified the field of poetry. In addition the economic prosperity brought with it benefits for the poets as well. Poets were paid for their creations and grants and scholarships were available for poets pursuing the profession. Poetry responded by becoming simple and comprehensible to everyone. Poetry bore the thoughts and dreams of common folk be it that of a farmer or a commuter in a metro station. Poetry was no more the prerogative of the rich and the romantic.

Check your progress

1. What could be identified as social and cultural forces that shaped early American Poetry?
2. What features of American Poetry in the early 20th Century made it a genre of a new land?
3. Describe how the distinction between American and English started at the beginning of early 20th century in American Poetry.

14.2 CRITICAL TRENDS IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

Modernism

While examining early 20th Century American poetry the birth of modernism in American poetry is a trend that cannot be ignored. While

defining modernism the arguments of Friedman (2001) on what modernism means in 21st century America, needs to be taken into account. Friedman (2001) defined modernism as loosely affiliated movements and individuals in the arts and literature that reflect and contribute to the conditions and consciousness of modernity in Europe, Britain, and the United States (2001, page 26). Although social sciences and other branches of humanities such as history have different views of modernism, with interdisciplinary approach to literature, modernism in recent times have to contend with opposing trends in aesthetics and anarchistic ordering of poetics.

The early 20th century American poetry is envisaged today by literary critics as period of time when America was embracing new trends in literary world and particularly poetry which would be termed as modernism in years to come. In today's English literary studies in general and poetry in particular, modernism occupies an elevated position perhaps because of the far-reaching debates that it evoked, especially with regard to the art's role in society. Terms such as cultural capital became trendy in literary world. The need for aesthetics to enrich individual lives in a post war ravaged country striving to achieve economic prosperity through industrialization elevated the status of poetry in terms of its potential for entertainment.

As a social cultural and historical movement, modernism encompasses more than a half a century, beginning around 1880 or 1890 and continuing until the Second World War. But despite this historical inclusiveness, modernism in practice is predominantly associated with authors whose major works cluster in and around the 1920s. This period saw the emergence of a group of poets who can be attributed as the harbingers of modernism in American poetry. These poets were an energetic bunch of Americans drawn from different social and economic backgrounds with exposure to the cultures of the East and the West and both from academic and nonacademic backgrounds. The richness of their knowledge and the experience combined with the path breaking achievements in science and technology and post war energy resulted in new trends in poetry writing. The audience for poetry written in a new simpler less ornate American English was growing at an unprecedented pace around the globe. In addition as America attracted talents from around the globe through its capitalist policies it provided the perfect cushion to nurture poetry with grants and scholarships and even philanthropy for poetry publications.

The first wave of modernist trend can be safely labelled as belonging to the Imagist. Initiated by Pound it saw the culmination in Harriette Monroe's publication of the magazine Poetry. The London born movement found an audience in America and can be said to inspire modernist poets in America. A second wave of modernist trend in American poetry started emerging in the 1930s and became famous as objectivists. Although it was not as all-encompassing to be termed a movement there were few poets who used it in their poetry writing. This style treats the poem as an object, and to emphasize sincerity, intelligence, and the poet's ability to look clearly at the world. Pound, too, was influenced by the Objectivists' sense of form, and their focus on everyday vocabulary. The politics around the Objectivist movement was also concentrated on the American politics and economics of the day.

Another alternative was the French Symbolist movement found particularly in the poems of Wallace Stevens. Helen Vendler, in her book on Stevens's poetry, commented that much of the early reception of his poems was oriented to the symbolic reading of his poems often using simple substitution of metaphors and imagery for their asserted equivalents in meaning. For Vendler, this method of reception and interpretation was often limited in its usefulness and would eventually be replaced by more effective forms of literary evaluation and review. It has been acknowledged by critics that T.S. Eliot was also influenced by the Symbolist movement while writing at Harvard University.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the New Critics had emerged as an authoritative force in literary studies influenced by the growing scholarship from Germany. The New Critics argued that the text and meaning of a poem are closely connected and hence should not be analyzed separately. A poem is a self-contained text by itself and its aesthetics can be understood only by referencing to it as a text. New critics found patronage in the academia particularly in American Universities well into the 1950s and 60s.

14.3 IMAGISM

Imagism as a trend is a key characteristics of early American poetry. It started as a movement in early 20th century by T.E. Hulme and adopted by Ezra Pound and later patronized by Amy Lowell. This movement saw the emergence of a new trend in American poetry. Ezra Pound in his essay, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," refers to himself as an imagiste, or one who creates images. Under the leadership of Pound the movement gained momentum and through public statements the salient features of imagism were clearly spelt out. These included efficiency, economy and modernity in poetry. In the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*, after the publication of the "H.D. Imagiste" poems in the January number, Pound and Flint published a couple of notes on Imagism. The three Imagist principles that had been agreed on by H.D., Aldington and Pound were elaborated in the notes and included: direct treatment of the thing and it could either be subjective or objective; not a single extra word should be used without any purpose or which did not contribute to the presentation and finally, with respect to rhythm in poetry use of musical phrases could be utilized for sequence instead of metronome. These principles of Imagists focused on the elimination of words and phrases that had no purpose in description of the object or event and on the other hand they added to the ambiguity of the description. Pound and Flint went to the extent of proposing training to writers of poetry to master the skills that would lead to writing perfect poetry.

Influenced by French symbolism and Japanese Haiku, imagism gave birth to an anthology of American poetry titled *Des Imagists*. This movement in poetry embraced the wider literature as well aimed at making poetry for the common man. One of the most important features of imagist poetry was that it used the language of common speech. Imagist poetry aimed at providing the poet liberty to express new ideas in one's own unique way. This made poetry go to all places be it hotel or even metro stations. And in presenting poetry the real images should form the core of poetry. The focus was clear and definite rather than vague and ambiguous. The original group

which formed the imagists included Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, Richard Aldington and Willian Carlos Williams. Amy Lowell is considered the main proponent of Imagism in American poetry. Pound became disenchanted with the movement and believed to have left the group of poets congregated for the publication in 1914 of *Des Imagistes* which Pound edited.

Attributed the title of revolutionary among early 20th century American poets Pound is unanimously acclaimed as the poet who has made modern poetry possible in English. Pound meddled with translations, themes of poems written in languages as varied as French and Greek to Chinese and Japanese, with politics and new meaning to aesthetics in poetry. Pound took poetry to a level of scholarship and intellectual acumen that it created a divide between poetry lovers who read poetry for entertainment and those who dwelled on poetry as an intellectual pursuit. This divide remains till date among poets writing in different languages. The craft of poetry, the imagination and originality in poetry everything got the attention of Pound who is pivotal to any discussion on poetry written in English everywhere and not only America several decades after his death. For Pound imagism was no words to be used without a purpose. Musical phrase rather than metre was the key feature of imagism. Carrying this tradition forward was T.S. Eliot who incidentally received accolades for his poetry from Pound. Critics have often remarked that modern poetry written in America changed forever since the lines by a student in Harvard were published. The lines –‘Let us go then.....’ by Eliot had ideas that were conservative and his style was radical. His poems were both religious and philosophical. And finally with the *Waste Land* modernism saw the best of American poetry where the contemporary world was compared to a waste land where nothing could grow and hence the evocation of peace or shanti taken from Indian philosophy.

The history of early 20th century American poetry in a way laid down the foundations of a unique genre which till today enthuses millions into its fold. This includes both poets and poetry lovers from around the globe. Imagism was the magic word that was brought into the American poetic genre to create a novel art of poetry writing and reading. Imagism provided the much needed breakthrough for the overarching influence of English romanticism and Victorian idealism. As one reads the poems written in early 20th century America few critics can deny that this period saw the beginning of a more humane and all-encompassing touch which was meant to appeal to any person irrespective of class and creed.

14.4 NEW CRITICISM

New Criticism propounded by Eliot came when art and literature started getting marginalized and then language as a social and historical construct emerged giving poetry a new mask to be written and appreciated. Eliot assumes, always, that art conveys simple, universal, precise emotions. Poetry was acknowledged, by New Critics as a creative process which demands an organized sensibility giving a subjective emotion an objective correlative. Poetry is always a transformation of emotion, a universalizing of emotion, however personal it may have been originally. Thus the work of art should be detached from the author and thus it should be the reader who

gives meaning to the text. Poetry demands perfection of common speech to be the language of poetry. Language needs to be clear and concise making the expression of emotion the prime concern. Eliot introduced the concepts of “impersonal” poetry, “unified sensibility” “objective correlative,” along with a sound justification for focusing on “tradition”. His emphasis on the “perfection of common speech” as the language of poetry, his discussion of the relation between ideas and poetry under the term “belief” are all critical ingredients of poetry. The suggestive language particularly in his own poem ‘The waste land’ can be a classic example of literary creation. The past needs to be preserved through present by the extension of tradition, was Eliot’s contribution to American poetry which blended European tradition and the occidental spirit together in his poetry. ‘The waste land’ ending with shanti or peace appeals to poetry readers around the world even today.

Eliot and from his ideas New Criticism developed as a movement in American Universities to read and write well into the middle of 20th Century America. New Criticism established poetry as an integral part of literature and was critiqued by students in Universities and secondary schools in America. Poetry had moved away from being a romantic pastime to an elevated status where it was a reflection of a civilized society.

14.5 WOMEN IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

Another trend that perhaps comes out strikingly in the critical examination of early American poetry is the emergence of voices of women with Amy Lowell, Harriet Mornoe to Anne Spencer. While Anne Spencer was an active member of the Harlem Renaissance Harriet Monroe was the editor of the poetry magazine.

Anthologies of American Women poets and poetry at different periods of history including the early 20th century have attracted the attention of academicians and literary critics. It has been now well established as a genre by itself making the voices of women matter in American poetry of the early twentieth century. During this period there was an emergence of women’s education with women’s only colleges. This led to many women joining the academic world and participating in public life as a cultural force. Anthologies with women poets such as the Henry Harrison Anthology published in 1936 included poems of Louise Bogan, Marianne Moore, Harriet Monroe, and Lizette Woodworth Reese and that of Muriel Rukeyser’s “Poem Out of Childhood” which had won the Yale University Press book prize. Women poets as a specific group of American Poets got recognition in the Henry Harrison poetry series edited by Margery Mansfield and published in 1937. This collection included poetry published in Poetry, Harpers, the American Mercury, Scribner’s, and the Atlantic, as well as from local publications such as the Tampa Tribune, the Kansas City Star, and the Concord Monitor. Harriet Monroe, the founder of Poetry magazine and Amy Lowell whom T. S. Eliot dubbed the “demon saleswoman of poetry” had published anthologies of modernist poetry by both men and women in 1917. Early Twentieth century American poetry can certainly vouch for the role played by women as not only poets but as publishers of Anthologies of poetry.

To conclude, it can be argued that early American poetry saw the emergence of contending currents which laid the foundations of a unique genre of American poetry. The culmination of these competing trends at the beginning of the twentieth century are exemplified in the diverse range of poems written and appreciated in this free and new land for more than a century now. A thorough reading and appreciation of early American poetry provides a kaleidoscopic view of aesthetic and realistic trends emerging in poetry written in English today in America and round the globe and the resultant controversies and assertions on both the language and poetry.

14.6 CHECK YOUR PROCESS

1. American poetry in the early twentieth laid the foundation of modernist poetry. Defend the statement with arguments from literature and literary critics.

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2. The seeds of a unique genre of American poetry was laid in early twentieth century America. Discuss this unique genre in the context of the cultural forces that worked through different poets writing in early twentieth century America.

.....
.....
.....
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3. Critically examine the Harlem Renaissance in the context of early twentieth century American Poetry.

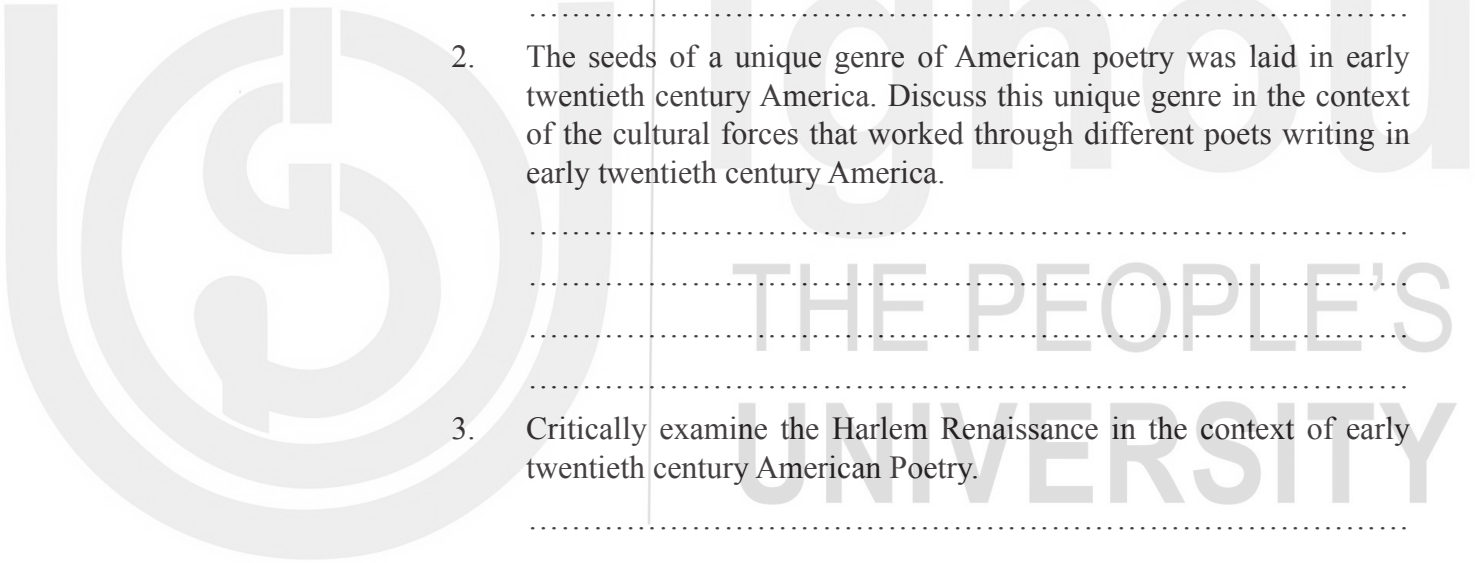
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4. Discuss the contribution of women to the development of poetry in early twentieth century America.

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14.7 SELECT READING LIST

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UNIT 15: T S ELIOT'S 'ASH WEDNESDAY'

Structure

- 15.1 Objectives
- 15.2 Introduction
- 15.3 Structural Analysis
- 15.4 Interpretation of 'Ash Wednesday'
- 15.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 15.6 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions
- 15.7 Select Reading List

15.1 OBJECTIVES

Reading T S Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* motivates prayer in the young minds as well as it describes about Christian religious rites and rituals during Lent season such as the needs and necessities of smearing ashes, attending sermons in the Anglo-Catholic churches celebration of fasting and abstinence- all are meant for building healthier mind and body that leads one closer to God's grace and attaining salvation at the end. Eliot makes an apt attempt to educate his readers in this poem the highest human values, nobility, meditation and prayer. Lent is a penitential season. That means it is a time when we are called to repent and turn our hearts toward God. It is a time to push away distractions and focus all the more on our relationship with God. As we begin Lent, this first reading reminds us of this call. The Lord Himself invites His people, including us today, saying, "return to me with your whole heart." When we stray from God, no matter how far we have gone, He is always inviting us back. He is a loving Father with outstretched arms longing for us to receive His warm embrace. God is "gracious and merciful," "slow to anger," and "rich in kindness." He calls us to acknowledge and repent of our sins, so that He can freely pour out His forgiveness upon us. This reading reminds us that God desires our hearts. He loves us and wants to be in relationship with us. Keep in mind this Lent that when we fall into sin, God is always right there to pick us back up and help us get our feet under us again.

(POEM)

I

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
I no longer strive to strive towards such things
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
Why should I mourn

The vanished power of the usual reign?
Because I do not hope to know
The infirm glory of the positive hour
Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power
Because I cannot drink
There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again
Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are and
I renounce the blessed face
And renounce the voice
Because I cannot hope to turn again
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice
And pray to God to have mercy upon us
And pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgment not be too heavy upon us
Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care Teach us to sit still.
Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

II

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree
In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained
In the hollow round of my skull. And God said
Shall these bones live? Shall these

Early Twentieth Century

Bones live? And that which had been contained
In the bones (which were already dry) said chirping:
Because of the goodness of this Lady
And because of her loveliness, and because
She honours the Virgin in meditation,
We shine with brightness. And I who am here dissembled
Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love
To the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd.
It is this which recovers
My guts the strings of my eyes and the indigestible portions
Which the leopards reject. The Lady is withdrawn
In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown.
Let the whiteness of bones atone to forgetfulness.
There is no life in them. As I am forgotten
And would be forgotten, so I would forget
Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose. And God said
Prophecy to the wind, to the wind only for only
The wind will listen. And the bones sang chirping
With the burden of the grasshopper, saying
Lady of silences
Calm and distressed
Torn and most whole
Rose of memory
Rose of forgetfulness
Exhausted and life-giving
Worried reposeful
The single Rose
Is now the Garden
Where all loves end
Terminate torment
Of love unsatisfied
The greater torment
Of love satisfied
End of the endless
Journey to no end
Conclusion of all that
Is inconclusible
Speech without word and
Word of no speech
Grace to the Mother

For the Garden
Where all love ends.

Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining
We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other,
Under a tree in the cool of day, with the blessing of sand,
Forgetting themselves and each other, united
In the quiet of the desert. This is the land which ye
Shall divide by lot. And neither division nor unity
Matters. This is the land. We have our inheritance.

III

At the first turning of the second stair
I turned and saw below
The same shape twisted on the banister
Under the vapor in the fetid air
Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears
The deceitful face of hope and of despair.

At the second turning of the second stair
I left them twisting, turning below;
There were no more faces and the stair was dark,
Damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth driveling, beyond repair,
Or the toothed gullet of an aged shark.

At the first turning of the third stair
Was a slotted window bellied like the figs's fruit
And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene
The broad backed figure drest in blue and green
Enchanted the may time with an antique flute.

Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,
Lilac and brown hair;
Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over the third
stair,
Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair
Climbing the third stair.

Lord, I am not worthy
Lord, I am not worthy
but speak the word only.

IV

Who walked between the violet and the violet
When walked between

Early Twentieth Century

The various ranks of varied green
Going in white and blue, in Mary's colour,
Talking of trivial things
In ignorance and knowledge of eternal dolour
Who moved among the others as they walked,
Who then made strong the fountains and made fresh the springs
Made cool the dry rock and made firm the sand
In blue of larkspur, blue of Mary's colour,
Sovegna vos

Here are the years that walk between, bearing
Away the fiddles and the flutes, restoring
One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing
White light folded, sheathing about her, folded.
The new years walk, restoring
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
The time. Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream
While jeweled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.
The silent sister veiled in white and blue
Between the yews, behind the garden god,
Whose flute is breathless, bent her head and signed but spoke no word
But the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down
Redeem the time, redeem the dream
The token of the word unheard, unspoken
Till the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew
And after this our exile

V

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.

O my people, what have I done unto thee.
Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence
Not on the sea or on the islands, not
On the mainland, in the desert or the rain land,
For those who walk in darkness
Both in the day time and in the night time
The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice
Will the veiled sister pray for
Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and oppose thee,
Those who are torn on the horn between season and season, time and time,
between
Hour and hour, word and word, power and power, those who wait
In darkness? Will the veiled sister pray
For children at the gate
Who will not go away and cannot pray:
Pray for those who chose and oppose
O my people, what have I done unto thee.
Will the veiled sister between the slender
Yew trees pray for those who offend her
And are terrified and cannot surrender
And affirm before the world and deny between the rocks
In the last desert before the last blue rocks
The desert in the garden the garden in the desert
Of drouth, spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed.
O my people.

VI

Although I do not hope to turn again
Although I do not hope
Although I do not hope to turn
Wavering between the profit and the loss
In this brief transit where the dreams cross
The dream crossed twilight between birth and dying
(Bless me father) though I do not wish to wish these things
From the wide window towards the granite shore
The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying
Unbroken wings

Early Twentieth Century

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
Quickens to recover
The cry of quail and the whirling plover
And the blind eye creates
The empty forms between the ivory gates
And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth

This is the time of tension between dying and birth
The place of solitude where three dreams cross
Between blue rocks
But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift away
Let the other yew be shaken and reply.

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come unto Thee.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

Ash Wednesday, in the Christian church, the first day of Lent, is taking place 6½ weeks before Easter between February 4 and March 11, depending on the date of Easter. In the early Christian church, the length of the Lenten celebration varied, but eventually it began 6 weeks (42 days) before Easter. This provided only 36 days of fasting (excluding Sundays). In the 7th century, 4 days were added before the first Sunday in Lent in order to establish 40 fasting days, in imitation of Jesus Christ's fast in the desert.

It was the practice in Rome for penitents to begin their period of public penance on the first day of Lent. They were sprinkled with ashes, dressed in sackcloth, and obliged to remain apart until they were reconciled with the Christian community on Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter. When these practices fell into disuse (8th–10th century), the beginning of the penitential season of Lent was symbolized by placing ashes on the heads of the entire congregation.

In the modern Roman Catholic Church, the ashes obtained by burning the palms used on the previous Palm Sunday are applied in the shape of a cross on the forehead of each worshipper on Ash Wednesday. Worship services are also held on Ash Wednesday in Anglican, Lutheran, and some other Protestant churches. Eastern Orthodox churches begin Lent on a Monday and therefore do not observe Ash Wednesday.

During church services, a cross is marked on the foreheads of worshippers to symbolise repentance. Ash Wednesday is a significant day on the Christian calendar, denoting the beginning of the repentant period of Lent which precedes Easter.

There is no mention of Ash Wednesday in the Bible. But there is a tradition of donning ashes as a sign of penitence that predates Jesus. In the Old Testament, Job repents "in dust and ashes," and there are other associations of ashes and repentance in Esther, Samuel, Isaiah and on Ash Wednesday, Catholics and many other Christians will have ashes applied to their foreheads in the shape of a cross. People generally wear the ashes — which symbolize penance, mourning and mortality — throughout the day to publicly express their faith and penance.

In the New Testament account of Holy Week, after Palm Sunday, the Sanhedrin gathered and plotted to kill Jesus before the feast of Pesach. In reference to Judas Iscariot's intent to betray Jesus, formed on Holy Wednesday, the day is sometimes called "Spy Wednesday"

Wednesday of Holy Week: Traditionally this day was called "Spy Wednesday" because it was on this Wednesday before the crucifixion that Judas conspired to hand Jesus over. ... Earlier this day Jesus had given instructions to the disciples on how to prepare for this most holy meal, which will be his last supper.

Wednesday is Wodens-day the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of the Norse Odin or the Roman Mercury a sky god and the god of wisdom, poetry, commerce, travel, thievery, eloquence and science. He is also the messenger of the other gods. Woden represents Mercury, meaning that Wednesday is Mercury day.

The first epigraph is a quote from a servant in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. The servant reveals to the character Marlow that another character named Kurtz has just died. ... The epigraph tells us that, in some sense, the poem is set after the death of Kurtz, or someone "hollow" man like him.

Mr. Wednesday is the leader of the Old Gods in their war against the New Gods. He is Odin, the All-Father and most prominent god of the Norse pantheon, god of wisdom. In America, he works as a con artist. He meets Shadow on an airplane after Shadow's release from prison and hires him on as a bodyguard.

After reading Matthew Arnold's "The Study of Poetry" Eliot declares himself in 1928 a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-catholic in religion". About 30 years later Eliot commented on his religious views that he combined "a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinist heritage, and a Puritanical temperament". Ash Wednesday derives its name from the placing of repentance ashes on the foreheads of participants to either the words "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" or the dictum "Remember that

you are dust, and to dust you shall return. The poem was first published in April, 1930 as a small book limited to 600 numbered and signed copies. Later that month, 2000 copies were published in the UK, and in September another 2000 published in the US.

Eliot is very famous for his collected poems and fragments of poems as they are new works in the new era that is the wake of modernism. This is most clearly visible in his poems- "The Hollow Men" and "Ash-Wednesday" where he incorporated previously published poems to become sections of a larger work. Three of the five sections comprising "Ash-Wednesday" had already been published earlier as separate poems:

"Perch' Io non Spero" (part I of "Ash-Wednesday") was published in the Spring, 1928 issue of *Commerce* along with a French translation.

"Salutation" (now part II of "Ash-Wednesday") was published in December, 1927 in *Saturday Review of Literature*. It was also published in January, 1928 in Eliot's own *Criterion* magazine.

"Som de l'escalina" (part III of "Ash-Wednesday") was published in the Autumn, 1929 issue of *Commerce* along with a French translation.

When first published, the poem is dedicated to his wife, referring to Eliot's first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot, with whom he had a nervous relationship, and from whom he needed a legal separation in 1933. The dedication, however, does not appear in subsequent editions. «Ash-Wednesday» is considered as Eliot's «conversion poem "with a base of Dante's Purgatorio, which is richly but ambiguously allusive and a journey motif from spiritual barrenness to hope for human salvation. In other words, this poem deals with the struggle that ensues one who has lacked faith in the past strives to move towards God. The poem is more casual, melodic, and contemplative.

15.3 STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

"Ash-Wednesday" is divided into six sections, which details the speaker's aspiration to shift from a sense of spiritual hopelessness to spiritual salvation. Eliot appears to be very much pessimistic in this poem.

In section I, the speaker while rejecting all worldly things he loses all potential for joy in existence, and the hope of any fulfillment in worldly diversions. In the first two stanzas, he admits that the 'one veritable transitory power' is insubstantial, prone to fading away into thin air.

In stanzas three and four, the speaker in rejoicing in his own helplessness to change the human condition, rejects the beauty of the world and its temptations, and calls upon humanity to 'pray to God to have mercy upon us.' In the final stanza of section I, the speaker not only rejects all worldly dreams and aspirations but also sees the absurdities of earthly wings 'Because these wings are no longer wings to fly / But merely vans to beat the air.'

In section II is quite metaphorical in which, the stanzas appeal to the Lady, the Mary figure, and introduce three white leopards that have eaten the speaker's flesh and released his bones to sing, crediting the Lady's goodness

that his bones now 'shine with brightness.' The section ends with God telling the speaker to prophecy to the empty wind.

In section III, the speaker in analyzing both the present and the past climbs the stairs and looks back on his past temptations of self-deceit, despair, and lust. The poet seems to be highly inspirational when he writes: 'At the first turning of the second stair,' he leaves the devil and the past 'twisting, turning below,' and enters darkness. Then he makes a direct appeal to God to 'Teach us to care and not to care/ Teach us to sit still.' Eliot's faith in Anglo-Catholicism leads him to hope in this hopeless world. The section ends with a couplet taken directly from 'Ave Maria' in the Anglo-Catholic version of the Rosary; 'Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death/ Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.'

In section IV, the speaker with a lot of confidence not only pays homage to a vision of the Lady, 'in white and blue, in Mary's colour' but also gives more importance to both her ignorance and her knowledge. The way she proceeds to her ability to make things firm, she often walks in a realm 'between sleep and waking' as a vision of light, veiled and silent among the yews, where birds reveal the vision of transcendence, of 'the higher dream.'

In section V, the speaker questions if the Lady will pray for 'those who walk in darkness' in the world with all its terror and denial. It confirms that in "Ash-Wednesday" prayer motif retains the value of its centrality and this centrality also considers Eliot as a prayer poet in the core of his poem.

In section VI, the speaker's journey motif from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday, the day commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus and the final day of Lent. The first stanza repeats the opening stanza of the poem, changing the word 'Because' to 'Although,' while the fourth stanza lets the readers to look deeply into the existence of human life as we all are not dreamy to be diverted by worldly things.

Here the speaker reveals the Lady, the Mary figure, as a reincarnation of the Holy Spirit and directs to her his earlier plea to God to 'Teach us to care and not to care/ Teach us to sit still.' The poem ends with a prayer from the Psalms: 'And let my cry come into thee.'

15.4 INTERPRETATION OF *ASH WEDNESDAY*

T.S. Eliot's, 'Ash Wednesday' is one of the first long poems and his conversion poem because after converting to Anglicanism, in the established Christian Church of England officially the title refers to 'Ash Wednesday,' the first of the forty days of Lent, which is a time for self reflection, sacrifice, and repentance in Christianity. The beginning of Lent, for many congregations, begins with the imposition of ashes at an Ash Wednesday celebration. It is often a powerful moment when the congregations in their rites and rituals kneel to receive their ashes. However, the experience is even more meaningful after a sermon, where the reason for adoring with ashes is truly varied and worthwhile.

Ashes as a symbol of Christ's redeeming love is found in the Bible immediately after God discovered the sin of Adam and Eve. God tells them that paradise has ended and now they, and all those who come after them, will suffer as a result of their sin. (In Genesis 3:19 God says, "By the sweat

of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”) The promise of everlasting life, given to Adam and Eve, was gone. They and all of humanity would now return to the dust from which they were formed, but with Christ everlasting life has returned. We who follow him are promised everlasting life with him. The sin of Adam and Eve has been redeemed. The new Adam, by dying for us, opened a door to everlasting life.

Ashes as a reminder of our place in relationship with God, ashes encourages all to serving God and placing the needs of others. We humans tend to place ourselves as the center of the universe and forget that God is the true center and source of everything. This belief, that we are the center and in control, is further validated with commercials. Furthermore, our social media now a day reminds as well as makes us feel like we are the center of everything.

But in reality, we needn't/ shouldn't forget that we are created by God, who truly is the center and supreme authority of everything. The presence of God through our sermons on Ash Wednesday reminds us that, God matters more when life matters. We are not the center of the universe. The truth is that we came from dust, we will return to dust. God and His love will grace and embrace us forever.

Ash Wednesday invites the Anglo-Catholics to kneel before God to admit their sins and receive forgiveness. The story of Jonah being sent to the evil city Ninevah to warn the people acknowledging their sins, rubbing ashes on their bodies as a sign of their repentance and God's forgiveness of them. Jonah is upset because, in his opinion, "they" did not deserve forgiveness. This story is a great reminder that we are all sinners. We have all fallen short and yet, God's love is greater than that of our sins. If the evil people of Ninevah could be forgiven, so can be everyone. God will forgive if we repent.

Ashes as a reminder of the equality of all people play a pivotal role for the Christians on the earth, whether the wealthiest person or the poorest. There will come a day when all must return to ashes. Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are all equal in God's kingdom. God has made us all, loves us all and calls us all to give what we can in return. There is no inequality in the eyes of God. (Paul, in Galatians 3:28 says, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.")

The fear of death is the greatest fear. Ash Wednesday teaches not to fear. We will return to ash someday but, in our returning, we will receive an everlasting place in God's kingdom. Those who follow Christ, obey his commands, love one another, neighbors and even enemies, they are only the best devotees of God and therefore there is no question to fear for them all.

Ashes as a symbol tell the truth of life that the body dies, not the soul. Ash Wednesday reminds us that following Christ means dying to self. In reality, this death is often more difficult because we must choose it. As we receive ashes we are reminded not only that our bodies will die someday, but that to truly follow Christ we must choose to die to self while we still live. (Jesus said, in John12:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.")

Ashes symbolize the end of everything. Ashes typically symbolize hopelessness, the end, and finality. But for Christians, who have been promised life eternal, ashes no longer represent the end, but the beginning of life eternal and the symbol of resurrection. (Revelation 21:5 says, "And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.'")

Eliot's long poem *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) is the first major poem written after his conversion to Christianity in 1927. The same year, he too writes 'Journey of the Magi', but *Ash-Wednesday* was a poem to clarify the 'narrative' of the poem and how it depicts the religious journey of the poet. There are echoes here of '*The Hollow Men*': the idea of a person in a sense cast out from the world of life and growth. The speaker renounces all earthly and temporal things, and acknowledges the emptiness of worldly aspirations and ambitions. The leopards might be read as images of death and destruction, but they show the speaker's desire for, rather than fear of, death. In a surreal image, the leopards feast upon the speaker's organs and flesh, destroying his sensual desire and leaving only his bones, which have been purified by the 'Lady' figure by religion, associated here specifically with the Virgin Mary. The bones sing a 'song' in praise of their achieved purity. The Lady is the feminine symbol of spiritual and religious fulfillment. She is described as 'wearing / White light folded', a symbol of her purity and 'blue' the color of the Virgin Mary. Now 'the fiddles and the flutes' are borne away that is, the flute being played by the figure at the end of the previous section, suggesting that the temptation of earthly, temporal delights is being overcome.

Part IV focuses on death which will also be bested: 'the yew tree', mentioned twice in this section, is a symbol of death, as the trees are often found in churchyards. The speaker has conquered doubt and despair with the aspirations to positivity later. He passes on to the window, which looks out on a pastoral scene where a Pan-like figure is playing a flute and enchanting the world around him. This seems to suggest worldly pleasures. Pan was the pagan god of the pastoral world who is half-man, half-goat, with the goat half suggesting sexual lust), which the speaker must reject just as he had to reject the devil and despair to continue his poetic journey. The double meaning of 'Word' in Part V, refers both to the Bible as the word of God and to Christ himself as God in human form. This is what St John means when he opens his Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' Jesus, who was God come down in human form walking amongst the world and the revelation of God, the Bible, and the revealed truth of God. This part is a meditation on the Word of God, the *Logos* from the Gospel according to John that Eliot would amplify in *Four Quartets*. This is accompanied by the refrain from the *Improperia* of the Good Friday service, "O my people." The poem's final segment returns to the original state of mind of the narrator as the poet recapitulates the themes and images of the entire poem and ends with a phrase addressed to the Lord in the *Indulgentiam* of the Mass of the Catechumens, the early dialogue between priest and laity which asks God to forgive sins, show mercy, hear prayers, "and let my cry come unto Thee." The service of Ash Wednesday is an important service, for it allows us to speak honestly and directly about the need for hope in the face of death, our sinful nature, our need to die to

self and our need to place God at the center of our lives. May God bless you as you preach the good news in the midst of ashes.

15.5 SUM UP

Eliot’s composition of *Ash Wednesday* is different from the voice of the *Hollow Men*. The speaker is “fractured,” like a broken mirror and like the images of broken things scattered throughout the poem. At times the *Hollow Men* are a bit cheesy and self-pitying, such as when they cry, “Alas!”. Vladimir Nabokov parodied *Ash Wednesday* in his novel *Lolita*. In chapter 35 of Part Two of Nabokov’s book, Humbert’s “death sentence” on Quilty parodies the rhythm and use of anaphora in T. S. Eliot’s poem. According to David Rampton, “...Quilty’s versified death sentence is, in part, a comic version of *Ash Wednesday*.” Biblical references crowd with forming a litany; the response too many of its phrases is the unvoiced but expected “Pray for us”. It concludes with a refrain from the last sentence of the Ave Maria, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” Eliot thus endows the poem with fragments of prayer along with Shakespearean allusions, varied renunciations, and some recognition of the need for rejoicing. The negative assertion of hope’s lack at the outset is modified by prayers which indicate realizations of the need for spiritual conquer. The speaker too ascends a spiral staircase, past a devil and past a vision of an earthly paradise; this portion ends with the liturgical prayer before Communion from the Mass of the Faithful, echoing phrases from one of the miracle stories about Jesus. Part 4 blends the biblical Mary with other female figures, asks for a redemption of time, and concludes with a phrase from the prayer *Salve, Regina*, which asks that Mary show the fruit of her womb, Jesus, “after this our exile.” In many respects, Eliot’s *Ash Wednesday* is a poetic public demonstration of a change of mind and heart, an assertion of Christian desire balanced by recognition of frailty that ends with a striving, itself a conversion from the poem’s opening stance. The poem is a study in the struggle between the worlds of time and that of the eternal, between the worlds of faith and evidence, and between self-sufficiency and repentance, which invokes a number of themes and images. The protagonist of the poem almost fails in his search for the transcendent, but not entirely. It is cyclical in its form, moving from a sense of despair and choice of renunciation in death, to a vision of one’s sin, to a vision of something heavenly and eternal, back to a sense of this world and its sensual claims and struggles. Still it ends with a great hope in prayer.

15.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

1. What is the effect of the figure of the Lady in the poem *Ash-Wednesday*?
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2. Likewise, what is the aesthetic effect of Eliot's use of symbols in the poem *Ash-Wednesday*?

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3. How is Eliot's poem true to the nature of Ash Wednesday? Elaborate.

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4. Contrast the vision of the Virgin with that of the stairs in *Ash-Wednesday*.

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5. Do you agree with Eliot's neo-Platonic bifurcation of time and eternity? Why or why not?

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6. In your opinion, does Eliot's poem end hopefully or in renewed despair? Discuss.

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15.7 SELECT FURTHER READINGS

T.S. Eliot, Lancelot Andrewes, and the Word: Intersections of Literature and Christianity

T.S. Eliot, Lancelot Andrewes, and the Word: Intersections of Literature and Christianity

“Sovegna vos” in Eliot's Marian Poems: Falsehood, Separation, and *Ash-Wednesday*

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).

Early Twentieth Century

Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959)

Mark Jones, "The Voice of Lancelot Andrewes in Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*" (*Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*) 58 (2005),

Barry Spurr, "Anglo-Catholic in Religion": *T.S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2010)

T.S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1929)

B.C. Southam, *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*, 6th edn (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, 1996)

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922).

Nicholas Lossky, *Lancelot Andrewes the Preacher (1555–1626): The Origins of the Mystical Theology of the Church of England*, trans. Andrew Louth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)

See Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago, 1981)

Alexander Pope, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Aubrey Williams (Boston: Riverside-Houghton Mifflin, 1969).

T.S. Eliot, *Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1920).

Eliot, "The 'Pensees' of Pascal," *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1951),

T.S. Eliot, preface, *Anabasis* by St.-John Perse, trans. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1930)

UNIT 16: EZRA POUND'S *THE RIVER* *MERCHANT'S WIFE: A LETTER*

Structure

- 16.0 Objectives
- 16.1 Introducing Ezra Pound
- 16.2 Ezra Pound- Life and Works
- 16.3 The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter
 - 16.3.1 Text
 - 16.3.2 Summary
 - 16.3.3 Historical Background and Critical Appreciation
 - 16.3.4 Style And Theme
 - 16.3.5 Use Of Symbols And Imagery
 - 16.3.6 Form and Metre
- 16.4 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions (With Answer Keys)
- 16.5 Summing Up
- 16.6 Select Reading List

16.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- get an idea about the life and works of Ezra Pound
- look in detail at one of his important *Cathay* poems
- comprehend *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* as distinctly different from his other works
- count the significance of Ezra Pound's English translations and interpretations from the notebooks written by the Japanese scholar Ernest Fenollosa
- understand how these works immensely influence 20th century poems at large and how they create an interest for Asian Literature as well

16.1 INTRODUCING EZRA POUND

Ezra Pound (1885-1972) is widely considered one of the most controversial poets of the 20th century. His contributions to modernist poetry are enormous. He is one of the major figures in 'modernist' literature. He was an early champion of a number of avant-garde and modernist poets; developed important channels of intellectual and aesthetic exchange between the United States and Europe; and contributed to important literary movements such as Imagism and Vorticism. Pound was one of the most innovative poets of his time, both in terms of matter and form, and very supportive of new talent.

16.2 LIFE AND WORKS

Ezra Pound is the most responsible one to define and promote a modernist aesthetic in poetry. Though he is considered one of the most influential American poets, he is a renowned critic too. The early teens of the twentieth century saw his extraordinary literary endeavors. He opened a seminal exchange of works and ideas between British and American writers, and was famous for the generosity with which he advanced the work of such major contemporaries as W. B. Yeats, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, H. D., James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and especially T. S. Eliot. He remained very much supportive towards the new talents of the literary world. Ezra Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho. His parents had ancestors in the American North-East and in the American West. They moved to Philadelphia when Pound was a few years old and his father worked in the Mint. Pound studied in the University of Pennsylvania--English literature, American history and the Greek and Roman classics--before moving to Hamilton College, where he took up Old English and Romance literatures. He graduated from Hamilton in 1905, returned to Pennsylvania for an M.A. the next year, and entered academics. He was dismissed from his first position (at Wabash College, Indiana) for sheltering an unemployed burlesque queen. This dismissal made him leave his native America for Venice and London but did not make him abandon his academic career. He taught medieval and Renaissance literature at the London Regent Street polytechnic between 1908-9 while trying to make his mark as a poet. His translations and scholarly works appeared in *The Spirit of Romance* (1910). His first verse collection was *A Lume Spento* (1908), published in Venice. Two others, *A Quinzane for This Yule* (1908) and *Personae* (1909) appeared in London. In 1914 he married Dorothy Shakespeare, who was to be the mother of his only son. Hand in hand with these publications went teaching and the writing of influential critical essays. Although he spent much of his life outside America he was very conscious of his identity as an American within Europe. In his memoir *Indiscretions* (1923) he made clear his links to the lumberman grandfather in the West and to the well-known upper New York family of his mother--two very disparate sections of society, one economically underprivileged, the other affluent. He insisted on using slang in his criticism and his poetry, along with colloquialisms in the latter in order to present an American identity, but as some critics have pointed out, there is also much of the cosmopolitan in Pound. He insists on writers adhering to standards of taste that are independent of national boundaries, is scathing when they do not, and is determined to formulate those standards in an effort to rebuild what we would now call the canon. Of course, Pound was far more radical than his contemporaries, the Georgian poets, who were merely calling for a literary revolt against Victorianism. At times in his strenuous efforts he appeared to want to become what a critic has called "the literary dictator of London" (Norman, Ezra Pound 273). Towards the end of his career he did occasionally sound a little too prone to the dramatisation of the loneliness of his endeavour, but the ambitiousness of his programme to redefine and rebuild the Anglo-American tradition, cannot be denied. In essays like "Renaissance" Pound wrote about the steps that ought to be taken in order to carry out his programme: models from earlier

ages should not be plagiarized but transformed and surpassed. Poets should “go against the grain of contemporary taste.” History and culture should be ransacked in order to disclose lost traditions, as Pound thought he had done by discovering what he called a “new Greece” in Chinese art and literature. Trusts and endowments should save the artist from the need to cater to the inferior tastes of the “ignorant” public and leave him/her free to pursue radical visions. A few instances will prove Pound’s indefatigable efforts to promote new talent. He was the first important reviewer of importance to praise what he called Robert Frost’s “VURRY Amur’k’n” gift (Letters 114, Norton 1027); he promoted the music of the American composer George Antheil; he it was that was responsible for having Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* serialised in the journal *The Egoist*. Of course, his crucial editing changes in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* are now a part of literary history. Along with Richard Aldington, Hilda Doolittle and others, Pound helped formulatethe theory behind Imagism, and provided the title “Imagiste” for the group. The three main principles of this movement were: 1) the “direct treatment” of poetic subjects 2) economy of language by a radical condensing by the elimination of any unnecessary or merely ornamental words 3) an inorganic selection of rhythmical patterns--rhythmical composition was preferred in the sequence of the more flexible “musical phrase” rather than in “the sequence-of a metronome” (Norton 1027). This group, which Pound left bythe time he had published *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* (1914) and which was later led by Amy Powell, believed in the short poem, usually dominated by a single image or metaphor and structured around it, a rhythm of cadences, describing to the reader an object or scene from the material world andrefusing to diffuse the poem’s effect by relating it to an extended abstract meaning. This movement was a reaction to the flabbiness and abstraction of much of nineteenth century poetry. Some critics see a similarity in this poetic revolution and the one that came about as a result of the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in particular in both Romantics’ and Imagists’ concentration on the object and the bias in favour of realism that accompanies this. In its concern with technique and in its restriction of meaning the movement also has something in common with more contemporary movements which attempt to reaffirm the values of poetry against the pressures of science. With formalism imagism shares an attention to the craft of writing. It focusses on a moment of discovery or awareness in which a single sharp metaphor or image crystallises the intuitive insight of the poet, the insight which he/she approximates with the essence of life. In its concern with surfaces, light and colour, the movement also has links with impressionism. Pound’s haiku, “In a Station of the Metro:” “The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/ Petals on a wet, black bough” is a famous example of an imagist poem. Later Pound moved away from Imagism to Vorticism, along with the sculptor Jacob Epstein and the painter Wyndham Lewis. While imagism he now thought was too visual and static, Vorticism enabled forms that were sculptural and associated withenergy and movement. Pound thought of the vortex as a form prior to any of the specific forms in art, a kind of ur-form. In cultural history a vortex is a time of revolution, innovation and ferment among all the arts. In poetry, an image is a vortex, “a radiant node or cluster...from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing” (Pound

Gaudier-Brzeska 92, Norton 1028). During this time Pound was also interested in his explorations of oriental culture. His volumes *Cathay* (1915) and *Lustra* (1916) contained translations from the Chinese. He studied Ernest Fenollosa's manuscript, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium of Poetry* and inferred that condensed Chinese ideograms had almost the effect of film in their combination of events and actions, their words full of energy and their graphics. His interest in Confucian ethics can be felt in the *Cantos* and in his free translations of certain songs in *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (1954). Studying Confucius convinced Pound that the poet's mission was to remake language and also the individual and society. Pound was drawn to the Confucian social model of the lord and his dependent community. His scholarship and his interest in the orient were not gratuitous and had to serve the larger purpose of his propaganda in poetry and poetics--what he thought appropriate and what he strove to make authoritative in modern poetry. In 1920 Pound left London for France and Italy--at this point he thought London as backward in the literary sphere as he had earlier thought New York. His farewell to London formed the basis of his early masterpiece "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (1920). By 1925 he was settled in Rapallo, Italy and well into composing the *Cantos*. At this time he relied mainly on the enormity of his correspondence to achieve his literary ends. Two volumes of his essays, *Make It New* (1934) and *Literary Essays* (1954), mostly contained essays written before 1920 while two other volumes, *The ABC of Reading* (1934) and *Polite Essays* (1937), contained his ceaseless appraisals of modern writing. Along with assessments of the present went Pound's research into the past. In his study of the Middle Ages he came across the word 'forma' which he felt expressed the process of creation which artists try to capture in their finished works of art. In his study of the Renaissance he was struck by similarities between 16th century statesmen and art patrons like Sigismondo Malatesta and Americans like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, and more surprisingly, the Italian fascist dictator Mussolini. His *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), though containing many perceptive observations on history and culture, is now increasingly attacked for its anti-Semitism. Pound was increasingly emphatic in his denunciation of the Jews and his criticism of America under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He supported fascism saying it was preferable to "usury." According to Pound, usury was the enemy of social good and cultural order. As expected, Pound's outspoken political views landed him in trouble. The talks that he delivered to the American troops on the invitation of the Italian government had the American government try him for treason in 1943. Literary circles in America also denounced him and he was edited out of an anthology. Not a bit deterred, Pound continued to recite his *Cantos* over the air, abuse President Roosevelt and the Jews, and mock American motives for taking part in World War II. After the fall of Italy Pound was imprisoned for months in an open-air cage--this physically and emotionally debilitating experience he hints at with anguish in the *Pisan Cantos*. In 1945 he was returned to the United States for trial, but his case was suspended because psychiatrists declared him mentally unfit. From 1946 to 1958 he was a patient in St. Elizabeth's hospital in Washington D.C., visited by his wife and admirers, and working on the *Cantos*. As a result of the efforts of influential friends like Archibald MacLeish, who harness the energies of lawyers and

congressmen as well as literary figures, Pound's charge of treason was dropped in 1958 and he was free to return to Italy. Pound spent the rest of his life in Europe, mainly Italy, cared for by his faithful wife, the concert violinist Olga Rudge, and their daughter Mary, the Countess de Rachewiltz. Occasionally Pound visited London and in 1969 he even went to the United States to receive an honorary degree from Hamilton College and visit friends. He continued to publish the *Cantos* and to see friends, although towards the end of his life he was increasingly prone to long periods of silence. Pound was awarded the Bollingen Prize for poetry in 1948 for the *Pisan Cantos*, but this prize stirred up quite a bit of controversy because of Pound's political views and the charge of treason. Even though his influence on the poets of the 60s and 70s was immense, his reputation could never free itself from charges of anti-Semitism. In 1962 he received the Harriet Monroe Award for poetry and the following year a prize from the Academy of American Poets. However, when in 1972, just before his death, a committee of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences nominated Pound for its Emerson-Thoreau Award, the governing board of the Academy overruled the committee and did not give Pound the prize. In Pound's life radical courage and innovation on the one hand and controversy on the other were perpetual bedfellows.

16.3 THE RIVER MERCHANT'S WIFE: A LETTER

16.3.1 Text

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead

I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.

You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,

You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

And we went on living in the village of Chōkan:

Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.

I never laughed, being bashful.

Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.

Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,

I desired my dust to be mingled with yours

Forever and forever, and forever.

Why should I climb the lookout?

At sixteen you departed

You went into far Ku-tō-en, by the river of swirling eddies,

And you have been gone five months.

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.
You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me.
I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Chō-fū-Sa.

16.3.2 Summary

Lines 1-6:

The poem is written in the form of a letter. The letter is woven with thoughts and emotions of a lonely wife. She has not seen her husband for five months. She now spends her days by reminiscing about their childhood. She feeds on the sweet and subtle memories of her meeting with her husband. Thus the opening stanza of 6 lines evolves around two central figures of the poem, the river-merchant and his wife as children. The central image of a little girl with her hair cut in bangs (here the hair-cut marks that an adult woman in the ancient Chinese culture was elaborate arrangements of uncut longhair) and a young boy coming ‘on bamboo stilts’ paves the direction of the poem. Each line contributes to a clearer understanding of the central image of the children. The repetition in three separate lines of the verb ‘playing’ to describe the little girl’s activity at the front gate, as well as the little boy’s presence on stilts and his circling around where she sits, emphasizes the natural, contented activity of children—almost as a part of the natural world referred to here by “flowers” and “blue plums”. This stanza establishes the presence of the “I” and the “you” in the world of the poem. But towards the end of the stanza, the hint of separation can be anticipated as the child couple was growing up separately “in the village of Chokan/Two small people, without dislike or suspicion”.

Lines 7-10:

Now in the second stanza the girl and the boy enter the world of adults. In ancient cultures, and in some cultures today, early marriages are customary, and it is often also the custom for the wife to refer to her husband by a respectful title. In the case of this poem the formality of the title is softened by the direct address of “you” added right after it. Lines 8-9 establish the child-wife’s shyness in this formal adult situation by offering a picture of her bent head and averted eyes, a shyness so extreme that she could not respond to her husband, no matter how many efforts he made.

Lines 11-14:

This stanza illustrates the bonding of love and marriage. Love brews incessantly between the two. They are now tied in the holy ceremony of marriage and its vows. The promise of living together through their thick and thin is being chanted by the line, "Forever and forever, and forever". The young wife is now more comfortable with her companion. It is unclear whether "climb the lookout" in line 14 is a reference to a ritual performed in this culture by a wife after death, perhaps to look for other offers to marry that might come her way. If it is, it means that the wife as a widow does not want to do this. In any case, it is clear that there is nothing she wishes for after the death of her husband, so deep is her love for him now.

Lines 15-18:

A sense of separation hovers over this stanza. As a river-merchant, the husband starts his voyage. It is the call of his job. He must answer. The waters take the husband away to a distant land for work. The wife's words depict the pain of separation. The absence of the husband is expressed in one line, giving it full and emphatic force. And in line 18 the effect of this long absence is comprehended by the use of the natural image of the sounds of the monkeys that reflect back to her the sound of her own sorrow. The sounds that monkeys make are generally interpreted as happy sounds, but the weight of the wife's sorrow adds a note of unbearable grief to monkeys' noise. The noise sounds as extremely "sorrowful" to the narrator.

Lines 19-21:

River-merchant's wife grieves here. Her words are expressive. Her mournings find expression in the nature. The river-merchant's long absence creates an emptiness in the life of his wife. She is haunted by sweet memories of yester years of their life. The image of 'the gate' occurred in line 20 is contains the fleeting memories of childhood. She remembers how reluctantly the husband left her for his mundane duty. This very image bears the sign for separation. She observes the overgrown thick mosses which are hard to get cleared properly. They are deep just as the wife's painful memories of separation from her husband.

Lines 22-25:

Here in this stanza the sadness of the river-merchant's wife finds its impression on nature. The autumnal decay and falling leaves bear the heartrending ache of the wife. The pairs of butterflies flying here and there constantly remind the wife of her conjugal companionship. She pines at her husband's absence. She desirously wants to grow old with her husband. The butterflies keep reminding of her growing seclusion.

Lines 26-29:

These closing lines express the innermost pining on the part of the wife. She is wistfully waiting for her husband to come. She is requesting her husband to let her know when he will be returning. Her dire concern is to know the route he will be reaching homeward. She is yearning to meet her husband as early as possible. She wants to efface the distance out for him.

16.3.3 Historical Background And Critical Appreciation

The poem, titled as *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter* was published in 1915 in *Cathay*, Ezra Pound's third collection of poetry. Originally the poem was written by Chinese poet Li Bai. Later it was translated and anthologized by Ezra in that collection. It contains versions of Chinese poems composed from the sixteen notebooks of Ernest Fenollosa, a scholar of Chinese literature. Pound named these poems (in English) "translations" as they resulted from the Fenollosa manuscripts. But these poems are held in contempt by most scholars of Chinese language and literature. However, they have been acclaimed as "poetry" for their clarity and elegance. They are variously referred to as "translations", "interpretations", "paraphrases" and "adaptations". Pound's in-depth study of the Fenollosa manuscripts made him preoccupied with the Chinese ideogram (a written symbol for an idea or object) as a medium for poetry. Chinese poets had long been aware of the image as the fundamental principle for poetic composition and he started formulating this notion. Pound realized that these poetic images could not be bound by place or time and so they did not lose their effects in translations. They were properly deliberated through the languages of different versions of translations. The effects and significance of the ideogram are generally perceived here beyond any marked space and cultural sphere. Pound's *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter*, thus, conveys the messages of love, anxiety and anguish through such poetic images. The depiction is so vivid that one, while reading, gets transported to the wife's world of separation. The cross-cultural context of this poem adds significance to other translations of Pound as well.

The poem can be celebrated as a modern dramatic monologue. The narrator is caught in her very particular phase of life. This phase circumnavigates the life in recluse. It foregrounds narrator's early phases of life and tries to project the possible phases to come in her life. The confluence of ideas in this translation of Pound is highly commendable. One can see how the etches of Li Bai's poetic venture and that of Pound's translation have come along together harmoniously. Pound sieves the perfect components out of Li Bai's poem while translating the same. Though the verse style differs, it does not affect the thematic profundity of the poem. It is assumed that "in the eighth century, when Chinese poet Li Bai wrote, Europe was struggling to emerge from the chaos caused by the fall of the Roman Empire". There were so many socio-cultural differences in between the time frames of Li Bai and Pound. But the observant eyes of poets enable them to observe and celebrate the universal appeal of human emotions, namely- love, faith, crisis, anxiety, aches, despair, desire and desperation in such poetic fineries. They go beyond the set barriers of socio-cultural territories. Eliot also "maintains that Pound's translations of ancient Chinese poetry are decidedly Modernist because they affirm the universality of human experience through time and across cultures". It is generally opined that Pound took interest in the art of Asian poetry and created the Chinese poem in English. The attributes of Chinese poetry are thematic clarity, clean description, subtle and quiet tones, precision in the use of proper nouns and simple active verbs. They are made familiar in large part by Pound. He introduces the vast arena of the Chinese poetry to the English readers. Her translated renditions of Chinese poems

enfold themselves to the readers with finesse of art. Now the distant land and its art can be treasured in English language. Though Pound achieved a lot through his path breaking translation series, his contemporary, the great American poet Robert Frost, dismissed the very idea of poetic translation as an impossible experimentation. Thus he opined, "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." Frost further adds that poetry is too specific to its host language to get translated into another language. Translation strips the poetry out of its original fervor. According to Frost, poetry is completely dependent on the musicality of the speech sounds of the host language and thus "no foreign language poem could ever be appreciated for its poetry if rendered into English". According to American poet-critic T. S. Eliot, Pound is "the inventor of Chinese poetry" for the twentieth century. He takes *Cathay*, containing *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter* as more "than an intelligent literary archaeology of poems from eighth century China". This endeavour exposes Pound's particular literary genius "for expressing himself through historical masks". The volume has become the hallmark in paving the way for his later major work, the *Cantos*. Thus, the poem, *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* can be considered one of the best challenges to Frost's theory about poetry and the translation, available in contemporary literary arena. The great critic of Modern poetry Hugh Kenner once said in *The Pound Era*, Pound "invents Chinese poetry for our time". The poem is a translation from the notebooks of Ernest Fenellosa, a notable scholar of Japanese and Chinese literature. Fenellosa was actually familiar with Japanese; he translated the poems' Chinese proper names into Japanese. In that case, all of the proper names, even the name of the poet who originally wrote *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter*, are given their name in Japanese translation. The note to the poem says the poet was Rihaku but that is just the Japanese name for Li Bai. Pound was living in London, in Kensington when he started translating Chinese poems. He came across 'the world of Chinese poetry' by going through the work of another American scholar.

Pound did experimentation with the technique of meter and rhyme for this poem. He featured the chronological life events of the river-merchant and his wife. The content of the poem got aligned with the cross-cultural and cross-spatial human emotions. The free verse pattern caught the reality of the situation. The letter-form of the poem got moulded aptly on the verse pattern. It was written as an authentic letter of a bereaved wife to her husband. The lack of stringent rules of meter serves the raw and pure emotional exuberance of the wife. Pound always emphasizes every emotional situation of the lonely wife. Some lines of the poem can be marked as climactic as the heaving wife creates subtle dramatic effect through her words. As the poem basically follows the ups and downs of characters' lives, the poet aptly uses 'time-based imagery' and 'figurative language' for thematic purpose. One of the important features of the poem is the setting of the events. The time frame is highly significant here as it directs towards the eventful actualities of life. Season spans from spring to autumn. The blissful affluence of life desiccates into autumnal decay. Life of the river-merchant and his wife changes just like the inevitable changes in nature. The couple's love dries down eventually as the husband leaves his wife to the call of river. Distance suffocates the wife with anguish and anxiety.

This poem is well knit by the poet. He translates it basically on three different levels. Firstly, the poet transcribes the words as well as the meaning from the Chinese language to the English. Secondly, he translates one cultural mode and tradition, here specifically that of China, into an altogether different cultural pot: that of the West. Thirdly, he creates space for the ancient pasts and the original events of the eighth century Chinese poem into the trajectory of twentieth century. Thus, Pound manages to convey a culturally specific remote world by transporting the eighth-century China in to the modern twentieth century.

16.3.4 Style And Theme

The poem, *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter*, is structured into five stanzas. The first stanza of the poem comprises six lines and the final stanza comprises ten lines. And the three stanzas in between consists of four lines. The stanzas are pictorially vivid. The first four stanzas are 'image-centered' and they are focussing on the emotional journey of the couple. The stanzas magnify the emotional attachment and the profundity of angst and anxiety on the part of the wife for her husband. The wife has got reminiscences of their childhood as they whiled away their days innocently and lovingly together. These stanzas contain the formative years of the couple's relationship. That phase has got wonderfully sketched in tune with the natural surroundings. The final stanza rises questions in the mind of the wife. She enquires whether her husband, the river-merchant will be coming by the river Kiang to meet her. Here in this stanza plays an important role to discover the magnanimity of human desire and despair. The grieving wife finds her expression in nature's autumnal decay. The concept of letter is a popular device, used in poetry, prose and song. Here in the context of this poem, letter as a device and concept elucidates the emotional attachment and the pain due to the situational distance between the couple. The word letter tries to bridge the gap between the aching souls. According to Pound's belief, Chinese ideogram, particularly in such an immediacy of situation, raises the mundane affair to a poetic culmination. It gives the poem a natural finesse. The unrhymed free verse brings the natural flows of life into the poem. Pound employs direct address throughout the poem, counting on the persona of the wife as the 'I' who is writing the letter and thus entering her experience. In addition, the direct address to the second-person 'you' allows the poem to be experienced as a letter by the reader. Thus, it is possible for the reader of the poem to enter the whole experience.

The poem is thematically rich. Different themes are aligned into this translation of Pound. Love, desire and passion are on the same strand. Besides these, constancy, separation and nature are adding significant dimensions to the poem. The poem is a dramatic monologue. The narrator, the river-merchant's wife writes this heartfelt letter. It's a plea to her husband, the river-merchant whose journey over the sea is lasting so long that the mind of the wife gets be ruffled with anxiety and pain of separation. The wife recalls the good old days from their formative years of life. She narrates how love brews up profoundly with her husband. She is passionately entwined in desire with her husband. The wife is suffering from both emotional and situational crises as her husband is long away from home. Thus love and

passion in the aching heart of the wife finds expression in the vivid images, rampant in the poem all through.

Constancy in love as a theme is also testified throughout the poem. The growth of love provides a rich context to allow the reader to fully appreciate faithfulness or constancy. When the speaker's husband has left her for the voyage, she just learn show to be in love with him in spite of the latter's absence. The speaker remains extremely passionate through the thick and thin of her life. The reader understands her regret that her newfound passion and emotional exchange with her husband is too brief. She is extremely concerned about her husband's well being and gets panicked about his safe return across the waters.

Nature is also a predominant theme serving all through the poem. It can be considered as a prime agent for catering the apt emotional expressions of the bereaving wife to the readers. Pound in his essay titled "Chinese Poetry" (1918) describes the central features of the Chinese verse-form. One of the important features is using the nature imagery to dictate the human emotion or mood. He refers to this as "metaphor by sympathy".

16.3.5 Use Of Symbols And Imagery

In *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter* Pound traces the course of the speaker's emotional journey from her childhood to adulthood in a long span of years. In order to drive home the emotional development of the speaker in that course of time, the poet uses the time-related imagery all along the poem. Much of this is connected with the seasonal cycle. The transition from the abundance and jollity of spring to the autumnal decay is depicted vividly in tune with the emotional changes in the character of the wife. Other natural phenomena are paired butterflies. Here in this poem butterflies represent the image of the loving couple. But in this poem the absence of the husband pricks the heart of the wife with acute anguish. Thus the pair of butterflies brings a sense of emptiness in the life of the speaker, the wife of the river-merchant. The various references to real places represent China as a whole to Pound's contemporary readers. Here by representing China as a lush garden filled with exotic animals and obedient wives, the readers of the past might not have had the same impressions that readers today will. The landscapes of China are tinged with the colour of love, passion and desire. China, an expressive backdrop acts as an appropriate agent that brings out the loneliness and longing of the speaker. The image of river is recurrent throughout the poem. Life flows and changes as the river does. It symbolizes the wife's life in recluse as her husband is long away from home. She waits passionately for her husband as the isles on the surface of water wistfully look at each other while being distant. Rivers are also an important symbol in this poem. Rivers constantly flow and change, just as the relationship between the wife and her husband has evolved. A river forms the physical barrier between them, as the husband traveled along it to another village. At the end of the poem, the wife wonders whether or not another river will bring them back together.

16.3.6 Form And Meter

The poem is written in free verse. It is structured around the chronological life events of the river-merchant and his wife. The use of free verse makes

the letter feel more authentic. It serves as a real letter from a wife to her husband. The lack of prescribed meter allows Pound to explain the wife's emotions properly. The poet also draws readers directly into her loneliness without overcoming the barrier of a structured presentation.

16.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : POSSIBLE QUESTIONS (WITH ANSWER KEYS)

- (a) Bring out the significance of the title of the poem, *The River-Merchant's Wife :A Letter*.

Your answer should take into consideration the discussion about the source of the poem as it is a translation. Then you should focus on the use of images as displayed through the title. The form of the poem, i.e. 'letter' should be expanded with proper discussion.

- (b) What are the events depicted in the first four stanzas of the poem?

As indicated in the relevant section of the summary, you need to describe chronologically all the events in the lives of the river-merchant and his wife. The first four stanzas are filled with different events vividly portrayed by the poet.

- (c) What is the main conflict in the poem?

The loneliness of the wife due to the separation from her husband serves as the main conflict in the poem. You need to figure this out from the sections, 'critical appreciation' and 'style and theme'. The agony in the life of the speaker needs to be explained here.

- (d) What are the predominant themes of the poem?

Love, passion, desire, constancy in love and nature are the predominant themes of the poem. The poem is thematically rich with these themes. You should count on the section, 'style and theme' for answering this question properly.

- (e) Comment on the use of symbols and images in the poem.

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter traces the course of the speaker's growth from childhood to adulthood in a matter of years. To drive home the emotional development of our speaker in this time, the poet makes use of different symbols and images all through the poem. You need to cite the section called 'use of symbols and images'.

16.5 SUMMING UP

To return to the beginning and sum up this Unit in the light of the 'Objectives' we had set as the preamble, you should, after reading this, be able to:

- Locate where the uniqueness of this translation, *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter*, lie in the light of Ezra Pound's other works
- Identify the transition from eighth century China to twentieth century modern West in the poem
- Understand the cross-cultural elements of the poem

- Recognize the importance of translation and transcreation in the context of this poem and understand this trend across the ages in the hands of stalwarts like Ezra Pound
- Comprehend the universal appeal of human emotions and the sense of isolation from near and dear ones

16.6 SELECT READING LIST

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UNIT 17: ‘WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS’ *A GOOD NIGHT*

Structure

17.0 Objectives

17.1 Introduction

17.1.1 The Writer’s Bio-brief

17.1.2 His major works

17.1.3 Influences on him

17.1.4 His Craftsmanship and Style

17.2 Movements associated with him

17.3 About the poem “*A Goodnight*”

17.3.1 The Text

17.3.2 Summary of the Poem

17.3.3. Critical Analysis of the Poem

17.3.4 Stylistic Devices Used in the Poem

17.4 Glossary

17.5 Check your progress: Possible questions (with answer keys)

17.6 Summing up

17.7 Select reading list

17.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- Know about the major works of William Carlos Williams
- Understand the style and themes used by the writer.
- Understand Imagist movement broadly in the context of this text
- Locate the work as distinct among his celebrated works.
- Comprehend the poem in the light of distinct stylistic devices used by the poet.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

17.1.1 The Writer’s Bio-brief :

Williams was born in September 17, 1883 near Paterson, New Jersey and he lived there all his life. His father was an English immigrant and his mother a Puerto Rican who had studied painting in Paris. His parents after their marriage settled in Rutherford where he grew up. He was thus exposed to European culture but at the same time had a strong sense of America being his only home. He went to local schools as well as to schools in Switzerland and Paris. After graduating from the Horace Mann High School, he studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. There he became friends with the poets Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), who accompanied him in the Imagist movement. He graduated in 1906, and after working in New

York City and Germany he returned to New Jersey, married Florence Herman, and began practising as a Pediatrician. He continued seeing patients till a number of strokes in the mid 50s forced him to turn his practice over to one of his sons. Like Wallace Stevens, Williams pursued his career as a poet at night and in between seeing patients, he was determined to be a writer but equally determined not to let go of a doctor’s livelihood. It was his experience as pediatrician and his community social projects that brought him into contact with a wide variety of people. It was probably the source of his unique vision which led to the energy and physicality of much of his poetry.

This poet did the most to support new talent in American poetry after World War II. He wrote for over sixty years and was both poet and doctor. Along with poetry he also wrote plays, essays and fiction and was, along with Hart Crane, one of the leading inheritors of Whitman’s mantle in American poetry.



17.1.2 His Major Works

His first book, *Poems* was published privately in 1909. The second volume, *Tempers*, published in 1913 with the help of Ezra Pound, revealed Williams’ interaction with the modern mode in poetry and his attempt to create his own voice. In the intellectual circles of New York he came to know Wallace Stevens, the poet Marianne Moore, and painters like Picabia and Duchamp. Notably, he disagreed with Pound on matters like the revival of old verse forms, he agreed with him about his principle of ‘Imagism’. He was also attracted to Whitman’s celebration of the merely physical and his strong recommendation for poetry of feeling and of the poet’s role as an upholder of liberty and equality. His essays in the magazine *Contact* which he edited between 1920 to 1923 with Robert McAlmon, his prose and poetry in *Spring and All* (1923) and his essays in the volume *In the American Grain* : (1925) saw him making away from expatriates like Pound and establishing his own, individual, even somewhat eccentric American tradition. Poetry, Williams argued, should be impelled by the same energies that bring about a revolution. It should run against the establishment. According to him, Symbolism should not be used to distance the reader of poetry from reality. Meanings should be found in actual things, actual objects and not vague abstractions. His most celebrated poem is “The Red Wheelbarrow” which is an excellent example of Williams’ concerns about poetry in this sense. He is famous for re-establishing the cadences, the rhythms of American diction in poetry more near to simplicity rather than to complexity. Williams effectively uses fragmentation in syntax to draw attention to the particular and different ordering that the poet’s imagination gives to the world of objects in order to turn it into poetry.

He received a number of awards like the Dial Award (1926), the National Book Award (1950), the Bollingen Award (1953) and the Pulitzer Prize (1962). As can be seen from these dates, recognition came later rather than earlier in his career.

17.1.3 Influences on Him

Poetry is not just imitation but “mutation.” The influence of painting can be seen in his volume *Sour Grapes* (1921) as well as the earlier *Spring and All*. This is something else he has in common with Pound and Stevens. Dadaists, Expressionists, Cubists, Precisionists--Williams was exposed to all of these modern schools of European painting through art shows in New York City. He borrowed from the Cubists their fragmentation of objects; from the Precisionists their combination of geometry and objective realism.

17.1.4 His Craftsmanship and Style

Williams's poem is a perfect example of Imagism, development of Modernism, in which an author gives direct management of “the thing”, whatever that might be. Williams is using a minimalistic approach of as few words as possible. Perception played very important role in his style and craftsmanship which we call ‘objectivism’. His idea about art that concentrates on the authentic rendering of the object in all its immediacy and particularity makes him different from other poets. He makes use of ‘defamiliarization’ (concept given by Russian critic Victor Shklovsky) that is making the objects ‘strange’ with his craftsmanship. He always saw the link between the object perceived as arrangement of appearances, of supra individual human emotional states and experiences. His conception of poetry revolves around ‘local consciousness’. Bram Dijkstra says about William Carlos Williams that ‘William saw one’s immediate environment, one’s locality as the only source of universal experience which he thought as great art experience. This universal experience was communicable only on the basis of an authentic perception of the objects of the material world, which he reasoned could only stem from an accurate representation of the things we know, the things with which we are intimately familiar, the sensual accidents bred out of local conditions which confront us’ (1978,p. 8) the presence of the nonhuman as more than mere backdrop, 2) the expansion of human interest beyond humanity, 3) a sense of human accountability to the environment.

17.2 MOVEMENTS ASSOCIATED WITH HIM

Williams was an oppositional voice in modern poetry--he agreed with many of the modern poets' endeavours (such as imagism) but was also fiercely critical of the expatriate poets. He was interested in developing a truly robust American voice and idiom in modern poetry. He was a strong influence on the movement called objectivism. He did a great deal to support new talent in American poetry in his lifetime. Modernism was basically a subjective rejection of tradition, with a newfound occurrence of a stream of consciousness. Modernist writers often experiment with new forms like imagism and primitivism, bringing new life to old poetic themes and genres.

17.3 ABOUT THE POEM “A GOODNIGHT”

The poem is composed of five stanzas and the last two stanzas are about the day time. With the use of peculiar style of ‘Objectivism’, poet has painted his vision of ‘Night’. The way he breaks up his lines is very interesting.

The way in which the stanzas are broken up seems to create the shape of a 'Night' itself, thus serving to subconsciously get our brains fastened to the concept of 'night' and 'sleep'.

'William Carlos Williams'
A Good Night

17.3.1 The Text

Go to sleep—though of course you will not—
to tideless waves thundering slantwise against
strong embankments, rattle and swish of spray
dashed thirty feet high, caught by the lake wind,
scattered and strewn broadcast in over the steady
car rails! Sleep, sleep! Gulls' cries in a wind-gust
broken by the wind; calculating wings set above
the field of waves breaking.

Go to sleep to the lunge between foam-crests,
refuse churned in the recoil. Food! Food!

Offal! Offal! that holds them in the air, wave-white
for the one purpose, feather upon feather, the wild
chill in their eyes, the hoarseness in their voices—
sleep, sleep ...

Gentlefooted crowds are treading out your lullaby.
Their arms nudge, they brush shoulders,
hitch this way then that, mass and surge at the crossings—
lullaby, lullaby! The wild-fowl police whistles,
the enraged roar of the traffic, machine shrieks:
it is all to put you to sleep,
to soften your limbs in relaxed postures,
and that your head slip sidewise, and your hair loosen
and fall over your eyes and over your mouth,
brushing your lips wistfully that you may dream,
sleep and dream—

A black fungus springs out about the lonely church doors—
sleep, sleep. The Night, coming down upon
the wet boulevard, would start you awake with his
message, to have in at your window. Pay no
heed to him. He storms at your sill with
cooings, with gesticulations, curses!
You will not let him in. He would keep you from sleeping.
He would have you sit under your desk lamp
brooding, pondering; he would have you
slide out the drawer, take up the ornamented dagger
and handle it. It is late, it is nineteen-nineteen—
go to sleep, his cries are a lullaby;

his jabbering is a sleep-well-my-baby; he is
a crackbrained messenger.

The maid waking you in the morning
when you are up and dressing,
the rustle of your clothes as you raise them—
it is the same tune.

At table the cold, greenish, split grapefruit, its juice
on the tongue, the clink of the spoon in
your coffee, the toast odors say it over and over.

The open street-door lets in the breath of
the morning wind from over the lake.

The bus coming to a halt grinds from its sullen brakes—
lullaby, lullaby. The crackle of a newspaper,
the movement of the troubled coat beside you—
sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep ...

It is the sting of snow, the burning liquor of
the moonlight, the rush of rain in the gutters packed
with dead leaves: go to sleep, go to sleep.
And the night passes--and never passes—

17.3.2 Summary of the poem *A Good Night*

When reading the title, the readers would be associating a night in poet's life as pleasurable, jaunty and celebrating but ironically, it turns out as full of decadence, nostalgic, regretting and troublesome. The poem is addressed to night and the epithet 'good' builds a sweet and positive setting of the poem. As the poem progresses, we find that the poet's tone has been change to agony and despair. The single motto of the poet is to make the audience aware about the night and the implications of sleep in the midst of mundane activities of different sets of people around. 'and the night passes—and never passes' is an open ending subject to multiple interpretations by the readers.

17.3.3 Critical Appreciation of the poem

William Carlos Williams stands apart as one of the influential poets of modern time. His poetic voice composes a unique picture in which reader is immersed in the poet's world of sensory perception. He believed that everything in our lives, no matter how simple can be organized into poetic verse. He utilizes objectivism to craft the poem into an 'object' that is 'Night' and 'Sleep' thereby emphasizing on the 'actions' of the animate and inanimate objects during night time. Poet has used his objective imagination to take the out of grounded reality. He employs keen observation 'rooted in particular time frame that is night'. Words becoming physical and visual energy can be evidenced with the employment of striking images.

He employs visually disjointed poetic patterns to express the minute details of an ordinary scene. A series of fragmented images to capture fleeting

moment of ‘Night time’ has been used. What is striking is the attention to details, the spontaneous reaction to a small local event, the imagination taking over surreal and emotional connection. William wrote that ‘ My theory of poetry arises from immediate environment and in the case of my environment, America...’. He adheres to his view and depicted the city life during night. The intention behind this seems to be depiction of realism and decadence of the society. Last two stanzas are descriptions of the time after you wake up.

The poem is structured with irregular stanza pattern. The tone of the poem is different in different stanzas. In the first stanza, the tone is casual and assertive at the same time. The use of the word ‘sleep’ for six times reveal the significance of the word. The importance of sleep in the garb of chaos is heightened with unusual images in the poem. It seems that the poem starts with the depiction of ‘nature’ and the treatment of it is different unlike Romantic Poets. ‘waves’ no doubt are ‘tideless’ but it is making noise and the cruel picture of the ‘scattered’ and ‘strewn over the car rails’ juxtaposes the urban and the natural setting as well. Each and every minute details have been given by the poet. With the use of Onomatopoeia in the lines ‘ gulls are crying in the strong wind’, the calmness of the nature has been subsided with the ‘raucous call’ of the gulls. We also find Reiteration again and again to manifest the central theme of the poem. ‘offa!offa! sleepsleep..’ signifies again the importance of the sleep in the lives of modern people.

Later the image has been shifted to ‘Gentlefooted crowds’ but with the use of juxtaposition that gentleness of the crowd transformed into ‘nudging’ each other symbolising urbanism may be by the poet. the image of the crowd at the crossings has been evoked to manifest the idea of traffic and chaos of the city life. From the depiction of urban life to church settling has also been seen. ‘black fungus’ springing out ‘lovely church doors’ signifying the loss of faith and spirituality among the people.

Notably, Night time is same in the first three stanzas but the shifts in ‘spaces’ have been used to overtly address the different people and the objects thereby emphasizing on the importance of ‘Sleep’. Now the last two stanzas have ‘day time’ and the morning rituals have been described but again the main key line themes lingers on ‘Sleep, Sleep, Sleep, Sleep...’ four times. The ending of the poem marks the subtle sarcasm by the poet as well that ‘ the night passes—and never passes’. The illusion of the dark night though seemed to have passed but it will always come back with new kinds of struggle and realities.

17.3.4 Stylistic Devices Used in the Poem

Onomatopoeia:

‘Gulls’ cries in a wind-gust
broken by the wind’ (stanza 1)

‘The wild-fowl police whistles,
the enraged roar of the traffic, machine shrieks:
it is all to put you to sleep’ (stanza 2)

Personification:

'The Night, coming down upon
the wet boulevard, would start you awake with his
message, to have in at your window. Pay no
heed to him. He storms at your sill with
cooings, with gesticulations, curses! ' (stanza 3)

Imagery: It is the sting of snow, the burning liquor of
the moonlight, the rush of rain in the gutters packed
with dead leaves... (whole poem with different images in different stanzas)

Rhyme: Irregular rhyme pattern.

Parallelism: 'over your eyes and over your mouth'

Symbolism: Sleep, night, cries etc

Phonological Devices: Alliteration- Sleep! Sleep, wave-white

Assonance: Offal! Offal!

Grammatical Patterns: strange breaks, run- on lines, compound words
and breaking them into next line. Unusual pauses and the use of enlisting
devices (commas and breaks) as well have also been used. For example: '...
to soften your limbs in relaxed postures, and that your head slip sidewise,
and your hair loosen and fall over your eyes and over your mouth, brushing
your lips wistfully that you may dream, sleep and dream- ...'

17.4 GLOSSARY

Modernism: 'making it new' is the slogan of modernist poets. It does not
have any alliance with the regular schemes and propagates ones right to
adopt any style as per the moods of the poet. It seeks exact concord of
thought and feeling in writing the poem. Poets like William Carlos Williams,
Ezra Pound insist on personal experience into poetic texture that claimed
universal human significance.

Imagism: It was a movement in early 20th-century Anglo-American poetry
that favored precision and clarity in the depiction of images in the poem.
It is also considered as succession of creative moments. With the use of
precision and direct statements, a single image is isolated to reveal its
essence. The Imagists were centered in London, with members from Great
Britain, Ireland and the United States.

Expressionism: It is the modernist movement of 20th century that emerged
in poetry and painting and particularly in Germany to present the world
from one's subjective point of view in order to evoke emotional effects by
presenting not mere physical reality but also emotional experience as well.

Objectivism: A mode of writing verse that recognises the poem, apart
from its meaning, to be an object to be dealt with as such. With this mode,
emphasis on the object has been given by paying particular attention to the
structure of the poem and its construction.

Dadaism: A western European artistic and literary movement that sought
discovery of authentic reality through the abolition of traditional cultural

and aesthetic forms by a technique of comic derision in which irrationality, chance and intuition were the guiding principles.

‘William Carlos Williams’
A Good Night

17.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (QUESTIONS WITH ANSWER KEYS)

a. How is the poem *A Good Night* a modern poem?

Your response should include the different movements of the modern time. For example objectivism, defying the traditional rhythm and cadence etc

b. What are the stylistic devices used by William Carlos Williams in the poem?

The answer should include the sentence, grammatical patterns and how the imagery used by the poet is different from the other poets of his times.

17.6 SUMMING UP

Williams’ use of lineation, simple lexis, careful syntax, and recognition of the act of reading, allows the generation of imagery synchronous with the immediate subject matter. Williams champions the American idiom and the “local”--either the urban landscape or one’s immediate environment. He pays close attention to ordinary scenes (some purely descriptive; others as compositions as in visual art), the working class and poor. Williams’s work often demonstrates the artist’s need to destroy or deconstruct what has become outworn and to reassemble or recreate with fresh vision and language. His own “hybrid” background is, in his view, particularly American. He uses his experience as a doctor, married man and father, son and friend, in some of the poems, fiction, and plays. In addition, he demonstrates the need to discover rather than impose order on reality.

17.7 SELECT READING LIST

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UNIT 18: COUNTEE CULLEN'S *LINES TO MY FATHER* AND LANGSTON HUGHES' *LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN*

Structure

18.0 Objectives

18.1 Introduction

18.1.1 Genesis of the African-American Community in America

18.1.2 Overview of the Changing Position of the Community

18.1.3 African-Americans in the Twentieth Century and Harlem Renaissance

18.1.4 About Harlem Renaissance

18.2 About Langston Hughes

18.3 "Let America be America Again": Analysis

18.4 About Countee Porter Cullen

18.5 "Lines to My Father": Analysis

18.6 Check Your Progress: Possible questions (with answer keys)

18.7 Summing Up

18.8 Select Reading List

18.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Know about the history of African-American community's arrival in America
- Become familiar with the history of this community's struggles
- Connect the movement known as Harlem Renaissance with these struggles
- Identify the two major strains of writers involved with Harlem Renaissance
- Close-Read the two poems mentioned above

18.1 INTRODUCTION

18.1.1 Genesis of the African-American community in America

As suggested by the very name, the community of African-Americans is a hybrid ethnic group. They are born out of a mixing of two ethnic groups who reside at a distance of nearly nine thousand miles. Looking at the sheer enormity of this distance the first question that arises is what actually led to this crossing over? The historical accounts of this community suggest that it was a result of a forced migration. The documentary entitled *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* with Henry Louis Gates, Jr tells: "In the

360 years between 1500 and the end of the slave trade in the 1860s, at least 12 million Africans were forcibly taken to the Americas - then known as the "New World" to European settlers. This largest forced migration in human history relocated some 50 ethnic and linguistic groups". For their shippers these migrated lot might be simply Africans but in reality they were members of different African tribes marked by their individual cultures. In the soil of America these people of diverse nature were actually forced to lose their unique tribal identities and get transformed into a new hybrid ethnic group- the African-Americans. These people did consist of members of Native American and European lineage but they were predominantly a pan-African group residing in America.

18.1.2 Overview of the Changing Position of the Community

The community did begin as slaves at its initial stage but along with time their position in America underwent a remarkable change. Harlem Renaissance is certainly one of the manifestations of this changing position hence before talking about this event itself, it seems important to explore the events preceding it that had a significant impact on the community's liberation. From 1619 to 1808, the importing of Africans to America for slavery continued officially. Though this importing was outlawed in 1808, the practice had already gathered millions of slaves. As the white population of America, especially the Southern people, were unwilling to accept these Africans forced to live in America as free citizens; the condition of these coloured people did not improve at all by the stopping of slave importing. Gradually these Africans living in America started revolting and America witnessed a number of reactions against the discrimination against the black people throughout the nineteenth century. People like Nat Turner or John Brown attempted to fight the perpetrators of slavery by force and though both were hanged after killing a few opponents, their revolts certainly gave the growing agitation against the slave owners a definite shape. The abolitionists started protesting against slavery in an organized way and this movement took a significant turn from the 1830s with the beginning of the publication of *The Liberator* by William Lloyd Garrison. Another notable instance of the rising of the black people was the case of the slave named Dred Scott who sought help from the legal system for gaining freedom. The biased Supreme Court did deny Scott his due but their hypocrisy infuriated the northern Americans and made them aware of the oppressed state of the blacks in a vivid manner. After the Civil War of 1861 the emancipation of the slaves finally got a legal sanction but during the post-slavery era further agitations against the blacks began when laws like the Black Codes were passed during 1865. The white supremacists formed notorious groups like "Ku Klux Klan" for fighting the blacks during this time. In short, the nineteenth century, especially its second half was a time of attacks and counterattacks for the blacks.

18.1.3 African-Americans in the Twentieth Century and Harlem Renaissance

During the early years of the twentieth century the African-Americans saw the rise of a few men of their own community as influential persons. Unlike the chief leaders of the previous century, these new generation of African-

Americans had either financial strength or the reputation of a scholar. They had managed to become voices to reckon with following different paths and revolutionary changes started to appear when they tried to impart their mantra of success to their fellow African-Americans. For instance, Booker Taliaferro Washington, who had become a known face amongst the circle of wealthy Americans insisted that the blacks should develop skills as technicians or workers of various industries for becoming a part of the American core population occupied by the whites. He tried to make the community become one with the whites but did not speak about the importance of the individuality of the blacks. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois drew their attention to the need for considering their community as an individual one instead of merely thinking themselves as an extension of the whites. Du Bois was a scholar. He was the first of these black Americans who earned a doctorate degree and moving a step ahead from Washington, he suggested that salvation lay in embracing education and nurturing a unique culture. When Du Bois acted as one of the main founding members of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in 1909, he had the educational and cultural development of his fellow people as his chief goal. These seeds sown by Du Bois soon evolved into what is known as Harlem Renaissance today.

18.1.4 About Harlem Renaissance

Looking at the impact of the event on the African Americans, it seems better to call it a revolution rather than a renaissance. For these people of African origin it brought a change that was hardly seen previously. Hence it was less a 're-awakening' and more an awakening that occurred surrounding a particular place in the 1920s. Stephen Matterson describes the event saying: "The renaissance mainly involved a group of writers and intellectuals associated (often loosely) with Harlem, the district of Manhattan that during the Great Migration of African Americans from rural South, became the major centre for urbanized blacks"(96). Matterson's entries inform that by 1930s no less than 2 million black people had migrated to north. In the urban space of northern America they could be free from the brutalities of the South and as a result of their proximity to the gloss of cities, they started updating themselves in a remarkable manner. This movement took place at a time when the entire world of Western literature was undergoing a sea change as a result of the emergence of Modernism. These African American writers too joined the wave of embracing novelty in their own ways. Practitioners of Modernism in general considered the mixing of the traditional and the new an integral part of their agenda. In the hands of these African Americans, this agenda became an effective medium of portraying their African heritage and Americanness together. For white writers like Eugene O' Neill, African American identity was mostly related with primitivism, as shown in the play *The Emperor Jones*(1920). Harlem Renaissance helped in developing the awareness that urbanity too had become an integral part of African American culture. Alain Locke's essay, published as an introduction to the collection entitled *The New Negro*(1925) gave voice to this movement for the first time. The term "New Negro" became synonymous with the movement and it referred to the newly developed awareness in the African Americans about their unique identity. For them, being black no longer meant being

backward. They started believing in their own culture like never before. Like many other movements, however, Harlem Renaissance too had exponents who had their differences. While a section of this movement insisted that the only purpose of an African American writer should be the voicing of the problems faced by their community, a second group intended to establish themselves not just as African American writers but writers dedicated to universal concerns. The key strain of thoughts of these two groups maybe understood from the poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, respectively.

Countee Cullen's *Lines to My Father* and Langston Hughes' *Let America Be America Again*

18.2 BOUT LANGSTON HUGHES (1901-1967)

This Missouri born poet is called a “poet laureate of the race” for African-Americans by Lisa Hollenbach. He introduced an interesting form of poetry to the American poetry in general which eventually became known as “Jazz Poetry”. He fused syncopated rhythms, a coded and figurative language referred as “Jive language” which, for example described a guitar as “Belly-Fiddle”, to poetry that used colloquial language as far as practicable in order to develop this fusion of Jazz music and poetry. He wrote more than fifteen collections of poems along with a notable number of novels, plays, short stories, essays and children’s literature.

18.3 “LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN”: ANALYSIS

One of the most iconic poems by Langston Hughes, “Let America...” was written during the 1930s which is infamously known as the Depression era in American culture. However, rather than being a dated text, the poem’s key argument eventually became one of the most popular slogans of American leaders like John Kerry. The key ideas of the poem will be analyzed in this section. Though written as one undivided text, the poem appears to have three distinct yet interrelated sections in it and this section will analyze it using the same.

- 1) The first sixteen lines show interplay between a prayer that asks for returning America to its ideal state and a voice captured in parenthesis that keeps reminding that America was never great for this individual speaker or a certain group that this individual speaker is a representative of. In these lines America of the glorious past is described as a land of liberty, equal opportunities, and a space where the time honored traditions of exploiting the common people has been done away with. These assertions are followed by short yet very strong interjections that remind that America has never really been an ideal land for the speaker of these interjections.
- 2) The first portion is followed by a longer and descriptive portion running nearly fifty lines that reveal the identities of the people represented in the interjections mentioned above and their respective sufferings. These people are requested by the narratorial voice to reveal their identities and they inform that they are literally a multitude of sufferers. They consist of poor white men, black people, the natives of America described by the ruling white people as “Red”, and all the immigrants

that ever arrived in America. All of them had come to America or hoped sincerely that America will make a difference but in reality they saw the gradual rise of the cruel, inhuman, exploiters all around who simply imitated the scheme of the tyrants that centers around the exploitation of the poor. Apart from these minority groups, the voice is described to be a representative of the young men, the farmer, the worker, and the black slaves. All of them are strong and capable enough for leading America to a bright future but the select few who run the nation never allow them to proceed. Instead the potential, the power of these honest workers are sold cheap and put at the service of the greedy rich people. Ironically it is these exploited and mishandled people who are the pillars of the dream about America's greatness. In short, these lines explain why America is no longer the America of "American Dream".

- 3) Finally, the concluding section wraps the poem with the hope of a better future despite all the hopelessness. It addresses the exploiters and informs with great confidence that they can brand these exploited people who are now declaring a war for reclaiming America as abhorrent or evil but they will not stop. They will bring a revolutionary change that will ultimately have the American Dream realized all over. The last section mentions the source of sufferings for the exploited and ends very confidently with an assurance that America will definitely become great again. Overall, the poem reflects Hughes's strong belief in the ideals of Harlem Renaissance as well as his Marxist ideology. Though written primarily for the black people, this poem ultimately speaks for every single person who has been affected by the selfish rich people who turned American dream into a nightmare.

18.4 ABOUT COUNTTEE PORTER CULLEN (1903-1946)

Details of the early life of Countee Cullen are quite obscure. Name of his real father is still unknown. The surname "Cullen" became a part of his identity after he got adopted by Reverend Frederick Cullen. His consistent achievements as a student make him look no less than a prodigy. Apart from earning degrees in challenging courses like classical literatures, Cullen drew the attention of many for his talent in creative works like writing poetry, delivering speeches, etc. His maturity as a writer earned him the opportunity to become an associate editor of his school's journal *The Magpie*. His first collection of poems known as *Color* was published the same year he became a graduate. The poem by Cullen featured in this module, that is, "Lines to My Father" belongs to Cullen's second collection of poems known as *Copper Sun* (1927). Subsequently the poem was anthologized in *My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen* (1991).

As mentioned before, Cullen's poems represent a section of Harlem Renaissance writers that attempted to engage with issues outside the African-American struggle for emancipation. The poem "Lines to My Father," however, serves not just as a representative text depicting Cullen's attempts to move beyond the recurrent thoughts that dominated the writings

of Langston Hughes and the like. Rather, the poem appears to be a subtle voicing of the African-Americans' sufferings beneath philosophical musings that have a universal significance.

Countee Cullen's *Lines to My Father* and Langston Hughes' *Let America Be America Again*

18.5 "LINES TO MY FATHER": ANALYSIS

The poem is apparently a brief message to a person the speaker calls his (though it is not clear whether this anonymous speaker is male or female, keeping the poem's connections with the poet's life or the condition of his community, which the following paragraphs will explain, it seems proper to assume that the speaker is male) father. This poem is comparatively more symbolic than the other poem discussed in this unit and these symbols have a Christian overtone.

To begin with, the poem alludes to the biblical saying about sowing and reaping. The Second Epistle to the Corinthians featured in the New Testament proclaims: "... whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly" (9:6) and the opening line of Cullen's poem alludes to it with a twist. Unlike the biblical line it speaks of a discrepancy between the people who sow and the people who reap. According to the poem sowing, the comparatively more laborious task of the two, is done by many but reaping, which though tiresome, is definitely more satisfactory in terms of immediate gains, is done by a select few. Though universal in tone, this statement appears to be grounded in the discriminatory situation that African-Americans were placed during Cullen's time. The African-Americans would do the hard work for the development of America but the benefits would mostly be enjoyed by the whites.

After this poignant beginning the poem continues to speak of the sufferings of hard-working people. The poet beautifully maintains the obliqueness by making the lines speak of universal as well as the sufferings of his own community. In continuation with the idea of the sufferings of the people engaged in sowing, the poem starts speaking of the minuscule presence of relief and joy in the lives of these hard-working people. They can enjoy the soothing moments of rest only when the daytime gets shortened and night gets lengthened by prolonged darkness, that is, only when due to the natural conditions they get to cease their work earlier than their schedule, they get to rest and soothe the "smart" that is "pain" of otherwise consistent grief of their daily lives. These laboring people, according to the poem, have very little expectations from life. All it takes is a slight sign of a good harvest to make them ecstatic. They are so habituated to "indigence" meaning their sufferings; that the arrival of a single flower makes them happy. In short, they live for working and know nothing beyond hard work.

After these meaningful descriptions about these hard-working people the poem shifts its focus on the speaker's father. This section of the poem reveals significant details about the identity of this "father" and further explicates the poem's central idea. The speaker requests his father to take a look around and witness the impact the seeds he had sown have had. It is important to note that the speaker associates his father with people engaged in sowing at this point. Just like them, the speaker's father too had sown seeds and as a result trees bearing ripe fruit with golden hue, signifying these fruits' purity,

have grown in abundance all over. After this sensuous description of the trees and fruits, the speaker explains the actual nature of the system that his father has created. This system is entirely based on hard-work. The father has set things in motion by sowing seeds and the subsequent generations must keep the rhythm of creation sprung thusly by way of hard-work. In return they will definitely get a beautiful world filled with ripeness but they must earn it. The system the father has created will never let them simply inherit things from idle wishful thinking. The speaker adds a note of praise for his father stating that the father has hired these people who need to work for continuing the father's good work, only after he became sure about their capabilities. The use of capitalization in the line "From One Who holds His servants worth their hire." sums up the questions about the father's identity by implying that the speaker is addressing God himself.

Towards the end the poem takes an interesting turn by pointing out that this great harvest that the father's sowing has given birth to was not really desired by the father without any doubts. Rather, it was "the shyest" of his dreams, meaning the father, the Almighty too was not really sure that someday the earth will look so beautifully ripened. Yet this dream has come true and more importantly, the dream does not at all look fragile. Instead, it looks solid as rock. This dream, according to the speaker, can be "impregnated," that is grown further but it will require the involvement of hard-working people. Hence, the conclusion that the poem features in between the lines insists that the people enjoying undue advantages, mentioned in the opening line, will fall short of the capability required for carrying on the father's work. Overall, the poem carries a universal significance by allegorically highlights the importance of hard-working people in general and yet it speaks volumes about the African-Americans too. It is a poem of hope and though the messages of hope it imparts are meaningful for readers across time and culture, the true significance of these rays of hope is definitely perceived better when seen through the lens of contemporary African-American history.

18.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (QUESTIONS WITH ANSWER KEYS)

a) Describe the socio-historical background of Harlem Renaissance.

Ans: Your answer should begin mentioning the history of African-American community's development and growth in America. Thereafter, you need to explain how the change in this community (in the form of literacy, participation in power structure, etc.) gradually led to the development of Harlem Renaissance.

b) Assess the contribution of Langston Hughes as a poet of Harlem Renaissance.

Ans. You should start by outlining Hughes' life and his involvement with the movement. In terms of his contribution, stress should be given to how his poems spoke for bringing about revolutionary changes to America. Along with the poem on your syllabus you should also refer to a few other poems by Hughes, namely "Harlem," "I, Too," etc.

- c) Critically comment on the central idea of the poem "Let America Be America Again".

Ans. You should close-read the poem and sum up its contents following the leads given above. Conclude your answer by relating the poem's idea of bringing the true face of American nation back with the Harlem Renaissance's notion of uplifting the African-Americans.

- d) Assess the contribution of Countee Cullen as a poet of Harlem Renaissance/ Assess the distinctive features of Cullen's poetry that gives him a unique position amongst the poets of Harlem Renaissance.

Ans. You have to outline the key differences between Cullen and other writers of Harlem Renaissance like Hughes by explaining how Cullen refused to indulge in out and out political and propagandist writings. You should substantiate your arguments by referring to the poem on your syllabus. However, references to other poems like "Yet do I Marvel," "The Wise," "The Loss of Love," may also be given.

- e) Explain the Christian symbolism used in "Lines to My Father".

Ans. You should refer to the discussion on the poem mentioned above. You can also attempt to relate the poem's central ideas with Cullen's childhood upbringing in the house of his foster father who himself was a devout Christian.

18.7 SUMMING UP

As stated above, after going through these discussions you should now be able to:

- Explain the factors behind the rise of Harlem Renaissance
- Distinguish between the two major strains of writings associated with Harlem Renaissance
- Critically explain the poems on your syllabus in the light of Harlem Renaissance
- Comment on the images used in the poems on your syllabus

18.8 SELECT READING LIST

The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance Edited By George B. Hutchinson, Cambridge University Press, 2007

A Langston Hughes Encyclopedia by Hans Ostrom, Greenwood Press, 2002.

Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past And Present Edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah, Harper, 2000.

Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes Edited by John Edger Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar, University of Missouri, 2007.

Countee Cullen by Alan Shucard, Twayne, 1984.

Harlem Renaissance by Nathan Huggins, Oxford University Press, 2007.

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Countee Cullen papers, 1900-1947, Amistad Research Center, <http://amistadresearchcenter.tulane.edu/archon/?p=collections/controlcard&id=41>

“Langston Hughes’s Cold War Audiences: Black Internationalism, The Popular Front, and The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949” by John Lowney, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26434716?seq=1>

“The American Dream of Langston Hughes” by James Presley, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43467552?seq=1>

“The Poetic Philosophy of Countee Cullen” by Bertram L. Woodruff, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/271989?seq=1>

“The Poetics of Conjecture: Countee Cullen’s Subversive Exemplarity” by Jeremy Braddock, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3300283?seq=1>



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