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AMERICAN LITERATURE
(MAENCC204)

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Teerthanker Mahaveer University (TMU)

PROGRAMME COORDINATOR

Dr. Sandeep Verma
Associate Professor
Department of Humanities
Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE)
Teerthanker Mahaveer University (TMU)

BLOCK PREPARATION

Dr. Renu Kumari
Department of Humanities
Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE)
Teerthanker Mahaveer University (TMU)

Secretarial Assistance and Composed By:
Mr. Namit Bhatnagar

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CONTENTS

1	**Section A :**	5
2	**Section B :**	86
3	**Section C :**	135

SECTION A: POETRY

1. The Raven: Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe: Biography

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the most celebrated of all American authors. Heavily influenced by the German Romantic Ironists, Poe made his mark in Gothic fiction, especially through the tales of the macabre for which he is now so famous. Although he regarded himself primarily as a poet, he is one of the few indisputably great writers of the short story, alongside Guy de Maupassant and O. Henry. Besides redefining that form as a vehicle for literary art, Poe also contributed to the modern detective genre and wrote highly influential literary criticism.

Poe was born in Boston on January 19, 1809, to David Poe, Jr. and Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins—both of whom died before their son was three. Young Edgar went to live in Richmond, Virginia with John Allan, a wealthy tradesman, while his older brother William Henry and his half-sister Rosalie were sent to other families.

After dropping out of university and the army, he became one of the first writers of the time to make a living from publishing his stories and criticism. Possibly his best-known work, "The Raven," published in 1845, won him considerable fame and success. But he had much financial and mental difficulty throughout his life, particularly after the death of his wife Virginia. Poe's death in 1849 was a much debated tragedy – alcohol, suicide, tuberculosis and many other things have been attributed as causes.

Major Themes of Poe

Death

A large portion of Poe's fiction includes musings on the nature of death and on questions about the afterlife. In poems such as "Eldorado," the protagonist is only able to reach his life's goal in death, having spent his life in endless seeking, and in other works, such as "The City in the Sea," "The Bells," and "The Conqueror Worm," death is a foregone conclusion as the end of a decaying process that started long before. Poe does not necessarily come to the same conclusion about death in each poem, particularly in the cases of "Lenore" and "The Raven," two poems that share a deceased female's name but that take a very different approach

to the subject of the afterlife. Whereas Guy de Vere of “Lenore” is defiant and hopeful in his mourning because he believes that he will again see Lenore in Heaven, the unnamed narrator of “The Raven” becomes increasingly agitated and despairing as he begins to believe the raven in that he will “nevermore” see Lenore.

Love

A common motif within Poe’s oeuvre is that of a woman who has died at the height of her youth and beauty, leaving a bereft lover behind to mourn. In many cases, parallels can be drawn between the female in question and Poe’s sickly and prematurely deceased wife Virginia Clemm, as Poe often depicts the female as child-like or naive, details that recall Virginia’s young age at the time of marriage. For Poe, the strongest and most lasting love generally belonged to the young and innocent heroines of “Tamerlane” and “Annabel Lee,” an attitude in line with that of many other contemporary writers of the Romantic era, who regarded childhood as the purest state of man. “To Helen” also emphasizes the nurturing role of a loving woman. After the death of the woman, however, the reaction of many of Poe’s protagonists is to remain emotionally dependent upon the dead women to the point of obsession. For example, the narrator of “Ulalume” wanders absentmindedly through the woods but is drawn irresistibly to her tomb, and the narrator of “Annabel Lee” sleeps every night next to her grave by the sea, lending macabre undertones to what appears at first to be faithful love.

Impermanence and uncertainty

“A Dream Within a Dream” by Poe deals most specifically with the troubling idea that reality is impermanent and nothing more than a dream, as the narrator first parts from his lover and then struggles with his inability to grasp the nature of an evanescent truth. However, a number of other poems touch upon the inevitability of the end, as in “The Conqueror Worm,” one of Poe’s least optimistic poems, which asserts that all men are influenced by invisible forces until their unavoidable and tragically gruesome deaths. In many cases, the protagonists of Poe’s works worry because they see the impermanence of their state of being but are unable to make predictions about the unknown. In particular, “The Raven” emphasizes the quandary of the unknowable by juxtaposing the questioning narrator and the apparently all-knowing but also non-sentient raven’s denial of a possible future.

The subconscious self

In his short works, Poe often plays upon the idea of a double, where the narrator has a doppelganger that represents his subconscious or his primal instincts. In some cases, as in "Ulalume," the double acts as the manifestation of instinctive wisdom, and here the narrator's Psyche tries unsuccessfully to guide him away from the path to Ulalume's tomb because she knows that he will encounter grief and seeks to protect him. In other situations, as in "The Raven," the narrator encounters a double that embodies his deepest fears, which in turn eventually overpower his conscious, rational self. Although the narrator of "The Raven" initially ignores the message of the intruding bird, he concludes the poem by interpreting its word "nevermore" as the denial of all his hopes; he has projected his soul into the body of the bird. In both cases, the poetic separation of the two halves creates a dramatic dialogue that highlights the narrator's inner struggle.

Nature

As a writer, Poe was part of the American Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century, when authors sought to return to nature in order to achieve a purer, less sinful state, away from the negative influences of society. As a result, Poe often associates nature with good, as in the case of "Tamerlane," where Tamerlane and his childhood friend find love and happiness in nature until he leaves for the company of other men and falls prey to pride and ambition. The poet of "Sonnet - To Science" also laments the encroaching of man into nature as he "drive[s] the Hamadryad from the wood" and consequently loses something of his soul. Many of Poe's protagonists wander in nature and as a result discover something about their innermost thoughts -- as is the case with the narrator of "Ulalume," who wanders through a wood and unconsciously directs himself to the location of his dead beloved's tomb. What is more, Poe often views cities negatively: "The City in the Sea" eventually sinks into hell after wasting away under the influence of a personified Death.

The Human Imagination

Poe addresses the capabilities of the human mind most directly in "Sonnet - To Science," where the narrator poet laments that the dulling influence of modern science has restricted the power of the imagination. Nevertheless, he holds to the aesthetic ideals of human creativity and refers to a number of mythological characters in his claim that the ability to imagine lies at the centre of humanity's identity. On the other hand, other poems deal with the

imagination in a somewhat different manner, showing the dangers of the imagination when not tempered by a sense of reality. The narrator of "The Raven" exemplifies this behaviour. Although he at first tries to explain the potentially unearthly phenomenon of the raven through rational measures, he eventually forgets his rational mind in his sorrow and despair, and comes to treat the raven as a sentient and therefore supernatural messenger.

Hope and Despair

By placing his characters in situations of regret and loss, Poe explores the spectrum of human emotion between hope and despair throughout his writing. On the one hand, poems such as "The Conqueror Worm" and "The Raven" primarily promote despair. In the latter work, the narrator's words become increasingly agitated, and he shrieks futilely at the raven. This state of being contrasts heavily with the more hopeful ending of "Eldorado," where the "pilgrim shadow" tells the aging knight that he must venture boldly into the Valley of the Shadow to achieve his goal and thus offers the knight a potential end to his life-long quest. Nevertheless, even this hint of hope has dark undertones since it suggests that the knight will be doomed to search for the remainder of his life and must willingly ride into death to fulfil his quest.

Historical Context of "The Raven"

Edgar Allan Poe wrote "The Raven" while his wife, Virginia, was ill with tuberculosis, a disease that had already robbed him of three family members. Critics consider the character of Lenore, presumably the narrator's lost beloved, to be a representation of Virginia. Virginia's premature death is also thought to have inspired other works by Poe, including "Annabel Lee" and a poem actually called "Lenore," in which, as in "The Raven," a man copes with the death of a young woman, though "Lenore" ultimately ends on a note of optimism in contrast to the madness and despair of "The Raven."

Detailed Summary

The unnamed narrator is wearily perusing an old book one bleak December night, when he hears a tapping at the door to his room. He tells himself that it is merely a visitor, and he awaits tomorrow because he cannot find release in his sorrow over the death of Lenore. The rustling curtains frighten him, but he decides that it must be some late visitor and, going to the door, he asks for forgiveness from the visitor because he had been napping. However, when he opens the door, he sees and hears nothing except the word "Lenore," an echo of his own words.

Returning to his room, he again hears a tapping and reasons that it was probably the wind outside his window. When he opens the window, however, a raven enters and promptly perches "upon a bust of Pallas" above his door. Its grave appearance amuses the narrator, who asks it for its name. The raven responds, "Nevermore." He does not understand the reply, but the raven says nothing else until the narrator predicts aloud that it will leave him tomorrow like the rest of his friends. Then the bird again says, "Nevermore."

Startled, the narrator says that the raven must have learned this word from some unfortunate owner whose ill luck caused him to repeat the word frequently. Smiling, the narrator sits in front of the ominous raven to ponder about the meaning of its word. The raven continues to stare at him, as the narrator sits in the chair that Lenore will never again occupy. He then feels that angels have approached, and angrily calls the raven an evil prophet. He asks if there is respite in Gilead and if he will again see Lenore in Heaven, but the raven only responds, "Nevermore." In a fury, the narrator demands that the raven go back into the night and leave him alone again, but the raven says, "Nevermore," and it does not leave the bust of Pallas. The narrator feels that his soul will "nevermore" leave the raven's shadow.

Analysis

"The Raven" is the most famous of Poe's poems, notable for its melodic and dramatic qualities. The meter of the poem is mostly trochaic octameter, with eight stressed-unstressed two-syllable feet per lines. Combined with the predominating ABCBBB end rhyme scheme and the frequent use of internal rhyme, the trochaic octameter and the refrain of "nothing more" and "nevermore" give the poem a musical lilt when read aloud. Poe also emphasizes the "O" sound in words such as "Lenore" and "nevermore" in order to underline the melancholy and lonely sound of the poem and to establish the overall atmosphere. Finally, the repetition of "nevermore" gives a circular sense to the poem and contributes to what Poe termed the "unity of effect", where each word and line adds to the larger meaning of the poem.

The unnamed narrator appears in a typically Gothic setting with a lonely apartment, a dying fire, and a "bleak December" night while wearily studying his books in an attempt to distract himself from his troubles. He thinks occasionally of Lenore but is generally able to control his emotions, although the effort required to do so tires him and makes his words equally slow and outwardly pacified. However, over the course of the narrative, the protagonist becomes more and more agitated both in mind and in action, a progression that he demonstrates

through his rationalizations and eventually through his increasingly exclamation-ridden monologue. In every stanza near the end, however, his exclamations are punctuated by the calm desolation of the sentence "Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore,'" reflecting the despair of his soul.

Like a number of Poe's poems such as "Ulalume" and "Annabel Lee," "The Raven" refers to an agonized protagonist's memories of a deceased woman. Through poetry, Lenore's premature death is implicitly made aesthetic, and the narrator is unable to free himself of his reliance upon her memory. He asks the raven if there is "balm in Gilead" and therefore spiritual salvation, or if Lenore truly exists in the afterlife. But the raven confirms his worst suspicions by rejecting his supplications. The fear of death or of oblivion informs much of Poe's writing, and "The Raven" is one of his bleakest publications because it provides such a definitively negative answer. By contrast, when Poe uses the name Lenore in a similar situation in the poem "Lenore," the protagonist Guy de Vere concludes that he need not cry in his mourning because he is confident that he will meet Lenore in heaven.

Poe's choice of a raven as the bearer of ill news is appropriate for a number of reasons. Originally, Poe sought only a dumb beast that was capable of producing human-like sounds without understanding the words' meaning, and he claimed that earlier conceptions of "The Raven" included the use of a parrot. In this sense, the raven is important because it allows the narrator to be both the deliverer and interpreter of the sinister message, without the existence of a blatantly supernatural intervention. At the same time, the raven's black feather has traditionally been considered a magical sign of ill omen, and Poe may also be referring to Norse mythology, where the god Odin had two ravens named Hugin and Munin, which respectively meant "thought" and "memory." The narrator is a student and thus follows Hugin, but Munin continually interrupts his thoughts and in this case takes a physical form by landing on the bust of Pallas, which alludes to Athena, the Greek goddess of learning.

Due to the late hour of the poem's setting and to the narrator's mental turmoil, the poem calls the narrator's reliability into question. At first the narrator attempts to give his experiences a rational explanation, but by the end of the poem, he has ceased to give the raven any interpretation beyond that which he invents in his own head. The raven thus serves as a fragment of his soul and as the animal equivalent of Psyche in the poem "Ulalume." Each figure represents its respective character's subconscious that instinctively understands his need to obsess and to mourn. As in "Ulalume," the protagonist is unable to avoid the recollection of his beloved, but whereas Psyche of "Ulalume" sought to prevent the unearthing of painful

memories, the raven actively stimulates his thoughts of Lenore, and he effectively causes his own fate through the medium of a non-sentient animal.

Themes in "The Raven"

Death and the Afterlife

As with many other of Poe's works, "The Raven" explores death. More specifically, this poem explores the effects of death on the living, such as grief, mourning, and memories of the deceased, as well as a question that so often torments those who have lost loved ones to death: whether there is an afterlife in which they will be reunited with the dead.

At the beginning of the poem, the narrator is mourning alone in a dark, cheerless room. He portrays himself as trying to find "surcease of sorrow" by reading his books. One might read this as an effort to distract himself and thereby escape the pain of the death of a loved one. One might also interpret the narrator's reading of books of "forgotten lore" to indicate that he is looking for arcane knowledge about how to reverse death. In either case, his reaction to the death of a loved one is rather typical: to try to escape the pain of it, or to attempt to deny death.

Before the Raven's arrival, the narrator hears a knocking at the door of his room, and after finding no one there calls "Lenore?" into the darkness, as if sensing or hoping she has returned to him. Following the Raven's arrival, he eventually asks the bird if there is "balm in Gilead," implying a hope that he might see Lenore once more in heaven. In either case, the narrator's desperate desire to be reunited with Lenore in some way is obvious.

In "Lenore," another of Poe's poems featuring a deceased woman named Lenore, the narrator, confronted with the loss of his wife, reassures himself with the prospect that he will see her again in heaven. In "The Raven," however, the narrator ultimately takes a gloomier view. After the raven arrives, cutting short the narrator's sense that Lenore might be visiting as a ghost and answering his hopeful questions about Gilead with only the repeated "Nevermore," the narrator resigns himself to believing that he will never encounter Lenore again. Poe leaves unclear whether the Raven is telling the narrator the truth or giving voice to the narrator's own anxieties about having lost Lenore for good. Either way, the poem concludes on the pessimistic note that nothing can exist beyond death, that there is no "balm in Gilead."

Memory and Loss

Often, memories of the dead are presented as purely positive – as a way for the departed to continue to exist in the hearts and minds of those who remember them, and as a source of comfort for those who are still alive. “The Raven” flips this notion on its head, envisioning memories of a deceased loved one as a sorrowful, inescapable burden.

As the poem begins, the narrator is struggling to put his anguished memories of Lenore aside, and attempts to distract himself by reading. But the insistent rapping at his study door interrupts his efforts, and he opens his study door and seems to sense the presence of Lenore and hear a whisper of her name. That moment of hearing the knock on the door and opening it to an almost-there ghostly presence can be read as supernatural, but it is also a perfect metaphor for obsessive memories that continue to intrude into one’s thoughts and from which one can’t escape.

With the arrival of the raven, the narrator’s desire to escape from his sorrowful, overwhelming memories comes to seem even more unattainable. Because the narrator’s other friends and hopes “have flown before,” he at first reasonably expects that the Raven will do the same. But the bird remains a constant presence, becoming itself like memories of Lenore, ever-present and inescapable, and its cry of “Nevermore” enforces in the speaker a belief that he lacks the power to escape his memories.

In what may be read as another supernatural moment or as a manifestation of a final, desperate hope for relief, the narrator then perceives that the air grows dense, perfumed, and inhabited by “seraphim,” or angels. The narrator cries and cries, “Wretch, thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee/Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore! /Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe, and forget this lost Lenore.” In Homer’s Odyssey, “nepenthe” is a drug that erases memories, and so in this moment the narrator is hoping that even if he cannot help himself escape his memories, that some sort of divine intervention will intercede on his behalf. The raven, of course, answers only “Nevermore,” and in so doing quashes the narrator’s hope for escape from the torment of remembering his dead love. Memories of loss and sadness, the poem implies, can never be escaped, they flutter always in the brain, like a bird that will not leave a room.

The Supernatural and the Subconscious

"The Raven" is an example of Gothic literature, a genre that originated in 18th century England. Hallmarks of Gothic works include horror, death, the supernatural, and occasionally romance. Their characters are often highly emotional and secluded from society, living in dark, gloomy, medieval-like homes surrounded by wild natural landscapes. ("Gothic" refers to the architectural style of the residences in which these novels are set.) "The Raven" contains many elements that point to the narrative's Gothic nature: a lonely character in a state of deep emotion, the cold and dark of a midnight in December. The Raven itself, a seemingly demonic, talking bird that arrives at midnight, is the poem's most prominent example of the supernatural.

Gothic works — *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*, to name a few — tend to be ambiguous whether the supernatural events they describe are actually happening, or if these events are a product of their characters' subconscious. "The Raven," by leaving unresolved the question of whether the raven is the genuine presence of a supernatural force or a figment of the tortured narrator's imagination, fits squarely into this tradition.

At the start of the poem, the narrator is reading his books in a failed attempt to distract himself from his grief at the death of his beloved Lenore, and is drowsing off. He then describes himself as having been roused by a mysterious tapping at his door and senses the presence of his dead love Lenore, followed by the arrival of the raven through the window. Perhaps the raven truly has arrived, but the narrator's exhaustion leaves open the possibility that he has actually fallen more deeply asleep, and that the knock he hears signals the beginning of his entrance into a dream state. The raven and its repeated message of "nevermore" may be a supernatural visitation, or an expression of the narrator's loss and doubts, a nightmare from which the narrator can never fully awaken.

Ultimately, the poem does not take sides on whether its events should be interpreted as either entirely supernatural or entirely a result of the subconscious. In fact, the way it straddles and ties together the subconscious and supernatural helps to give the poem much of its power, depicting someone forced to confront the uncertainty, unknowability, and despair of losing a loved one, and having to face the profound and unanswerable question of death.

Rationality and Irrationality

In an essay titled "The Philosophy of Composition," in which Poe explained his writing of "The Raven," he describes the narrator as a scholar, a learned person devoted to rational

investigation. It is therefore natural for the speaker to attempt to escape his obsessive memories of his wife by reading "ancient lore," and when he senses Lenore's presence he comforts himself with the words "Nothing more" to assure himself that a ghost has not actually paid him a visit. Even after he meets the raven, he supposes that its first replies of "Nevermore" are only "stock and store," that the bird is only parroting a phrase it has heard before from a previous unhappy owner.

Put another way, the speaker attempts to respond to and understand the raven (and the world) in a rational manner. But the poem shows how the speaker's rationality can't cope with the profound irrationality of the raven and its responses, and even shows how the speaker's despair at the death of Lenore, and his desperate attempts to understand the raven rationally, leads him to a frantic irrationality of his own. Although the raven exerts no tangible power over the speaker, and in fact seems not even to notice the narrator's pained reactions to its constant message, the narrator nevertheless sees the bird as an ill omen of tragedy that means him harm. The speaker's obsession with his beloved's death is such that he immediately associates the bird's arrival with his memories of Lenore, in his despair making this connection without concrete evidence.

Further, it's important to note that the raven is gifted with speech, not conversation: no matter what the speaker says, whether to himself or directly to the bird, the raven responds, mechanically, with "Nevermore." The raven never addresses the subject of Lenore directly; it is the narrator who chooses to interpret its remarks in the context of his lost love. Considering that Poe envisioned the narrator as a scholar, it is possible to understand the narrator's reading of the raven's remarks as similar to how he might approach his books in that he performs a sort of literary analysis of the raven and its comments, viewing them as the denial of all his desires and hopes. The narrator, whose despair over death leads him to need to understand whether he might ever again hope to see Lenore, interprets that the raven is responding to him and is bringing him a message, but it is not at all clear that is the case. He attempts, over and over, to rationally make sense of a response that makes no sense – and, as the cliché goes, continuing to do the same thing with the hope of a different result is the definition of insanity.

Through the poem, the raven perches above a bust, or statue, of Pallas — a reference to Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom. This placement of the "nevermore"-spouting bird on top of the goddess of wisdom, suggests the victory of the irrational over the narrator's ability to think clearly and rationally. At the conclusion of the poem, the narrator describes seeing the

Raven still sitting upon the bust of Pallas, "never flitting." The image places irrationality above rationality, forever. One can therefore read "The Raven" as suggesting that the bird makes its eternal nest solely in the narrator's frantic mind. His irrational tendencies in the face of his lost Lenore, bordering on madness, make his rational approach moot, suggesting that the aftermath of an event as traumatizing as the death of one's beloved cannot be overcome with measured, sensible thinking.

Ancient Influences

Throughout the poem, Poe makes repeated references to classical mythology and the Bible — "ancient lore" such as what the narrator might have been studying at the beginning of the text. "Pallas," the bust on which the raven perches, is a reference to "Pallas Athena," the Greek goddess of wisdom. Like Pallas Athena, the raven hails from "the saintly days of yore." The bird's choice of landing place illustrates its relationship to ancient, divine, omniscient authority, solidifying a connection that the speaker makes explicit when he dubs the bird a "Prophet." Further, "Nepenthe" is described in Homer's Odyssey as a drug that erases memories, while the "Plutonian shores" are a reference to the god Pluto, the Roman equivalent of Hades in Greek mythology, who reigns over the underworld. The mention of "Gilead" refers to the Old Testament line in Jeremiah 8:22: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" and "Aidenn" refers to the Garden of Eden.

While these references help to establish the narrator as a scholar, they also allow Poe to anchor his poem to the classic literature of antiquity, lending "The Raven" the authoritative weight of Western literature's foundational texts. These references also suggest that what the narrator experiences is universal and timeless across all humanity, from the present back to the founding texts of Western literature. At the same time, the narrator's continued references to ancient literature suggest that — just as he is unable to divert his attention from his past with Lenore —he is mired in the past at large. His impulse to view his experiences in the context of these works is echoed by his impulse to view the raven and its antics in the context of Lenore. The past becomes the lens through which he perceives the present.

2. Passage to India: Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman: Biography

Walt Whitman was born in 1819 on Long Island (the Paumanok of many of his poems). During his early years he trained as a printer, then became a teacher, and finally a journalist

and editor. He was less than successful; his stridently radical views made him unpopular with readers. After an 1848 sojourn in the South, which introduced him to some of the variety of his country, he returned to New York and began to write poetry.

In 1855 he self-published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which at the time consisted of only twelve poems. The volume was widely ignored, with one significant exception. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote him a congratulatory letter, in which he offered his "greet[ings]... at the beginning of a great career." Whitman promptly published another edition of *Leaves of Grass*, expanding it by some twenty poems and appending the letter from Emerson, much to the latter's discomfort. 1860 saw another edition of a now much larger Leaves—containing some 156 poems—which was issued by a trade publisher.

Whitman's health had been shaky since the mid-1870s, and by 1891 it was clear he was dying. He therefore prepared his so-called "Deathbed" edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which contained two appendices of old-age poems as well as a review essay in which he tries to justify his life and work. The "Deathbed Edition" came out in 1892; Whitman died that year.

Whitman's lifetime saw both the Civil War and the rise of the United States as a commercial and political power. He witnessed both the apex and the abolition of slavery. His poetry is thus centred on ideas of democracy, equality, and brotherhood. In response to America's new position in the world, Whitman also tried to develop a poetry that was uniquely American, that both surpassed and broke the mould of its predecessors. *Leaves of Grass*, with its multiple editions and public controversies, set the pattern for the modern, public artist, and Whitman, with his journalistic endeavours on the side, made the most of his role as celebrity and artist.

Major Themes of Whitman

Whitman's major concern was to explore, discuss, and celebrate his own self, his individuality and his personality. Second, he wanted to eulogize democracy and the American nation with its achievements and potential. Third, he wanted to give poetical expression to his thoughts on life's great, enduring mysteries — birth, death, rebirth or resurrection, and reincarnation.

The Self

To Whitman, the complete self is both physical and spiritual. The self is man's individual identity, his distinct quality and being, which is different from the selves of other men, although

it can identify with them. The self is a portion of the one Divine Soul. Whitman's critics have sometimes confused the concept of self with egotism, but this is not valid. Whitman is constantly talking about "I," but the "I" is universal, a part of the Divine, and therefore not egotistic.

The Body and the Soul

Whitman is a poet of both these elements in man, the body and the soul. He thought that we could comprehend the soul only through the medium of the body. To Whitman, all matter is as divine as the soul; since the body is as sacred and as spiritual as the soul, when he sings of the body or its performances, he is singing a spiritual chant.

Nature

Whitman shares the Romantic poet's relationship with nature. To him, as to Emerson, nature is divine and an emblem of God. The universe is not dead matter, but full of life and meaning. He loves the earth, the flora and fauna of the earth, the moon and stars, the sea, and all other elements of nature. He believes that man is nature's child and that man and nature must never be disjoined.

Time

Whitman's concept of the ideal poet is, in a way, related to his ideas on time. He conceives of the poet as a time-binder, one who realizes that the past, present, and future are "not disjoined, but joined," that they are all stages in a continuous flow and cannot be considered as separate and distinct. These modem ideas of time have given rise to new techniques of literary expression — for example, the stream-of-consciousness viewpoint.

Cosmic Consciousness

Whitman believed that the cosmos, or the universe, does not consist merely of lifeless matter; it has awareness. It is full of life and filled with the spirit of God. The cosmos is God and God is the cosmos; death and decay are unreal. This cosmic consciousness is, indeed, one aspect of Whitman's mysticism.

Mysticism

Mysticism is an experience that has a spiritual meaning which is not apparent to the senses nor to the intellect. Thus mysticism, an insight into the real nature of man, God, and the

universe, is attained through one's intuition. The mystic believes in the unity of God and man, man and nature, God and the universe. To a mystic, time and space are unreal, since both can be overcome by man by spiritual conquest. Evil, too, is unreal, since God is present everywhere. Man communicates with his soul in a mystical experience, and Whitman amply expresses his responses to the soul in *Leaves of Grass*, especially in "Song of Myself." He also expresses his mystical experience of his body or personality being permeated by the supernatural. Whitman's poetry is his artistic expression of various aspects of his mystical experience.

Death

Whitman deals with death as a fact of life. Death in life is a fact, but life in death is a truth for Whitman; he is thus a poet of matter and of spirit.

Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism, which originated with German philosophers, became a powerful movement in New England between 1815 and 1836. Emerson's *Nature* (1836) was a manifesto of American transcendental thought. It implied that the true reality is the spirit and that it lies beyond the reach or realm of the senses. The area of sensory perceptions must be transcended to reach the spiritual reality. American transcendentalism accepted the findings of contemporary science as materialistic counterparts of spiritual achievement. Whitman's "Passage to India" demonstrates this approach. The romanticist in Whitman is combined with the transcendentalist in him. His quest for transcendental truths is highly individualistic and therefore his thought, like Emerson's, is often unsystematic and prophetic.

Personalism

Whitman used the term "personalism" to indicate the fusion of the individual with the community in an ideal democracy. He believed that every man at the time of his birth receives an identity, and this identity is his "soul." The soul, finding its abode in man, is individualized, and man begins to develop his personality. The main idea of personalism is that the person is the be-all of all things; it is the source of consciousness and the senses. One is because God is; therefore, man and God are one — one personality. Man's personality craves immortality because it desires to follow the personality of God. This idea is in accord with Whitman's notion of the self. Man should first become himself, which is also the way of coming closer to God. Man should comprehend the divine soul within him and realize his identity and the true relationship between himself and God. This is the doctrine of personalism.

Democracy

Whitman had a deep faith in democracy because this political form of government respects the individual. He thought that the genius of the United States is best expressed in the common people, not in its executive branch or legislature, or in its churches or law courts. He believed that it is the common folk who have a deathless attachment to freedom. His attitudes can be traced to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century because he thought that the source of evil lay in oppressive social institutions rather than in human nature. The function of literature is to break away from the feudal past of man and artistically to urge the democratic present. Princes and nobles hold no charm for Whitman; he sings of the average, common man. He follows Emerson in applauding the doctrine of the "divine average" and of the greatness of the commonplace. A leaf of grass, to Whitman, is as important as the heavenly motion of the stars. Whitman loves America, its panoramic scenery and its processional view of diverse, democratically inclined people. He loved, and revelled in, the United States as a physical entity, but he also visualized it as a New World of the spirit. Whitman is a singer of the self as well as a trumpeter of democracy because he believes that only in a free society can individuals attain self-hood.

Whitman emphasized individual virtue, which he believed would give rise to civic virtue. He aimed at improving the masses by first improving the individual, thus becoming a true spiritual democrat. His idea of social and political democracy — that all men are equal before the law and have equal rights — is harmonized with his concept of spiritual democracy — that people have immense possibilities and a measureless wealth of latent power for spiritual attainment. In fact, he bore with the failings of political democracy primarily because he had faith in spiritual democracy, in creating and cultivating individuals who, through comradeship, would contribute to the ideal society. This view of man and society is part of Whitman's poetic program.

About the Poem

"Passage to India" by Walt Whitman is a free verse poem that was published as a part of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's seminal work. *Leaves of Grass* was published multiple times throughout Whitman's life, as he made changes and editions, until his death in 1892. It was this piece that would inspire E.M Forster to write his 1924 novel, *A Passage to India*. Whitman was greatly impressed by three great engineering achievements: the opening of the Suez Canal

(1869), the laying of the transatlantic undersea cable (1866), and the joining of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads at Utah to produce the nation's first transcontinental railway (1869). These events resulted in improved communication and travel, thus making possible a shorter passage to India. But in Whitman's poem, the completion of the physical journey to India is only a prelude to the spiritual pathway to India, the East, and, ultimately, to God. "Passage to India" is a prime example of Whitman's transcendentalism and realism themes in his poems. The title suggests that the setting of the poem may be India; but India is used as a metaphor. The poem is set throughout time. From the beginning of time, to ancient history, to modern wonders and to the unexplored future; the poem covers and traverses it all.

Detailed Summary

The poet, in section 1, celebrates his time, singing of "the great achievements of the present," and listing "our modern wonders": the opening of the Suez Canal, the building of the great American railroad, and the laying of the transatlantic cable. Yet these achievements of the present have grown out of the past, "the dark unfathom'd retrospect." If the present is great, the past is greater because, like a projectile, the present is "impell'd by the past."

Here Whitman presents the world of physical reality, an antecedent to the world of spiritual reality. The essential idea in emphasizing the three engineering marvels is to indicate man's progress in terms of space. The space-time relationship is at the heart of the matter. The present is significant, but it is only an extension of the past and, therefore, its glories can be traced to times before. Man has mastered space, but he must enrich his spiritual heritage by evoking his past. His achievement in space will remain inadequate unless it is matched, or even surpassed, by his achievement in time and his spiritual values.

In section 2, Whitman envisages a passage to India which is illuminated by "Asiatic" and "primitive" fables. The fables of Asia and Africa are "the far-darting beams of the spirit," and the poet sings of the "deep diving bibles and legends." The spanning of the earth by scientific and technological means is only part of the divine scheme to have "the races, neighbours." The poet, therefore, sings of "a worship new," a spiritual passage to India.

The poet here identifies time with space and merges them in the realm of the spirit. Modern miracles of science are all part of a divine plan, of "God's purpose from the first." Thus the poet sings of a new religion which will combine the scientific achievements of the present with the spiritual attainments of the past.

Man's achievements in communications are shown in the portrayal of "tableaus twain" in section 3. The first tableau, or picture, is the first passage through the Suez Canal "initiated, open'd" by a "procession of steamships." The second picture is the journey of the railway cars "winding along the Platte" river to a junction of the Union and Central Pacific railroads. These two engineering achievements have given concrete shape to the dreams of the "Genoese," Columbus, "centuries after thou art laid in thy grave." Columbus dreamed of "tying the Eastern to the Western sea"; his ideal has now been fulfilled.

The underlying significance of the two events which Whitman describes here is to show that man's material advancement is only a means to his spiritual progress. The poet seems to master the vastness of space through his visionary power. And his thoughts also span time: modern achievements are a realization of Columbus' dream of linking East with West. His discovery of America was only a first step toward finding a shorter passage to India.

Section 4 tells how "many a captain" struggled to reach India. History seems like an underground stream which now and again rises to the surface. Thus Whitman praises Vasco da Gama, who discovered the sea route to India, and who thus accomplished the "purpose vast," the "rondure [rounding] of the world."

This is a tribute to the courage and adventurous spirit of the West in seeking a passage to India. The poet has a vision of history "as a rivulet running," and this dominates his sense of space. History is conceived of as a progression of continuous events which are like a flowing stream. This stream joins the spiritual sea and the poet's vision endows historical happenings with spiritual meaning.

Section 5 presents the spectacle of this earth "swimming in space," endowed with incredible beauty and power. Since the days of Adam and Eve, Whitman says, man has asked the meaning of life: "Who shall soothe these feverish children? / . . . Who speak the secret of impassive earth?' After the scientists and explorers have achieved their goals, the poet, who is "the true son of God," will forge the links of spiritual union. "Trinitas divine" will be achieved through the visionary power of the poet; he will fuse "Nature and Man."

The earth has been spanned by the efforts of engineers and technicians, Whitman says, and now it is for the poet to bring about the unity of East and West in the realm of the spirit. In his general survey of history, Whitman seems to encompass all time. The poet is the "true son

of God" because, in visualizing the union of man and nature, he responds to the divine call within him. He is thus a true explorer and a discoverer of spiritual India.

In section 6, the poet sings of the "marriage of continents." Europe, Asia, Africa, and America are dancing "as brides and bridegrooms hand in hand." The "soothing cradle of man" is India. The poet perceives India as an ancient land of history and legend, morals and religion, adventure and challenge. Brahma and Buddha, Alexander and Tamerlane, Marco Polo and other "traders, rulers, explorers" all shared in its history. "The Admiral himself" (Columbus) is the chief historian. The poet says the culmination of heroic efforts is deferred for a long time. But eventually their seeds will sprout and bloom into a plant that "fills the earth with use and beauty."

Here Whitman has explored the swift passage of time and has invoked the India of Buddha through the present achievement of the linkage of continents by modern technology. The poet thus becomes a time-binder. He also attempts to fuse the familiar with the unfamiliar and the physical with the spiritual. He stands "curious in time," but he also stands outside of time, in eternity, in his spiritual quest.

Section 7 confirms that a passage to India is indeed a journey of the soul "to primal thought." It is not confined to "lands and seas alone." It is a passage back to the Creation, to innocence, "to realms of budding bibles." Whitman is anxious for himself and his soul to begin their journey.

The language of section 7 is highly metaphorical. The return of the poet and his soul to the East is envisaged as a journey back to the cradle of mankind, to the East, where many religions had their birth. It is a journey "back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions." The poet and his soul seek a mystical experience of union with God in the realm of the spirit.

In section 8, the poet and his soul are about to "launch out on trackless seas" and to sail "on waves of ecstasy" singing "our song of God." The soul pleases the poet, and the poet pleases the soul, and they begin their spiritual exploration. They believe in God, "but with the mystery of God we dare not dally." They think "silent thoughts, of Time and Space and Death." The poet addresses God as "O Thou transcendent, / Nameless," as the source of light and cosmic design and a "moral, spiritual fountain." Whitman "shrivels at the thought of God, /At Nature and its wonders," but he expects the soul to bring about a harmonious reconciliation

with these forces. When the soul accomplishes its journey and confronts God, it will be as if it had found an older brother. It will finally melt "in fondness in his arms."

The last two sections of this poem are marked by an upsurge of spiritual thought and an ecstatic experience. The poet and his soul, like two lovers, are united in harmony. They seek the mystical experience of union with God. The poet reflects on the nature of God as a transcendental deity. By comprehending God, the poet is enabled to comprehend himself and also man's complex relationship with time, space, and death. The soul is eternal and establishes its relationship with time. The soul is vast and expansive, and thus forms a relationship with space. The soul is alive forever and thus conquers death.

In section 8, the poet and his soul together seek to perceive the Divine Reality. Both eagerly await a mystical experience of union with God, of merging with the Divine Being. God is conceived of as a "fountain" or "reservoir" and this image is similar to the basic metaphor of water, which is necessary to nourish the greenery" of *Leaves of Grass*.

In section 9, the journey which the soul embarks on is a passage to more than India." It is a challenging spiritual journey. Whitman asks the soul if it is ready: "Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?" The passage to the divine shores, to the "aged fierce enigmas," and to the "strangling problems" is filled with difficulty and "skeletons, that, living, never reach'd you" — but it is a thrilling journey. The poet, fired by the spirit of Columbus, is intent on seeking an "immediate passage" because "the blood burns in my veins." He "will risk . . . all" in this bold and thrilling adventure; but actually it is safe enough, for are they not all the seas of God"? Thus the passage to India — and more — is a journey of man through the seas of God in search of an ideal. It is marked by intense spiritual passion.

This last section presents the final evolution of the symbol of India, which began as a geographical entity and culminated in a timeless craving of man for the realization of God. The words "passage" and "India" both have an evolving symbolic meaning and significance in this richly evocative poem, and the growth of their meanings is indirectly the growth of the poem itself.

3. There is a Certain Slant of Light: Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson: Biography

Emily Dickinson's life has always fascinated people, even before she was famous for her poetry. She was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, a small farming village, on December 10, 1830, to Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson. Edward Dickinson was a well-respected lawyer and politician, descended from a prominent Amherst family; his father was a founder of Amherst College, where Edward was treasurer.

Emily was very active socially, and was considered well-liked and attractive. In her late twenties, though, she suddenly cut herself all from all society, never leaving her family's home, and started ferociously writing poetry. Although there is a long-standing myth that the catalyst for this was her falling in love with a man who rejected her, it is more likely that it was a combination of several factors.

She wrote prolifically, writing almost 1800 poems in her lifetime, but her genius was never recognized in her lifetime. She published only seven poems while alive, all anonymously, and all heavily edited. Only after her death from kidney disease in 1886 did her sister find her poems. Recognizing their genius, she convinced her brother's mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd, to help her publish them. The first book was published in 1890, and met with great success.

Major Themes of Dickinson

Death

Death is one of the foremost themes in Dickinson's poetry. No two poems have exactly the same understanding of death, however. Death is sometimes gentle, sometimes menacing, sometimes simply inevitable. In "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –," Dickinson investigates the physical process of dying. In "Because I could not stop for Death –, "she personifies death, and presents the process of dying as simply the realization that there is eternal life.

In "Behind Me dips – Eternity," death is the normal state, life is but an interruption. In "My life had stood – a Loaded Gun –," the existence of death allows for the existence of life. In "Some – Work for Immortality –," death is the moment where the speaker can cash their check of good behaviour for their eternal rewards. All of these varied pictures of death, however, do not truly contradict each other. Death is the ultimate unknowable, and so

Dickinson circles around it, painting portraits of each of its many facets, as a way to come as close to knowing it as she can.

Truth and its tenuous nature

Dickinson is fascinated and obsessed with the idea of truth, and with finding it in her poems. She knows that this is close to impossible—like "To fill a Gap" teaches, answering one question just leads to further questions—yet she also posits that a kind of truth can be found, if done so circuitously, as in "Tell all the Truth but tell it Slant –."

This is reflected in how she deals with all of her other themes. Her poems come back to these central themes again and again, but they are never treated in exactly the same way. She discovers new sides to each of them, comes at them from new angles, and by investigating each theme again and again in seemingly contradictory ways, she is finding the truth in her "Circuits."

Dickinson also clearly shows that truth is found more easily in negative or painful emotions. In "I like a look of Agony," she shows how she can only trust people who are dying, because that is the one thing that cannot be faked. Her own grief and others' is powerful to her, because, while it may not be pleasant, she has found something honest. And this drives her poetry—the experience of these painful emotions allows her to represent them faithfully, and thus write honest poetry.

Fame and success

Dickinson wrote many poems dealing with fame and success. These poems almost always elucidate the negative sides of these ostensibly positive things. In "I'm Nobody! Who are you?", to gain fame one must advertise oneself, use one's own name and identity as marketing tools. This fame, also, is made meaningless by the fact that its audience is an unthinking "Bog."

"Success is counted sweetest" – does not present quite so wholly negative a vision of fame and success. Success here, however, is dangerous, for it takes away the speaker's ability to appreciate that success. This represents a general lessening of the successful person's emotional realm, and if this success is in the field of poetry, that will certainly lead to weaker poems in the future.

This focus on the negatives of fame and success makes it seem like Dickinson did not want them for herself, that she was happier unpublished and unknown. This is belied, however, by the simple fact that she wrote about them so frequently. She may have known very well the dangers of them, but clearly still found fame and success enticing and fascinating.

Grief

Grief is virtually omnipresent in Dickinson's poetry. Other characters are few and far between in these poems, but grief is practically Dickinson's primary companion. When other people do appear, it is often only grief that allows Dickinson to feel connected to them. She only trusts people who display "a look of Agony," because it is the only emotion that she knows must be true - thus it is only with the dead and dying that Dickinson's wall of distrust collapses.

In "I measure every Grief I meet," grief does not just bring Dickinson closer to others because she can trust it, but rather because it is a bond between them, and knowing they are grieving too makes her burden of grief somewhat lighter. Thus, in "I like a look of Agony," and "I measure every Grief I meet," it is only grief that allows Dickinson to feel that she is a part of the community.

Dickinson also shows another positive side of grief—it gives her strength. In "I can wade Grief" – she makes it clear that happiness only intoxicates her, makes her stumble and ostensibly lose her great perceptive abilities. Grief, however, emboldens her, makes her able to face anything, and gives her the strength and perceptiveness to write the poetry that she does.

Faith

Dickinson's poetry is highly interested in faith, in God, in religion. The fact that she so often wrote in a traditionally religious hymnal stanza form emphasizes this fact. God is essential to her, yet she is unwilling to just accept the traditional dogma, and so explores other possibilities for faith in her poetry, just like while she follows stanza form, she breaks conventions of rhyme and punctuation.

Often, many of her poems about nature seem to be the most religious. "There's a certain Slant of light" – presents this light as almost a divine vision, and shows how nature can be very closely tied to God, yet can also distance the reader from him. "The Bat is dun, with wrinkled Wings" –, shows that it is the ugly, eccentric creatures who can bring us closest to an understanding of God.

Her poems never claim to any understanding of the divine, however. What she is most certain of is God's inscrutability. Indeed, it is only her relationship to Him that she can fully investigate. In many of her poems in which there is another figure besides the speaker, it is often unclear whether this figure is God or a lover, and these poems can often be read either way. This elucidates the profound closeness with God that Dickinson searched for.

Freedom through poetry

Poetry in Dickinson's poems is an expansive, greatly liberating force. In "They shut me up in Prose" –, society tries to limit the speaker to the acceptable female roles, shutting her in closets or in prose to prevent her from expressing herself. These limitations, however, only inspire her further, and fuel her to write her poetry. This they cannot limit, no matter how they try, for poetry is limitless, as she shows us in "I dwell in Possibility" – it is a house with no roof but the sky.

This metaphor of poetry as house also allows Dickinson to transform what oppresses her—those female tasks of running the household—into a setting for what frees her—her poetry. This metaphor also allows Dickinson to take possession of poetry—it is not solely a male vocation, in the realm of politics and wars, but also a female vocation, situated in the house and garden.

Intensity of emotion

Dickinson's poetry exhibits a profound intensity of emotion, and her poems also focus on this as a subject, extolling the virtues of such intensity. In "I like a look of Agony," she shows that only the most intense emotions can be trusted, can be exhibited for others with honesty—and thus, only the most intense emotions belong in poetry.

"Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?" shows, however, that while positive, this level of emotional intensity is neither easy to produce and experience, nor is it easy to observe. In this poem, the speaker must enact a painful forging process to refine her emotions to this heightened level, and while it is glorious, almost divine when she does, it is still a challenging thing for the reader to observe.

"The first Day's Night had come" shows just how dangerous such intensity of emotion can be; why the reader must "dare" to witness it. In this poem, the speaker's emotions are so overpowering that she cannot maintain a whole, incorporated identity, and she loses her mind.

Thus while most of Dickinson's poems extol the honesty in heightened emotions, we see that there is a risk in all of this.

About the Poem

"There's a Certain Slant of Light" was first published in 1890. However, in this edition, the poem was altered. It was published in its original form in 1955. The poem has four quatrains, which vary the hymn meter. Emily Dickinson is known for her unusual use of punctuation, and "There's a Certain Slant of Light" is an example of that. The poem has several main themes like nature, and the importance of its meaning, God and religion, alienation and loneliness, and death.

Detailed Summary

The poem focuses only on the effect of a certain kind of light that the speaker notices on winter afternoons. It quickly becomes clear that this is not going to be a poem extolling nature or winter light's virtues, for this light "oppresses." What kind of oppression this is, exactly, is what the rest of the poem describes? In the first stanza it is described as "like the Heft/Of Cathedral Tunes" –, which is not a common simile for something oppressive, making it clear that this light's oppression is of a complicated nature.

This slant of light gives a "Heavenly Hurt" to the observer of it—that is, something that causes no outwardly visible damage ("We can find no scar"), but instead causes a mental or spiritual change ("But internal difference, / Where the Meanings, are"). This change cannot be induced through teaching ("None may teach it – Any"); instead, it must be experienced. Though it is "Despair," it is an "imperial affliction," that is, a regal or royal affliction, that although painful, leads to an uplifting.

It is powerful enough that even nature notices its presence ("When it comes, the Landscape listens – "), and its departure allows for a preternatural understanding of death ("When it goes, 'tis like the Distance / On the look of Death").

Analysis

The poem very closely describes a fairly common theme of Dickinson's—that of change as a fearful but illuminating process, both painful and essential. Here this awe of change is embodied in the "certain Slant of light" that becomes the place of departure for the

transformation. This slant of light is oppressive, but this is no simple, purely negative oppression, it is instead oppressive like “the Heft/Of Cathedral Tunes”.

The choice of “heft” here, instead of “weight,” which would actually have fit the rhyme scheme more closely, emphasizes the paradoxically uplifting aspect of this oppression, because while “weight” gives the reader solely an image of a downward force, “heft” implies a movement upward, albeit a difficult one. Thus while this slant of light is oppressive, while it creates difficulty for the speaker, the diction makes it clear that it is also uplifting.

This makes the surprising use of the simile of the “Cathedral Tunes” more understandable, as this seems to fit in with Dickinson’s views of religion. Faith, religion, and God are not easy for her; instead, they have a great difficulty, an oppressiveness, about them, and they cause “Heavenly hurt”—the importance of the adjective here is emphasized in the alliteration, and the flipped syntax of the line, opening with the direct object instead of the subject. This difficulty is, however, one that leads to greater understanding, and thus perhaps uplifts her, and in so doing takes her closer to God.

The importance of this painful transformation becomes even clearer in the third stanza. Here we see that its lessons cannot be taught, but must be lived; the emphasis of “Any” at the end of the first line of this stanza makes this very clear. And it is a “Seal of Despair – / An imperial affliction.” The close proximity of “Seal” and “imperial” make this experience into something that brings she who experiences it onto another level -- into a select, almost royal group of those marked by it.

This painful transformation has a better side to it implied throughout the poem, a certain uplifting that makes it worthwhile, that makes those who have lived through it members of a select club. However, the final stanza ends this transformation, and in so doing, leaves the day much closer to ending and the observer much closer to death, the word with which the poem itself closes. Yet death is balanced closely with life, as is shown by the fact that “death” rhymes with “breath,” an obvious symbol for life, earlier in the stanza, so even this death is not purely negative.

4. Home Burial: Robert Frost

Robert Frost: Biography

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco on March 26, 1874 to William Prescott Frost, Jr., a journalist and zealous Democrat; and Isabelle Moodie, a Scottish schoolteacher. A descendant of early British colonist Nicholas Frost, Frost's father was originally based in New England, but worked as a teacher and an editor of the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* in California.

In 1894, Frost sold his first professional poem to *The Independent* for fifteen dollars. He also had five poems privately printed. Despite his academic success, Frost had to leave Harvard before obtaining a degree in order to support his growing family. Frost's grandfather had given the couple a small farm in New Hampshire as a wedding present before his death, and Frost and White promptly relocated. For the next nine years, Frost would write poetry in the early morning hours and then work on the farm for the rest of the day; it was during this period that he wrote many of his most famous poems.

By the last decade of his life, Frost had achieved a coveted position as one of the most prominent poets in the United States. Among his many awards and honours, Frost received tributes from the American Academy of Poets (1953) and New York University (1956), and four Pulitzer Prizes, as well as the Congressional Gold Medal (1962) and the Edward MacDowell Medal (1962). In additional, he was an honoured guest at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and was invited to travel to the Soviet Union as a member of a goodwill group in 1962. On January 20, 1963, Frost died of complications from surgery.

The subtle wit of Frost's language, his broad humour, and his frequent despair are too often overlooked for his regional-ness, his folksiness, and his public persona. The neglect of his true talents was compounded by the fact that serious criticism for so long did its best to ignore him. Though perhaps influenced by, or in agreement with, statements by Imagists, Frost nonetheless belonged to no school; he worked outside of movements and manifestos to create his own sizeable niche in English literature.

Major Themes of Robert Frost

Nature

Frost places a great deal of importance on Nature in all of his collections. Because of the time he spent in New England, the majority of pastoral scenes that he describes are inspired by specific locations in New England. However, Frost does not limit himself to stereotypical pastoral themes such as sheep and shepherds. Instead, he focuses on the dramatic struggles that occur within the natural world, such as the conflict of the changing of seasons (as in "After Apple-Picking") and the destructive side of nature (as in "Once by the Pacific"). Frost also presents the natural world as one that inspires deep metaphysical thought in the individuals who are exposed to it (as in "Birches" and "The Sound of Trees"). For Frost, Nature is not simply a background for poetry, but rather a central character in his works.

Communication

Communication, or the lack thereof, appears as a significant theme is several of Frost's poems, as Frost presents it as the only possible escape from isolation and despair. Unfortunately, Frost also makes it clear that communication is extremely difficult to achieve. For example, in "Home Burial," Frost describes two terrible events: the death of a child and the destruction of a marriage. The death of the child is tragic, but inability of the husband and wife to communicate with each other and express their grief about the loss is what ultimately destroys the marriage. Frost highlights this inability to communicate by writing the poem in free verse dialogue; each character speaks clearly to the reader, but neither is able to understand the other. Frost explores a similar theme in "Acquainted with the Night," in which the narrator is unable to pull himself out of his depression because he cannot bring himself even to make eye contact with those around him. In each of these cases, the reader is left with the knowledge that communication could have saved the characters from their isolation. Yet, because of an unwillingness to take the steps necessary to create a relationship with another person, the characters are doomed.

Everyday Life

Frost is very interested in the activities of everyday life, because it is this side of humanity that is the most "real" to him. Even the most basic act in a normal day can have numerous hidden meanings that need only to be explored by a poetic mind. For example, in the poem "Mowing," the simple act of mowing hay with a scythe is transformed into a discussion

of the value of hard work and the traditions of the New England countryside. As Frost argues in the poem, by focusing on "reality," the real actions of real people, a poet can sift through the unnecessary elements of fantasy and discover "Truth." Moreover, Frost believes that the emphasis on everyday life allows him to communicate with his readers more clearly; they can empathize with the struggles and emotions that are expressed in his poems and come to a greater understanding of "Truth" themselves.

Isolation of the Individual

This theme is closely related to the theme of communication. The majority of the characters in Frost's poems are isolated in one way or another. Even the characters who show no sign of depression or loneliness, such as the narrators in "The Sound of Trees" or "Fire and Ice," are still presented as detached from the rest of society, isolated because of their unique perspective. In some cases, the isolation is a far more destructive force. For example, in "The Lockless Door," the narrator has remained in a "cage" of isolation for so many years, that he is too terrified to answer the door when he hears a knock. This heightened isolation keeps the character from fulfilling his potential as an individual and ultimately makes him a prisoner of his own making. Yet, as Frost suggests, this isolation can be avoided by interactions with other members of society; if the character in "The Lockless Door" could have brought himself to open the door and face an invasion of his isolation, he could have achieved a greater level of personal happiness.

Duty

Duty is a very important value in the rural communities of New England, so it is not surprising that Frost employs it as one of the primary themes of his poetry. Frost describes conflicts between desire and duty as if the two must always be mutually exclusive; in order to support his family, a farmer must acknowledge his responsibilities rather than indulge in his personal desires. This conflict is particularly clear in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," when the narrator expresses his wish to stay in the woods and watch the snow continue to fall. However, he is unable to deny his obligation to his family and his community; he cannot remain in the woods because of his "promises to keep," and so he continues on his way. Similarly, in "The Sound of Trees," Frost describes a character who wants to follow the advice of the trees and make the "reckless" decision to leave his community. At the end of the

poem, the character does not choose to leave (yet), because his sense of duty to those around him serves as the roots that keep him firmly grounded.

Rationality versus Imagination

This theme is similar to the theme of duty, in that the hardworking people whom Frost describes in his poetry are forced to choose between rationality and imagination; the two cannot exist simultaneously. The adults in Frost's poetry generally maintain their rationality as a burden of duty, but there are certain cases when the hint of imagination is almost too seductive to bear. For example, in "Birches," the narrator wishes that he could climb a birch tree as he did in his childhood and leave the rational world behind, if only for a moment. This ability to escape rationality and indulge in the liberation of imagination is limited to the years of childhood. After reaching adulthood, the traditions of New England life require strict rationality and an acceptance of responsibility. As a result of this conflict, Frost makes the poem "Out, Out", even more tragic, describing a young boy who is forced to leave his childhood behind to work at a man's job, and ultimately dies in the process.

Rural Life versus Urban Life

This theme relates to Frost's interest in Nature and everyday life. Frost's experience growing up in New England exposed him to a particular way of life that seemed less complicated and yet more meaningful than the life of a city dweller. The farmers whom Frost describes in his poetry have a unique perspective on the world as well as a certain sense of honour and duty in terms of their work and their community. Frost is not averse to examining urban life in his poetry; in "Acquainted with the Night," the narrator is described as being someone who lives in a large city. However, Frost has more opportunities to find metaphysical meaning in everyday tasks and explore the relationship between mankind and nature through the glimpses of rural life and farming communities that he expresses in his poetry. Urban life is "real," but it lacks the quality and clarity of life that is so fascinating to Frost in his work.

About the Poem

"Home Burial" was written and published in 1914. In this dramatic narrative, Frost has depicted a critical situation arising between a husband and wife over the death of their son. There is the drama of social adjustment in human relationship. The son dies. This breaks the wife completely. She is standing at the top of the staircase and peeps through the window and sees that her husband is digging the grave of the child. On returning home, he talks of daily

concerns. This further strengthens the wife's conviction that her husband is not touched by the tragedy at all. The rest of the poem depicts the further tensions between the duo. It is a highly suggestive poem, and the title is the most significant, since it does not only tell us something about the burial of the dead child, but also about the burial of domestic peace.

Detailed Summary

"He saw her from the bottom of the stairs… And her face changed from terrified to dull."

Amy is looking at something in fear. She takes a step downward hesitatingly, but then retraces if to come back to the height and look at the object. The husband advances towards her and asks what it is that she keeps always looking at from there. He insists on knowing about it, Amy turns and bends on her knees. Her face, which looked terrified till now, becomes dull-looking.

He said to gain time: 'What is it you see,'… 'You don't,' she challenged. 'Tell me what it is.'

The husband asks her again as to what it is that she looks at. He mounts the stairs just above her, and asks her to tell him about the object, because he will anyhow find it out. Amy remains silent, and does not help him by telling him. She lets him look and find for himself, thinking that he would not be able to see or find what it was that she has kept looking at. Thinking him to be blind to her feelings and troubles, she is sure that he cannot find anything. For a moment, the husband cannot see anything. But then he murmurs 'Oh' as if to indicate that he has found it out. Amy asks what it is, the husband says that now we can see it. Amy remarks to him that he cannot find out what is there she looks at, and challenges him to tell her, if he knows, what he has found out.

'The wonder is I didn't see at once… 'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she cried.

The husband says to Amy that it is a surprising thing that he could not guess earlier about what it was she looked at. Since he was accustomed to looking at the object and other things, he never noticed it particularly. It was the small graveyard or burial plot where his people were buried. The graveyard is so small that the whole of it can be seen through the widow. It is not larger than a bedroom. There are three stones of slate and one of marble, 'Broad-shouldered' little slabs there in the sunlight/on the side-hill. However, they need not pay attention to these. It is not these grave-stones, remarks the husband, but the 'child's mound'

or the heap of stones and earth meant to be the grave of the child that she keeps looking at. At this Amy cries to him not to talk about or mention the child's grave.

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm…I don't know rightly whether any man can.'

Amy slips from beneath the arms of her husband that are resting on the railings, and starts going downstairs. She turns to him and casts a fearful glance at him. He asks her twice whether a man is not entitled to speak about his own dead child. Amy replies that at least he has no such right. Then she asks about her hat and tells her husband that she was to go out of that place so as to get air in the open. She also remarks that she does not definitely know whether any insensitive man has the right to talk about this matter.

Amy! Don't go to someone else this time…Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

The husband asks Amy not to go to anyone else, but to listen to him. Saying that he will not come down the stairs, he sits there putting his chin between his fists. He tells her that he wants to ask her something. Amy replies that he does not know how to ask it. The husband asks her to help him do it. Instead of responding to his request, Amy moves to the door and moves the latch as if to go out.

'My words are nearly always an offense…But two that do can't live together with them.'

The husband remarks to Amy that his words seem to offend her, and that he does not know how to speak in a way or use the words in such a way as to please her. But he can, he says, learn how to do so. He cannot say that he understands all the things just now. Sometimes a man must cease to behave like a man with a woman in a hardy manly manner, and be sensitive enough to appreciate her feelings. He further suggests that they, the husband and the wife, should have an arrangement under which the husband should not try to know anything that the wife doesn't want tell him about. Those who love each other do not need have any such secrets between them; but those who do not love, cannot live together without having some secrets between them and something to hide from each other.

She moved the latch a little. 'Don't—don't go…You'd think his memory might be satisfied—'

Amy moves the latch a little to open the door. Her husband entreats her not to go to tell or consult somebody else about her trouble. He asks her to tell him about it and let him share

it. He explains to her that he is not different from other people; but if she keeps herself aloof from him, he will be proved to be so. He requests her to give him a chance to prove his sincerity of his grief over the child's death, although she may be feeling it more than he. He asks her what it is that has made her take the loss of her child 'so inconsolably', in spite of the love he bears for her which may compensate for the loss and make her satisfied.

'There you go sneering now!'…A man can't speak of his own child that's dead.'

Amy misinterprets her husband's consolatory words and comments that he is mocking her. The husband assures her that he is not doing so. He tells that he is annoyed with her comment and that he will come down to her to prevent her from going out. Commenting on her bluntness and stubbornness, he remarks what kind of a woman she is that she does not even allow him to talk about his own dead child.

'You can't because you don't know how to speak…Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.'

Amy replies that he cannot speak about his own dead child because he does not know how to speak to express his grief. If he had any feelings for the child, how could he, she asks, dig its grave with his own hands with his own hands. She tells that she herself saw him digging pieces of stones, making them leap in the air and fall down to form to do. She tells him that she asked herself who this man was who was digging the grave, was-he seemed such a strange or an abnormal man to her. She came downstairs again to look at him again, lifting his spade for digging the grave. Then, she tells him, he comes to the kitchen. Amy heard his voice and she came there to see him with her own eyes. There he was sitting, with his shoes stained and soiled by 'the fresh earth' from his own 'baby's grave.' He was talking about daily routine matters as if nothing important had happened. She saw that he had put his spade outside against the wall in the entrance.

'I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed…I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed.'

Listening to his wife's brutally accusing words, the husband feels like laughing the worst laughter. He remarks that he really believes that he cursed by his wife. If he does not believe him to be cursed, that will make him feel cursed.

'I can repeat the very words you were saying…If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!'

Amy tells her husband that she can repeat the words spoken by him at that time to console her. He had said then that 'three foggy mornings and one rainy day' can damage or rot the best and strongest birch fence that a man may have set up. That is, even the greatest grief can be forgotten with the passage of time. Amy says that she is surprised to see how a man could talk about the damage to birch fences especially in a room where there are no such fences. In fact, it is meant that he did not care for the death of his child. Disgusted over the way of the world and the behaviour of her husband, Amy remarks that even the closest friends do not mourn a man's death long and deeply enough.

Their sorrow over the death is so short-lived that they might as well not feel it at all. From the time a man falls ill and is confined to bed, he remains alone, and when he dies he is all the more alone. Friends follow him to the grave only for show or social decorum, and before he is buried in it, their minds turn away from the dead and they begin thinking about their worldly affairs and about living people around them, or about the things they understand or are concerned with in life. All grief is thus short-lived. Amy regards such behaviour of the world as an evil. She says that if it lies in her power, she will not allow grief to be so short-lived.

'There, you have said it all and you feel better…I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will! —'

Having listened to Amy's statement, her husband remarks that since she has expressed her views, she must feel better and that she should not go out now. He asks her to close the door, because he does not want somebody who is coming down the road to see her in that condition. But Amy is not satisfied with mere talk or words of her husband since she has been disgusted over his behaviour. She says she must go out somewhere, and she opens the door to do so. The husband asks her where she intends to go. He tells her to understand that if she goes out, he will follow her band bring her back even forcibly.

Analysis

In terms of form, this poem is a dramatic or pastoral lyric poem, using free-form dialogue rather than strict rhythmic schemes. Frost generally uses five stressed syllables in each line and divides stanzas in terms of lines of speech.

The poem describes two tragedies: first, the death of a young child, and second, the death of a marriage. As such, the title "Home Burial," can be read as a tragic double entendre. Although the death of the child is the catalyst of the couple's problems, the larger conflict that destroys the marriage is the couple's inability to communicate with one another. Both characters feel grief at the loss of the child, but neither is able to understand the way that their partner chooses to express their sorrow.

The setting of the poem – a staircase with a door at the bottom and a window at the top – automatically sets up the relationship between the characters. The wife stands at the top of the stairs, directly in front of the window overlooking the graveyard, while the husband stands at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at her. While the couple shares the tragedy of their child's death, they are in conflicting positions in terms of dealing with their grief.

With her position closest to the window, the wife is clearly still struggling with her grief over the loss of her baby. Incapable of moving on at this point in her life, the wife defines her identity in terms of the loss and would rather grieve for the rest of her life than grieve as a sort of pretence. The husband has dealt with his sorrow more successfully, as evidenced by his position at the bottom of the staircase, close to the door and the outside world. As a farmer, the husband is more accepting of the natural cycle of life and death in general, but also chooses to grieve in a more physical manner: by digging the grave for his child. Ironically, the husband's expression of his grief is completely misunderstood by the wife; she views his behaviour as a sign of his callous apathy.

Ultimately, each character is isolated from the other at opposite ends of the staircase. In order for the marriage to succeed, each character must travel an equal distance up or down the staircase in order to meet the other. The husband attempts to empathize with his wife, moving up the staircase toward her and essentially moving backward in his own journey towards acceptance of his child's death. Even so, the wife is unable to empathize with her husband and only moves down the staircase after he has already left his position at the foot.

When the wife moves down the staircase, she assumes the upper hand in the power struggle between the two by ensuring that her husband cannot move between her and the door and stop her from leaving. Without the physical capacity to keep her from leaving, the husband must attempt to convince her to stay through communication - something that, as the poem demonstrates, has been largely unsuccessful throughout their marriage.

5. The Emperor of Ice Cream: Wallace Stevens

Wallace Stevens: Biography

Wallace Stevens was among the most revered leaders of the 20th century Modernist movement in American poetry. His stylistically precise, philosophically dense poems reconcile gaudy everyday life with highly abstracted journeys of thought. Stevens' body of work now ranks him as one of the greatest American poets of his age, alongside T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Ezra Pound. Compared to these contemporaries, especially the firebrand Pound, Stevens' poetic career had a slow and quiet start, but his reputation continued to grow throughout his life. Harold Bloom, a leading literary scholar, has called him "the best and most representative American poet of our time" and "a vital part of the American mythology."

Stevens was born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania, the son of a wealthy lawyer. A defining shift in Stevens' life came in 1916, when he moved to Hartford, Connecticut to a new job with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, where he would remain the rest of his life. The first few years in Connecticut proved a fruitful period, resulting in his ground-breaking debut collection, *Harmonium*, in 1923. *Harmonium* contained many of what would become Stevens' defining works: "Sunday Morning," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "The Snow Man," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and "The Emperor of Ice Cream," among many others.

The complex, hyper-attentive observations in his poems garnered some immediate praise from fellow poets, but many critics dismissed his work and its tendency to exclude the realm of reality in favour of nuanced mental experiments. John Gould Fletcher expressed worries that Stevens "must either expand his range to take in more of human experience, or give up writing altogether," calling *Harmonium* a book "which does not permit a sequel."

Stevens produced five more poetry collections: *Owl's Clover* (1936), revised as *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937); *Parts of a World* (1942); *Transport to Summer* (1947); and *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), which received the National Book Award. Stevens' interest in long poems increased steadily, beginning with "The Comedian as the Letter C" in *Harmonium* and continuing with poems such as *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942) and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" in *The Auroras of Autumn*. His investment in complex philosophical explorations of perception and metaphysics likewise continued to deepen. His *Collected Poems*

in 1955 was awarded his second National Book Award as well as the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Stevens passed away in August of 1955 and was buried in Hartford.

About the Poem

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" was originally published in 1922. It was included in Stevens' 1923 debut collection, *Harmonium*. This poem exemplifies the blend of mundane everyday reality and metaphysical philosophy that marks Stevens' work and has earned him a place as one of America's 20th century master poets.

In a 1933 letter, Stevens picked "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" as his favourite of his poems, because it "wears a deliberately commonplace costume, and yet seems to me to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry." This gaudiness shines through in the first of the poem's two stanzas, depicting a joyous, youthful scene with ice cream and flowers. Not until the second stanza does the poem reveal that the occasion is a wake, a gathering for a recently deceased woman.

Through an ironic juxtaposition of vivacity and death, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" implicitly asks how life and death can coexist. The poem encourages its readers to strip away the appearances of both, and confront bare reality, which is full of the delightful, lustful, crude energies of life.

Detailed Summary

A big, muscular man who rolls cigars enters the scene, and begins whipping up ice cream in a kitchen. The ice cream curds evoke desire, and there are girls hanging around in the kitchen with boys who carry flowers in old newspaper. Bare reality should take precedence over any fuss about appearances: the poem urges us to let the young people live in the moment.

The second stanza switches scene to a quieter room, perhaps a bedroom. An embroidered sheet is taken from an old dresser to cover the dead body of a woman, but it is not long enough, and leaves her knobby feet exposed. The woman is cold and motionless under the light. The poem ends by re-asserting the supremacy of ice cream and the pure, present reality it represents.

Analysis

"The Emperor of Ice-Cream" is the most popular poem of Wallace Stevens. Stevens "plots" this story into two equal stanzas: one for the kitchen where the ice cream is being made,

and another for the bedroom where the corpse awaits decent covering. He "plots" it further by structuring the poem as a series of commands from an unknown master of ceremonies, directing, in a diction of extreme oddness, the neighbours in their funeral duties.

Both the symbolic kitchen stanza and the symbolic bedroom stanza end with the same third-order refrain echoed by the title. "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream." The title, in simple words, means something like this: since life is like ice-cream, the ruling standard of life and its reality is the emperor of that fact itself; therefore, enjoy life as you'd enjoy ice-cream itself.

The title reflects that human beings are no more resistant to death than ice cream is to the sun. The poet speaks in the voice of a man (the poet's spokesman), addressing the neighbours to carry out the funeral in certain ways. It is common in some communities to satisfy the dead in this way, with food and drink, after a time of mourning. This is common in tribal communities; and it is suggested that Stevens has based the poem on his experience of Canadian tribes, or maybe on some Red Indian American tribe.

The poem begins with the neighbour's confident command to the other people; he is giving instructions as to how to conduct the funeral (wake). In the first stanza, the man calls for a person muscular enough to whip up desserts by hand; perhaps there is not enough money for an expensive mixer. People must eat and drink when they arrive the poor woman's house to attend her "wake" and funeral. This implies that we need not grieve and fast, and torture the living when one has died. The desserts will have to be served in kitchen cups; there is no fine china or crystal. The common people who will attend will come in their everyday clothes, rather than formal attire; the flowers will be brought in last month's newspapers, rather than in vases, or as garlands. All these details suggest that there is nothing fanciful, nothing romantic, or nothing special about death and its aftermath; indeed, death is too ordinary and natural to be shocking. Stevens avoids the euphemisms and denials that often accompany the details and descriptions of death. From the second stanza, the poem continues with the preparations. The man asks someone to take a sheet from the top of a broken dresser to cover the dead woman's face; even if that means that her ugly feet will protrude from the too short covering. Instead of lighting soft and dim candles, the bright light should be turned to glare on her body, to show that she is now cold and silent in death. Stevens is insisting that one must look directly at death, in all its mater-of- factness, and see it not as a state of some mystical or spiritual transformation, but rather as actual fact to be faced and dealt with. To romanticize death is to invite more grief

than less. The wake (ceremony) takes place in the woman's own house, rather than in a church; and the preparation are inexpensive and minimal, including making the food in her own kitchen; this reflects Stevens's insistence that death should not be romanticized, idealized, or sentimentalized. Perhaps if death will inevitably melt everyone away to nothing, no matter how tasty or delicious they may be while alive, in terms of the ice-cream metaphor. So, in the classic tradition of *carpe diem*, one should seize the day while one is able to do so.

The central image in "The Emperor or Ice-Cream" is complex, ambiguous and ambivalent. The emperor of ice-cream is further specified as the only "emperor". Death is, as everyone present can see, the end of life, a natural and inevitable thing. The poem ends by repeating this statement: "the only emperor is the emperor of ice- cream"; with the title and the two refrains, the enigmatic-looking statement is repeated three times, for emphasis, in the poem. These are two possible interpretations of the ice cream: one that the emperor is life, the other that he is dead. Ice cream is tasty, transitory, and cold: life may be tasty and perishable, but is not cold. The quality of coldness may suit death, for it is cold but scarcely transitory, unless we assume than Stevens believes in an afterlife, which he doesn't. This mixture and complication of the implications in the meaning of the image of ice-cream seems to suggest that life and death are inextricable bound and blended together. Whoever the emperor is, he is more real than the run-of-the-mill emperors. Ice cream is both death and life.

Themes

Life and Death

The poem's primary contrast is the proximity of life and death, energy versus stasis, potential versus impotence. Stevens is far from the first poet to suggest that we can best appreciate life by juxtaposing it with death—such was a favourite topic of John Keats and his contemporaries—but "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" departs from the Romantic vision of life's sublime beauty, offering instead a realistic picture of its messy, crude energies. After facing the cold fact of the dead body, the poem's speaker seems to conclude that we must accept life at face value. In Stevens' words from a 1951 letter, "The final reality is not death but life, as it is, without any pretences."

Ordinary objects

The poem gives great importance to physical objects: ice cream, flowers in newspaper, dresser knobs, an embroidered sheet, and a lamp. It suggests that by examining mundane items

as evidence of the lives of the people using them, we can learn something about life. Stevens wrote in a letter, “The point of [“The Emperor of Ice-Cream”] is to isolate and make crisp the commonplace.” Certain objects in the poem become linked with life, some with death, and the poem seems to claim that we can make sense of reality by stripping it down to a set of basic physical components.

Youth

The age of the wenches and boys in the kitchen is unclear, but they embody a youthful energy that contrasts with the dead woman. Stevens’ choice to depict dallying young people waiting for ice cream suggests that their carefree sensuality contains the essence of life, as it contrasts most with death.

Lust and Desire

Lust and desire appear in far more places than we would expect in a poem about a funeral, most notably in the “concupiscent curds.” This tone inflects how the characters appear, and highlights the romantic potential energy buzzing in the kitchen among the muscular man, the wenches, and the boys. The poem makes these energies central to everyday life, and thus they appear strikingly once we examine life plainly with all pretence stripped away.

Passing of time

The passage of time is implied in the poem through “last month’s newspapers” and the aging wood dresser whose owner never got around to replacing its missing knobs. Though the poem’s setting spans only a few moments in a limited space, these details help situate the scene in the broader stream of time. The newspapers, already obsolete, are reminders that time is fleeting, and that youthful love, such as the boys might be pursuing, is transitory and full of lost moments. The woman’s dresser signifies the human work undone by time or left incomplete at the end of a life: all the more reason to return to the ice cream party and appreciate life in all its mundanity.

6. **Buffalo Bill: e e cummings**

e e cummings: Biography

Edward Estlin Cummings, born on October 14, 1894, grew up to become the Harvard graduate who seized the occasion of his commencement speech to introduce his plans to make a name for himself as a poet in the then-scandalous Modernist artistic movement. Those plans

would be forged by experiences as a military ambulance driver in France before America's entry into the war and return to Paris as an art student following the war. Those incidents planted the seed for Cummings to embark upon a lifelong production of poetry that attacked the very conventions of the literary form with as much as vigour as those soldiers hit the battlefield to change the course of history. In the face of a breakdown of confidence in many of the principles that had established conventions and form, the poems of e e cummings would become creative experiments that compelled his ever-expanding readership to reconsider all they had come to expect as obligatory material for the construction of poetry. When reading a poem by e e cummings no literary aspect is sacred, from diction used in recitation right down to the mechanical aspect of how the letters are formatted when the poem is printed:

On assignment for Vanity Fair magazine in 1926, e e cummings began traveling around the world and set a routine for himself that would become an essential part of the rest of the life and further reinforce his commitment not only to poetry, but to artistic pursuits ranging from prose to painting. Along the way to his death in 1962, cummings would become one of the most commercially popular poets in American history.

Despite this progressive aspect of his poems, however, critical appreciation for e e cummings would never stretch as wide a net as his popularity among those who read poetry with a less critical eye. While perhaps only Robert Frost can lay claim to being more widely read among 20th century American poets, the status of cummings as a serious poet whose work is given the same type of scholarly attention as T.S. Eliot has lagged to the point where arguments are even made as to whether he truly belonged to the Modernist movement.

Nevertheless, many of the poems collected in this representative volume are responsible for cumming becoming a recipient the Shelley Memorial Award, the Levinson Prize and the Bollingen Prize. So, while it may be true that cummings may not yet have gotten the critical accolades so many of his fans believe is certainly his due, it would be a mistake to suggest that his poetry has not be recognized as having critical value to the extent that he is firmly located within the vanguard of the movement which revolutionized all aspects of poetry following the horrors and awakened consciousness brought about by World War I.

That awakened consciousness brought on by the horrors of war resulted in several poems found within this collection that masterfully exemplifies the means by which cummings is capable of combining the experimentation and traditionalism within a Modernist aesthetic to

transcend both. Many of the poems exhibit some of the more avant-garde techniques of playing with structure and punctuation to be found throughout cummings' canon.

Major Themes of e e cummings

The "I" in Team

A common theme running throughout the entirety of the canon of cummings, is heralding the individual as part of the fabric society. The most common literary device that he uses to convey this theme is capitalization. cummings is, of course, famous for unconventional capitalization and utilization of the first person pronoun reference is almost universally written as a lower case "I" instead of the traditional upper case. This choice is a conscious indicator by the poet of both the subjugation of the self into his role as part of the community. and the struggle that a person faces to express individuality. The choice is not intended to be read as a political statement; cummings is not fostering communist collectivism through unconventional capitalization any more than he is advocating anarchism, but is rather addressing form as function. The form of the modest lower case first person pronoun follows the function of a more expansive theme that society is dependent upon the imagination of the individual's contribution to the evolution of society rather than individuality existing as merely a narcissistic expression of selfishness.

Making Language Submissive to Communication

The poetry of e e cummings is immediately and obviously more unconventional that most poetry. The lack of punctuation, a rebellion against the rules of capitalization even experimentation with spacing between words all serve to lend his poetry an experimental quality. cummings feels free to create words when none exists that properly conveys his meaning. Poetry is literary form that has always been dependent upon breaking rules, but even when those rules are being broken they usually also simultaneously conform to specific rules of poetry like rhythm, rhyme and meter. For cummings, such constrictions are just another way in which language acts as a stranglehold on communication, forcing the poet to mangle the transmission in order to conform. The playfulness of structure, the willingness to eschew expectations of grammatical consistency and the flexibility of word choice are all manifestations of a theme that seeks to revolt against the fundamentals of poetry by forcing language to be submissive to communication rather than the other way around.

Love

It may be surprising to some who are only familiar with the poetry of cummings through school assignments to learn that he is one of the more highly regarded writers of the love sonnet of his generation; indeed, many argue his best are among the examples of the 20th century. Just as he could prove himself one of the all-time great revolutionaries of literature with his pursuit of experimentation, so could also exhibit a precise control over the conventions of form. Even within the limited context of "love poetry" was cummings a rebel, however. His output was prodigious, but only because he seeks to cover the gamut. The sonnets can glide heavily into the physicality of romantic love, but he was equally capable of creating emotional depth and dramatic tension through his more experimental nature such as the verse in his collection of 95 Poems that engage his exuberance for fighting convention, while at the same time revealing a passionate sort of non-romantic love both for specific individuals such as his father, as well as for humanity at large. Every one of his most anthologized poems is at heart a love poem even as "anyone lived in a pretty how town" also exists as a perfect example of his themes about individualism and constant struggle with society to express that quality while still fitting in.

Fame

This is the main subject of cummings's poem "Buffalo Bill". cummings does not explain who Buffalo Bill is—the point being that he does not have to. Although Buffalo Bill is now "defunct," his peak fame now behind him, he remains a well-known figure from the heyday of the American Wild West. Buffalo Bill was originally a real cowboy and scout, but he soon recognized the value of capitalizing on the romanticized idea of the Wild West for his own gain. Consequently, he began to take part in multiple stage shows and traveling circuses, where he could be viewed as the archetypal cowboy. In this role, such seemingly superficial elements as his "handsome" face and his ability to kill multiple pigeons with one shot became tricks, performed as showmanship. While it is important for a celebrity to be famous, this is not something that's necessary for a real cowboy. So, to an extent, cummings is suggesting that fame is superficial, even when it endures. However, he is also emphasizing the fact that fame is ephemeral. Buffalo Bill is "defunct" not only because he is dead but also because he has lost the relevance as a famous person that he once had. Death has come for him, and while a "blue-eyed boy" in life, the speaker is curious as to what Death thinks of him—is he more important in the realm of the dead than others, as he was seemingly more important while alive?

Death

Connected to the theme of “Fame”, is the idea of ever-present death. If fame is fleeting, then life is even more so. At the end of the poem, cummings appeals to Death, personifying him and addressing him directly as “Mister Death.” This is a jarring shift, as the speaker has previously been addressing the reader; it suggests that Death is ever-present, and that he has been listening all along. Through this technique, cummings succeeds in underscoring the idea that Death can appear at any time; Death is unexpected, does not obey human laws, and can come for anyone, even the famous.

About the Poem

e e cummings’s poem “Buffalo Bill” is one of his most straightforward in terms of meaning. It maintains many of the language features typical of e e cummings’s poetry, such as the rejection of standard capitalization and the use of unusual punctuation. The poem plays with more than one possibility of meaning and attitude of the poet towards the subject, the dead hero, Buffalo Bill. In one sense, the poem is an expression of respect towards the heroic personality of the man. But if we read the poem critically, we sense that the poet is satirizing the traditional heroism of killing the armless and harmless animals with guns, from a distance. The title may stand for a contraction that symbolizes the life of Buffalo Bill in a nutshell. The title may also be in the possessive case indicating that the narrative belongs to Bill. The word “defunct” comes across as a portmanteau word that is a cross between deflate and extinct. The closing lines bring out the sombre aspect of the poem in the direct address to Death. The poem is more than a tribute to Cowboy Buffalo Bill who died in 1916 as a testament to folk legend. It is a statement on mortality and the ephemeral nature of fame.

Detailed Summary

cummings explains that Buffalo Bill is “defunct.” This is an interesting use of word, too; he does not say that Buffalo Bill, the great Western hero of legend, is dead, but rather that he is “defunct.” cummings goes on to describe Buffalo Bill in legendary terms, referring to his capacity to ride horses and his skill with guns, through which he could kill multiple pigeons “just like that.” Buffalo Bill is presented in rather idealized terms: cummings does not mention that he has killed people, only pigeons, and describes him as Death’s “blue-eyed boy.”

There is a sense of approval from the speaker, too, in the use of the word “Jesus” before the speaker notes that Buffalo Bill was a handsome man. Finally, the speaker appeals to Death

himself, who is personified, asking how he is enjoying the presence of Buffalo Bill, whom he has now accepted into his kingdom.

Analysis

The poem makes it difficult to say whether the poet is writing about Buffalo Bill's life or death, heroism or cruelty to animals, his achievements or the irony that he also died the same death, or something else. This has been untold deliberately and entitled to make multiple interpretations of the poem. The theme of the heroism is also true, but the theme of the irony of Cody's unheroic death is also equally true. This is truly a modernist poem in which one and certain meaning is neither intended nor possible.

cummings attitude toward William Cody could really have been ambivalent. This unique "concrete poem" is based on the legend of Buffalo Bill, or the American Cowboy William F. Cody. It is partly a tribute to the legendary hero who ruthlessly killed buffalos as well as pigeons, and partly it is an ironic poem that tells us that no one is heroic in front of death. The poem's typography (typing on the page) is like a pistol and a gun. Its "howness", as modern critics say, is more striking than its themes and meanings (or whatness).

Buffalo Bill is "defunct" or dead. The poet remembers how he used to ride a horse and go hunting. In his hunting spree, he would shoot down many pigeons or buffalo at a time, in a series. The poet laments: "Jesus," This handsome man is no more. What he wants to know now is whether death liked the "blue-eyed boy" or Buffalo Bill. He addresses death formally as "Mr. Death" and asks this curious personal question. Of course death doesn't discriminate. The question turns out to be very ironic on a second thought.

The poem begins with the news of the hero's death. But the word "defunct" is unusually inappropriate. Defunct means "no longer operating, functioning or being used" as in the case of a machine or a law. This is unsympathetic. May be heroism has died with the hero! No one is mortal or even forever famous. The hero used to kill so many animals recklessly. William Cody, a former scout, became a hunter and killed thousands of American brown buffalos, which almost pushed them into extinction. This man was death for the animals. But his own death would not leave him. Cody later became an actor and a stereotyped hero of hundreds of novels. He also became the cowboy symbolizing the Wild West. All this popularity and power of the "blue-eyed" handsome Cody did not last. The poet becomes intimate with Mr. Death at

the end of the poem, and he asks the question pretending not to know that death takes everyone whether it likes them or not. The question is rhetorical.

The poem begins with a neutral tone, which on a closer attention is actually ironic. Then it develops into a serious lament at the word "Jesus". But again, the address to death makes it ironic. The poet "I" establishes a closer relation with "you" or "Death" than with "he" or Buffalo Bill. Thus the somehow sincere regard indirectly paid to the legendary hero is also complemented by a satire on his reckless killing, and the irony of his death that didn't spare him.

The visual or typographical dimension of the poem is notable. If we draw lines around the two halves of the poem, the upper half up to the word 'Jesus' makes the shape of a gun. But the gaps and line breaks are indicators of pause. The typography is also a direction for the reader as to how to read the poem.

7. **I too: Langston Hughes**

Langston Hughes: Biography

Langston Hughes was an American poet, essayist, playwright, and short story writer. He is still considered one of the most renowned contributors to American literature in the 20th century. He rose to prominence during the Harlem Renaissance and continued to produce experimental and ground-breaking work for the next several decades. During the Harlem Renaissance, writers like Hughes, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston worked to develop a distinctly African American literary voice—a way to express black culture, history, and identity. Hughes was known for vocalizing the concerns of working-class African Americans. His work was deeply influenced by jazz, and he often wrote in a simple and straightforward fashion, sometimes even using the vernacular.

Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, as a descendant of prominent abolitionists. His racial heritage was a mix of Indian, African, and French. Hughes began writing at an early age, and published poems and short stories in his Cleveland high school periodical. He also became the editor of the school's annual magazine and was elected as the class poet. Besides the work of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, Hughes found inspiration in the writings of leftists, philosophers, and progressives.

After graduating from high school, Langston Hughes travelled to Mexico to visit his father. Along the way, he composed his first major poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” which was published in W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Crisis*. In 1921, Hughes wrote a prize-winning poem called “The Weary Blues.” In 1930, Hughes received a Harmon Foundation Medal for his novel *Not Without Laughter*.

In the 1930s, Hughes’s poems became more radical as the racial tensions in America became increasingly divisive. His commitment to Marxist ideals is evident in pieces like “Good Morning Revolution,” and his internal conflict with Christianity is apparent in “Goodbye Christ” (1932), which is also his most controversial poem. Hughes wrote about the Spanish Civil War in 1937 for the Baltimore Afro-American. During the 1930s, he also worked regularly in the theatre, collaborating with Zora Neale Hurston on *Mule Bone* (their friendship ended because of this play; Hurston claimed full authorship).

He wrote sixteen books of poetry, two novels, seven collections of short stories, two autobiographies, four nonfiction works, ten books for children and more than twenty-five plays. He died in 1967 at a hospital in Harlem due to complications from prostate cancer. The New York Times obituary stated, “Mr. Hughes was sometimes characterized as the ‘O. Henry of Harlem.’ He was an extremely versatile and productive author who was particularly well known for his folksy humour.”

Major Themes of Langston Hughes

Racism

While Langston Hughes’s tone is softer than that of Malcolm X or the Black Panthers (not surprising, since Hughes lived in a different era), he has his own way of denouncing racism and depicting the oppression that African Americans experienced at the hands of the patriarchal system. He alludes to lost and forgotten aspirations, insinuating that African Americans are not allowed access to the American Dream because of their race. In “Mother to Son,” the mother describes the various vicissitudes she has faced, exacerbated or directly caused by the colour of her skin. In “On the Road,” one of Hughes’s best known short stories, he depicts racism as being tied up with religious hypocrisy. Hughes is realistic about the discriminatory environment that he lives in, but he also expresses hope that one day, the racial inequality in America will start to even out.

Music

Music, particularly blues and jazz, permeates Langston Hughes's oeuvre. Many of his poems have an identifiable rhythm or beat. The lines read like the verses in a blues song and echo themes that are common in blues music, like sorrow, lost love, anger, and hopelessness. Hughes frequently alludes to music that originated during the era of slavery, using a "call and response" pattern for auditory effect, and to create a link between the past and the present. By invoking the musical traditions of slaves, Hughes connects himself to the painful history of African Americans. Hughes's poetry, like jazz and blues, has a distinct and expressive tone, often depicting tales of sorrow, alienation, and loneliness.

The American Dream

Many of Langston Hughes's poems invoke the theme of the American Dream. In 1931, James Truslow Adams defined the American Dream: "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." Hughes, however, addresses this concept from the perspective of the country's disenfranchised, including African Americans, Native Americans, downtrodden immigrants, and poor farmers. He portrays the glories of liberty and equality as out of reach for these populations, depicting individuals who are trapped under the fist of prejudice, oppression, and poverty. Their dreams die or are forgotten in a life defined by a desperation to survive. However, Hughes does often end his poems on a somewhat hopeful note, revealing his belief that African Americans (and others) will one day be free to pursue their dreams.

Dignity

During Langston Hughes's time, his African American readers felt that the poet's work directly explored their lives, their hopes, their fears, their past, and their dreams - as opposed to the obtuse modernism of poets like T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. The African American characters in Hughes's oeuvre embody all the complexities of life in a segregated America. He writes from the point of view of struggling jazz musicians, frustrated dreamers, disenfranchised students, biracial children, and so on, finding dignity in their daily struggles. Like W.E.B. DuBois, Hughes's work calls attention to his characters' strength, endurance, and the purity of their souls. He praises their physical beauty as well, defying the "white" standards of beauty that dominated popular culture during the early 20th Century.

Aspiration

Hughes often writes about aspirations as dreams. He explores hidden dreams, lost dreams, dreams regained, and dreams redeemed. African Americans, from the time of slavery to the oppression of the Jim Crow era, were treated like second-class citizens in the eyes of the American law. Hughes believed that this inferior social status forced most African Americans to hide their dreams behind a protective psychological barrier. For many of Hughes's characters, the American Dream is completely unattainable. Hughes expresses the power of dreams in different ways throughout his work. In one poem, Hughes comments that despite the difficulty of realizing these dreams, it is important for the disenfranchised to keep them alive in order to sustain the will to live. In another poem, Hughes writes that if these dreams remain dormant for long enough, then they might explode.

Wisdom

While the word "wisdom" does not specifically occur this particular collection of Langston Hughes's poems, he clearly alludes to its attainment in many places. Hughes shows wisdom being passed down through generations, such as the mother who tells her son to never give up, even when the road is hard. Wisdom is a result of experience, and can inform one's decision to persevere in the face of adversity. Courage can lead to wisdom - there is priceless knowledge to be gained from confronting one's demons. Finding a mode of expression for sorrow - like music or poetry - is a form of wisdom in that a person can learn how to separate him or herself from bad experiences.

Self-Actualization

Many of the speakers in Langston Hughes's poems start in situations of despondency and hopelessness. One has argued with a lover, another faces discrimination, a biracial man struggles with his identity, and so on. However, in these poems, Hughes commonly creates a narrative that culminates in the protagonist/speaker reaching a state of self- actualization. Despite his or her difficult surroundings, these individuals are able to find inherent inner strength, allowing them to persevere against the odds.

About the Poem

First published in 1926, during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, the poem portrays American racism as experienced by a black man. In the poem, white people deny the speaker

a literal and metaphorical seat at the table. However, the speaker asserts that he is just as much as part of America as are white people, and that soon the rest of the country will be forced to acknowledge the beauty and strength of black people. The poem begins and ends with "I, too" giving it a symbolic meaning. The "I" in the poem depicts not only the poet, but also the whole Black Race of Afro-Americans who have been considered second class citizens in America even when they equally love and respect the country.

Detailed Summary

The speaker claims that he, too, sings America. He is the "darker brother" who is sent to eat in the kitchen when there are guests visiting. However, he does laugh and he eats well and grows bigger and stronger. Tomorrow, he will sit at the table when the guests come, and no one will dare to tell him to eat in the kitchen. They will see his beauty and be ashamed, for, as he claims, "I, too, am America."

Analysis

The poem "I, Too" is also known as "I, Too, Sing America," and was initially titled "Epilogue" when it appeared in *The Weary Blues*, the 1926 volume of Langston Hughes's poetry. It has been anthologized repeatedly and scholars have written about it many times. It is written in free verse and features short lines and simple language.

Hughes wrote "I, Too" from the perspective of an African American man - either a slave, a free man in the Jim Crow South, or even a domestic servant. The lack of a concrete identity or historical context does not mitigate the poem's message; in fact, it confers on it a high degree of universality, for the situation Hughes describes in the poem reflects a common experience for many African Americans during his time.

The speaker begins by declaring that he too can "sing America," meaning that he is claiming his right to feel patriotic towards America, even though he is the "darker" brother who cannot sit at the table and must eat in the kitchen. This alludes to the common practice of racial segregation during the early 20th century, when African Americans faced discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives. They were forced to live, work, eat and travel separately from their white counterparts, had few civil or legal rights, were often victims of racial violence, and faced economic marginalization in both the North and the South. One critic identifies the opening lines of the poem as illustrative of W.E.B. DuBois's theory of "double-consciousness": "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always

looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

The speaker does not languish in despair, however. He proclaims that "tomorrow" he will join the others at the table and no one will dare send him back to the kitchen. Not only that, but the "others" will see "how beautiful" the speaker is and will therefore feel ashamed. This statement is extremely hopeful and optimistic. The speaker demonstrates a heightened sense of self and proclaims his ambition to assert his legitimacy as an American citizen and as a man.

The invocation of America is important, for Hughes is expressing his belief that African Americans are a valuable part of the country's population and that he foresees a racially equal society in the near future. Many critics believe that "I, Too" is an unofficial response to the great poet Walt Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing." This is likely given Hughes' expressed affinity for Whitman's work, as well as the similarity between the titles and choice of words. In Whitman's poem, a variety of Americans - including a mechanic, carpenter, boatman, and mother - sing joyfully about America. Hughes suggests that even though the circumstances are different for African Americans, they also deserve to experience patriotism.

8. For the Union Dead: Robert Lowell

<u>Robert Lowell: Biography</u>

Robert Lowell was born in Boston, Massachusetts on March 1, 1917, a descendant of two prominent New England families. In his lifetime he produced a stunning, varied body of writing and became a prominent and influential poetic figure, known in particular for his mark on the world of confessional poetry and his political activism.

In 1943 Lowell became a conscientious objector against World War II and spent several months in federal prison. At about the same time he finished and published his first book, *Land of Unlikeliness*. The book was received favourably for its intensity and depth, and it won 30-year-old Lowell the Pulitzer Prize. In 1951, before the publication of his next collection, *Life Studies*, he suffered from bouts of mania and depression, and found he could not write in the same strict meter as before. During this time, he also taught at Boston University, spent time in Europe, and had his first child, Harriet, in 1957. Inspired in particular by William Carlos

Williams and Gustave Flaubert, he loosened the formality in his writing and focused more on his life and struggles. *Life Studies*, published in 1959, renewed his reputation as a leading American poet. Indeed, the book shifted the landscape of American poetry, opening the door for Confessional poets, like his students Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, who followed in his wake.

The 1960s saw Lowell move to New York. In 1961 he published *Imitations*, a collection of loose translations of poems by Baudelaire, Rilke, and Homer, among others. In 1964 he published his collection *For the Union Dead*, where he found he was once again inspired to write in meter. In 1965 he published a collection of four plays, three of which were adapted from short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne and one from a novella by Herman Melville.

In 1973 he published three books, two of which consisted of poems from *Notebook*, though revised, rearranged, and with new additions. The third volume was also a series of sonnets, but they were previously unpublished. This book dealt with guilt, desire, passion, and freedom, and despite mixed reviews, *The Dolphin* became Lowell's second book to receive a Pulitzer Prize. Lowell's final and highly personal collection, *Day by Day*, was published shortly before his death in 1977 and was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award in the following year. Lowell suffered a heart attack on September 12th, 1977 in New York and passed away at the age of sixty.

About the Poem

"For the Union Dead" is the titular poem of Robert Lowell's sixth book of poetry. This poem was commissioned by the Boston Arts Festival in 1960 and ended up in some paperback editions of *Life Studies*. It builds a shaky bridge between the present and the past, and indicates Lowell's dread for the future. The speaker imagines that violence will be increasingly normalized and exploited. He understands that the present has not resolved the issues of the past, but he believes that some decayed bit in the fabric of American society is beginning to rot faster. Monuments to Union heroes are no longer valued. Nor are the enterprises whose core values are not simply the increase of capital: for instance, the South Boston Aquarium. This poem is written almost conversationally, without so much as a rhyme scheme, and is demonstrative of Lowell's break from meter and rhyme.

The poem contemplates the legacy of the Civil War, embodied in a memorial to Colonel Robert Shaw, a white soldier who died while commanding an all-black regiment. Colonel Shaw

was a twenty-one-year-old son of a well-to-do white man, but he had sacrificed himself for the unity of the nation; he symbolized union idealism. One hundred years after his death, Lowell contrasts Shaw's heroism with contemporary forms of self-interest and greed in this poem. The title suggests that the Union army, now symbolizing national unity/patriotism, has been dead for the people of America of 1963 (and the modern culture in general).

The epigraph of the poem is the inscription (letters carved under the statue, written in Latin) on the memorial to Colonel Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment that he commanded. In English, the inscription (which Lowell revised for the poem) means, "He leaves everything else to serve the republic". The original inscription is: "Relinquunt Omnia Servare Rem Publicam" (or "They relinquish/ sacrifice everything to serve the Republic"). By quoting this inscription Lowell introduces the theme of noble self-sacrifice.

Detailed Summary

The first stanza of Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead" introduces the readers to the "old South Boston Aquarium." Here, everything has rotted away. The building is old, and the weathervane is rusty. The speaker immediately launches into a memory of a past moment, when he was in the aquarium. Then he returns to present tense and thinks wistfully of the aquarium.

The speaker slips in time again, thinking of a moment parallel to his memory in the Aquarium; this time he was pressed against the "barbed and galvanized" fence, looking in on construction.

The next stanza describes the city, then seems to slide back in time again. Moments later the speaker makes it clear that he is looking at a bronze relief that faces the Statehouse. Then the speaker imagines a moment further back in time, when the philosopher William James stands at the dedication of the monument, thinking of the black soldiers of the regiment who are being honoured. He describes the Colonel, and how the bronze relief "sticks like a fishbone/in the city's throat."

The next two stanzas describe the Colonel, projecting a wide array of emotions onto him. He is sensitive to his circumstances, and the way that he "seems to wince at pleasure" implies that he is humble, a likable character. The second stanza about him, however, introduces a menacing edge. He has no fear of death and leads his soldier to it; when he does so, Lowell says, "he cannot bend his back."

The speaker then spends a stanza describing New England from a bird's-eye view. To him, the white old churches still have the spirit of rebellion that they once did, but these things are fading; the flags in the graveyards from the Civil War are fraying. The speaker returns to the Colonel, commenting on how time is wearing away at these monuments. He then brings up the Colonel's father, saying that he wanted only to know where his son died. "The ditch is nearer," the speaker says, but does not provide any other information.

The speaker returns to Boston, pointing out that there are no monuments to World War II. Images of the war are for used for commercial reasons, like an advertisement the narrator sees that shows a safe surviving the bomb at Hiroshima. The speaker then returns to the phrase "The ditch is nearer," saying, "Space is nearer." This line, however, seems to refer to the advances made in aviation technology in the 50s and 60s.

The speaker then thinks of "Negro school-children" he has seen on TV; this image calls to mind the Little Rock Nine, though he could be referring to another moment in the Civil Rights Movement. The speaker says that their faces rise like "balloons," and this imagery continues into the next stanza, where the Colonel is "riding on his bubble," and "[waiting] for the blessèd break." That bubble, and those balloons, do not break.

In the next stanza, the speaker is back in the present, on the street. He watches "giant finned cars" that "nose forward like fish." They have replaced the fish at the beginning of the poem, who seemed to serve no purpose. Like the image of Hiroshima selling a brand of safes, now everything has a purpose for the sake of capitalism; the "savage servility" seems to refer to the way capitalism has broken the world to its will. Things that are not monetarily productive, like aquariums and monuments, make way for something else.

Analysis

The poet begins by surveying the Boston memorial from a distance; as he looks at the surrounding, he feels that the place looks like a "Sahara of snow now" - symbolically a place devoid of feelings. The South Boston Aquarium (a big aquarium was also placed before the statue for decorating it) has been so neglected that it has broken and there are no more fish in it. The weathercock upon the building has lost its scales so that it no longer shows any direction: this is symbolic of the lack of direction in the "progress" of the material American civilization. In the second stanza, the poet recalls his visit of the aquarium. As he was a child, he rubbed his nose on the glass wall of the aquarium and wished that he could break the bubbles that rose

from the fish's mouths! The bubbles, as we shall see later, symbolize many things including the American dream, values that modern people regard too unreal to be pursued, the heroism of the past, and so on. This image of rising bubbles presents the fish as trapped and submissive. The kingdom of fish is literally heading "dark downwards" as they swim down and away from the aquarium light. More broadly, this image suggests a sense that the modern American kingdom is also getting worse, darker, and less noble. "For the Union Dead" addresses the mode of American society as it regresses from the idealism of the nineteenth century to the despairing loss of it in the mid twentieth century. The very image of the dilapidated landscape and the broken language reinforces this sense of breakdown of values. Everything is ruined, broken and bare, both literally and symbolically.

Themes

War

This poem mentions the Civil War and World War II. It seems that the Civil War, in particular, is on the speaker's mind due to the ongoing Civil Rights Movement that he observes on the television. The speaker is not a participant but an observer; his distance is doubled because he observes one war through a monument, another through an advertisement. However, the poem, which ends with the speaker ominously describing an ordinary American street, seems to indicate that, though the speaker is not personally involved in these wars, by being an American he lives in their wake, and that this is something Americans may be trying to forget. "Their monument sticks like a fishbone/in the city's throat," he says. The monument and what it represents will not disappear, but the statues seem to be getting thinner, wasting away.

Racial prejudice

The speaker understands that racial prejudice still exists. This poem is a tribute to those who died on the Union side of the Civil War. The poem offers no resolution; Shaw continues to ride his bubble, waiting for it to break. The question remains if the speaker has dealt with his own underlying prejudices, if he has put in effort to identify the ways racism has influenced his way of thinking. In this poem he refers to black people only in groups, never as individuals. White characters like William James and Colonel Shaw's father, on the other hand, get to pop up for a line or a stanza, then vanish again.

However, he does make a few small steps. For instance, by referring to the black children specifically as "school-children," he may be nodding to the Little Rock Nine, the nine black students who challenged the segregation of schools starting in 1957. He recognizes how tired their struggle has left them. All the same, this poem seems to represent an evolved form of the same racism it criticizes. The black soldiers on the relief look so real that they seem to be breathing, but they are not real enough to have individual identities.

Capitalism/consumerism

The speaker decries capitalism for using atrocities to make money, and for failing to support institutions like the Aquarium. At the same time, the speaker is undeniably part of this capitalist society; he watches TV and is familiar enough with advertisements to find them upsetting. The "savage servility" that "slides by on grease" seems to reference how capitalism has made people obedient, and dumbed them down; the "grease," which could be a reference to increasing popularity of fast food in the 1960s, or the ubiquity of automobiles in mid-century America, also links present problems to capitalism. Either way, this "grease" smooths things out and quiets people down, rendering the "savage servility" silent.

The servility is already on the street with the speaker; it needs no help infiltrating America. The speaker has no set course of action to reverse this capitalist passivity, but he feels that forgetting past heroes and atrocities will risk immobilizing society and making violence the norm.

9. America: Allen Ginsberg

Allen Ginsberg: Biography

Irwin Allen Ginsberg was born on June 3, 1926 in Newark, New Jersey. He died on April 5, 1997 in New York City. Ginsberg was one of the best-known of the Beat poets, a group of writers and artists who were responsible for creating a new and original style of American literature in the mid-20th century. The Beat movement's writing was characterized by stream of consciousness narrative, depictions of drugs, alcohol, and sex, and the glorification of a bohemian lifestyle that contrasted sharply with the conservative American culture of the period.

Allen Ginsberg's work can be considered a culmination of modernist poetry while, at the same time, it is also a prime example of the deconstruction of the modernist form. Ginsberg sought to move away from the formal styles of poetry that characterized the academic

disciplines of literary criticism and writing in the mid-twentieth century. Both his life and his art inhabited a space outside of the mainstream. His poetry attempted to recreate forms of speech and patterns of conversation using the long line as a template for experimentation. Though his poetry was initially rejected by critics and many contemporaries, Ginsberg's work came to exemplify the poetic styles of the Beat generation.

The Beat Generation, or Beat poets as some were called, embraced the bleak urban landscapes and pockets of poverty and despair of people living outside mainstream culture. They were a generation that felt they could never settle into the lives of corporate jobs and nuclear families -- ordinarily the ideal of men of the post-war era. They longed for a more "real" America with people truer to the land or to a kind of homespun cultural heritage that seemed somehow lost. Other Beat writers simply longed for a cultural space in which to exist where the conformity of society was never an issue. Ginsberg's poetry, for example, deals with the tensions between rural ideals of the American Romantic poets and the reality of poverty, industrialization, and urban blight that faced maligned urban groups in the mid-twentieth century. Ginsberg, like his fellow Beat poets, felt that he simply could not belong in modern America.

Ginsberg's poetry, along with other Beat Generation works, thus became a seed for the rebellion, protest, and cultural revolution that would mark the late 1960's and early 1970's. Ginsberg would be characterized as a "hippie," though his poetry never shied away from the realities of war and violence. Ginsberg was never naive about the social power of the authorities his art assaulted. Ginsberg knew rejection -- he was kicked out of Columbia, discriminated against because of his sexuality, and his poetry was banned and censored because of its controversial content. Ginsberg was clearly aware of an America that had gone awry, and though he kept hope for the country's renewal, his work never shied away from depicting the less romantic realities of a beatnik life.

Ginsberg remains one of the most respected, yet controversial, poets of the modern era. His poetry sought to redefine the values both of poetic form and social commentary. Its depictions of drug use, violence, and lewd sexual acts still have the power to shock even while Ginsberg's life and work condemn an artistic, political, and social context that seeks to choke out difference and activism. Ginsberg's *Collected Poems*, published a few years after his death in 1997, marks an artistic life that stretched the boundaries of form and taste and helped identify

an iconic underground generation --one that defied the authority of standards and law in the mid-twentieth century

Major Themes of Allen Ginsberg

Insanity

Ginsberg dealt both literally and metaphorically with insanity throughout his entire life. His mother, Naomi Ginsberg, was institutionalized on several occasions, which left a young Allen without his mother or full family for much of his early life. He would later admit that this absence left a stain on his development and was responsible for both his fascination and disgust with the mentally ill.

Insanity, however, is not a state of being true genius is able to escape, Ginsberg argues. This is the fate of the "best minds" from Ginsberg's poem, "Howl:" the "best minds" are driven insane by their inability to accept the models of normality and conformity imposed on them by modern life, and their inability to escape these same strictures.

Commodification

Ginsberg saw the economic commodification of society as one of the great ills of modern life. In his poem, "A Supermarket in California," Ginsberg goes into a supermarket to try and find the natural beauty of the fruits and vegetables there. Instead, his final conclusion is that modern humanity is no longer able to see the history of a particular object, fruit being his example. For instance, a peach is picked from somewhere across the country or around the world and then shipped directly to that supermarket. The consumer is no longer able to know where it came from, who it was that picked that particular fruit, and what social and economic context that fruit represents.

Ginsberg posits Walt Whitman as one of his heroes and predecessors in his assessment of modern life. Whitman explored the natural world and the natural self and all of the desires -- spiritual, sexual, physical -- that made humanity what it was. The commodification of society means the loss of this natural meaning and, in Ginsberg's poem, Whitman's vision is lost amidst a river of forgetfulness.

The Holy Bum

Several beat writers use seemingly opposing symbols to show how society is never as normal or advanced as it seems. In Ginsberg's writing, this symbol is the "holy bum." Though

this holy bum can go by several different names in his poetry, the idea of the holy bum is always the same. The holy bum has had everything that is valuable to him taken away by modern society. Some of these things can be abstract, such as freedom, liberty, or the ability to express oneself artistically or sexually. Other times, the holy bum has had his literal property or freedom taken by a justice system bent on destroying him and the things he stands for.

Ironically, it is in the act of destruction that the bum then becomes holy. He becomes holy because he is detached from the “normal” things of this world. He is then able to embody the sacred values of humanity, such as mercy, kindness, charity, and freedom. The holy bum is holier than anything in religion or government or respectable society because those respectable things have lost the truth of their being.

Ginsberg’s holy bums resemble religious saints. Saints in the Catholic Church, for instance, usually attained their sainthood because they rejected some aspect of human nature or society in order to follow God’s more perfect way. The holy bums do the same. They feel they cannot live in respectable society and denounce the evil that such respectability shrouds. Instead, they are made holy by following a purer path towards enlightened art and “kindness of the soul.”

The Natural World

Ginsberg grew up and remained for much of his life a city dweller. He was brought up in a New Jersey industrial town, he moved to New York, and after several years of traveling he settled in New York City and lived there for the rest of his life. Yet, Ginsberg saw himself as belonging to a tradition of poetry that stretched back to the Romantic Age, a period that posited the awe of the natural world as the highest and holiest forum of artistic and social expression. Ginsberg attempted to denounce in his poetry the acts of humanity that sought to circumvent and tame nature. The atom bomb is one example Ginsberg uses in several of his poems, including “Howl” and “America.”

Ginsberg’s poetry often attempts to compare the natural world with the monolithic military industrial complex that characterized the social and political life of Americans after the second World War. In “A Strange New Cottage in Berkeley,” for example, Ginsberg uses imagery of modern conveniences like toilets or coffee pots as a contrast to the wild everyday beauty of the plants he finds in his backyard. In Part II of “Howl,” Ginsberg denounces the industrialized world that destroys nature and ultimately destroys the soul of humankind.

Moloch

Moloch represents the modern institutions of finance, war, industry, and government that have conspired to destroy all good for the sake of profit. Ginsberg's Moloch, like the ancient middle eastern god, is a creature of sacrifice. Moloch asks all individuals to sacrifice their souls, their freedom, and even their lives for a false patriotism and devotion.

Moloch appears in Part II of "Howl." After Ginsberg has described the destruction of his generation's "best minds" in Part I, he turns to describing the thing that caused such destruction. Moloch is "unobtainable dollars" and a "judger of men!" It is "pure machinery," and "armies," and "poverty." Moloch, in short, is all of the devastation that Ginsberg sees in American society caused by greed or war or blind patriotism. What makes Moloch so powerful is not just its evil, but also the way in which profit and war and pollution are lifted up as ideals of advancement and cultural power. In Moloch, Ginsberg sees a generation sacrificing its soul to a set of false values.

The Prophetic Tradition

Though Ginsberg did not remain a particularly devout Jew, the tenets and traditions of Judaism -- and of other world religions -- did serve as major themes in much of his work. The prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible is an especially important theme.

In the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible, a prophet is called by God to announce to the people of Israel that they have been wicked and that they must repent in order to call on God's favour and save their people. In some of the prophetic stories, the people do turn back to God and are saved. In some of the other stories, they do not and destruction and captivity are the result. In "America," Ginsberg used that same prophetic tradition to proclaim an end to divine favour for his country.

Ginsberg called on America to repent for its reliance on greed and industry, its propensity for war and political witch hunts, and its inherent hate for those who fell outside of the white middle-class mainstream. Ginsberg sees nothing but more war and destruction on the horizon if America does not change its ways. He uses himself as a prime example of the intolerance the country exhibits toward its own people. Like a prophet himself, Ginsberg is the wild and untamed visionary calling down destruction on a world that has rejected hope and love.

Hypocrisy of Modern Society

Romantic poetry often denounced the modern world's ability to create a more perfect society through enlightened thought and technology, and Ginsberg's work extends this tradition, positing a false sense of "progress" as indicative of society's hypocrisy. Ginsberg aimed much of this criticism specifically toward his own country, the United States. The US claimed to be the most dominant and progressive society on the face of the earth in the aftermath of World War II. Yet, when Ginsberg looked at his country he saw nothing but injustice in the most dominant institutions. Government sought only to advance its own militaristic conquests, leaving some of its people literally starving and impoverished. Universities rejected anyone who did not support the dominant interpretations of culture or art. The media glorified celebrity and encouraged shallowness at the expense of serious problems. All of this represented a country's misaligned values and, for Ginsberg, a flagrant display of hypocrisy.

About the Poem

"America", a poem based on political theory with resentment towards the Democratic way, is at the very least graphic and very opinionated towards the greater portrait of society. This is coupled with the author's rebellious nature, his mother originating from Russian lands, and so a sense of heritage emerges in his persona. Thus his views of a Socialistic society in United States were based off Russia's Communism. The inquiries the author asks America as a whole, help to define his steadfast hold on his views, marking him as an extremist in that accord, but not in that the world was locked in a Cold war scare that helped reveal the true natures of each country involved.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Lines 1 - 16

The poem's first stanza is somewhat of an introduction that sets the time and context for the poem. The first line sets an exhausted and depressed mood for the poem. Ginsberg expresses his own hopelessness that his life or work, or anyone's life, would mean anything within a culture of censorship and oppression. He laments the cultural poverty of the time, equating it to only a few dollars and cents, and finds that he is not even able to be himself in such a culture.

The following lines of the poem start Ginsberg's conversation with this personified America. He is partly dissatisfied with the militarism of the country and he tells America to "go fuck yourself with your atom bomb" (5). He wants to stop the conversation before it even starts, making excuses that he doesn't want to be bothered with such a conversation (ignoring that he was the one who started it) and declaring that he won't write until "I'm in my right mind" (7). But as he noted before, he will never be in his right mind. He cannot stand his mind.

The stanza then turns into a kind of angry lament. These lines make America seem like a lost lover, someone that Ginsberg once loved and saw great promise and potential in; it was a potential for salvation. Ginsberg is perhaps remembering the great promise that America offered his own family as immigrant to the land. He asks when America will once again become the land that it once promised to be. When will it become "angelic" (8), when will it see the death and destruction that it has caused, when will it understand that its own political oppression is greater than the political oppression of the "Trotskyites" (communists) that it denounces and goes to war with (11)? Ginsberg laments that the libraries of America, representing the potential of free information and free expression, are "full of tears" (12), and he denounces the corporatism of American life symbolized by "the supermarket" and how those with "good looks" are given easy entry into American wealth (15-16).

Lines 17-28

The second stanza continues the back and forth argument that Ginsberg is having with the personified country. He begins with a tone of reconciliation, trying to find commonality amongst himself and his country. He writes that it is "you and I who are perfect" and insinuates that the longing for the "next world" is pointless. One of the most poignant lines of the poem is line 19, when Ginsberg, speaking to his country like a lost lover, says that "You made me want to be a saint." This confession demonstrates the love Ginsberg once felt, and the hope and optimism he felt in his own earlier life. As a young man, influenced by his mother's Communist affiliations, Ginsberg felt that his first calling was to help workers and labourers as a labour lawyer. Even though his ambitions took him in a different direction - that of a poet instead of a lawyer - Ginsberg admits that he cannot "give up my obsession." It is an obsession with the promise of America, with the things that he once believes deeply in: justice, tolerance, freedom, and acceptance. This is patriotic optimism that Ginsberg writes about here, though as the rest of the poem attests, there has been a definite break in the relationship. Line 20 continues the theme of reconciliation. Ginsberg hopes that "There must be some other way to settle this

argument." But this will be the last time that Ginsberg offers to reconcile with his country. As he noted in lines from the first stanza, he feels that, in a way, this conversation is pointless, though through the act of writing it he knows there must be some validity in it.

This stanza also sees Ginsberg offer themes of warning to his country. He asks if America is being "sinister" or if the country, through is artistic suppression and police-like state, is simply playing some kind of twisted practical joke on him and those like him. He tells America that "Burroughs is in Tangiers," a reference to William S. Burroughs' time spent in Tangiers, Morocco where he was in a kind of exile from the United States because of legal problems related to the transport of illegal drugs from Mexico. Ginsberg, for his whole career, was strongly in support of legalizing drugs and his warning to America in this line is that if the country continues to prosecute for such petty crimes, the country will lose their "best minds." The end of the stanza begins to turn more cynical and violent. Ginsberg accuses the country of "pushing" him and he asserts that he knows "what I'm doing" (25). Line 26 uses imagery from Eastern influences, a region of the world whose religion and culture would fascinate Ginsberg throughout his life. He writes that "the plum blossoms are falling." In Eastern culture, the plum blossom is a symbol of peace. By using this imagery from another country and culture, Ginsberg is attempting to tell America that its essence as a benevolent leader of the world is in decline. It is the East - both in its culture and its politics - that show the way to a better world.

Ginsberg finishes the stanza by telling America that he has not "read the newspapers for months" and that the reason is because "everyday somebody goes on trial for murder" (27-28). This is both a lament at the violence, or threat of violence, that was increasingly a part of American culture. But this line also has personal resonance for Ginsberg. Throughout his time in New York and San Francisco, Ginsberg saw several of his friends and acquaintances in the Beat movement arrested for murder. Most of the arrests were not unwarranted. While Ginsberg often felt that the police unfairly targeted people like him and his friends, the line of the poem also hints at the remorse that Ginsberg feels over the senseless violence that even his own company took part in. The reason that he doesn't read the newspapers is not only because the news will only tell more of how his country betrays him, but because it will also tell of how his own friends and colleagues become a part of the cycle of violence and rage.

Lines 29-40

Ginsberg starts the third stanza with his most overt political statements of the poem yet. In line 29, Ginsberg tells America that he is "sentimental about the Wobblies." The Wobblies was a nickname given to The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an international worker's union that was a powerful political and social group during Ginsberg's childhood and that leaned strongly towards Socialist and leftist policies. They believed that all wages should be abolished and that all workers should be united as a class of persons. The Wobblies were harshly criticized by the United States government which largely shut down the group during World War I by prosecuting and politically embarrassing many of its leaders. Ginsberg's sentimentality towards the group is a result of his mother's influence. Naomi Ginsberg held strong Communist views throughout her life and, during Allen's childhood, often took him and his brother to meetings of the local Communist Party. Ginsberg admits this sentimentality again in the next line of the poem (30) where he tells America that as a child he was a communist and is not sorry for that fact. Context here is key: during the 1950's there was a strong anti-communist attitude in the nation, exemplified by Senator Joseph McCarthy's congressional hearings in which many Americans were accused of communist activities, often ruining their careers. Ginsberg is taking a social risk by admitting in the poem that he was once a communist. Such a statement risked not only government interrogation but possibly criminal charges brought against him for treason.

This stanza serves as a kind of confession for Ginsberg. He goes on to detail his other "sins," though there is hardly in regret in his recounting. Ginsberg tells America that he smokes "marijuana every chance I get," that he gets drunk in Chinatown, and that he has read the writings of Karl Marx. None of these activities would have been considered morally or legally upstanding, but Ginsberg makes no apologies. As if to make his point, Ginsberg also says that he "won't say the Lord's Prayer." This line symbolizes the confessional nature of the stanza, but it also demonstrates Ginsberg's unwillingness to feel guilty for his acts. The Lord's Prayer, which Ginsberg equates with culpability for one's sins, represents the oppression of what Marx called the "opiate of the masses." This fits with Ginsberg's earlier statements of his communist affiliation.

Ginsberg also attempts to bring in modern psychology to help acquit him of his deeds. He says in line 36 that "My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right." A few years before writing "Howl" and "America," Ginsberg had sought psychological help for the depression and

guilt he felt over the life he was choosing. After the therapist asked Ginsberg what would make him ultimately happy, Ginsberg tells him that writing poetry and living the life of the artist is what would make him happy. The therapist then answers that that is what Ginsberg should do. Ginsberg felt that this was a validation of his feelings, and uses this stanza of the poem to show that the therapists opinion of his lifestyle means that he is justified in shirking responsibility. Ginsberg ends the stanza with a deeper seeded reason for why he feels no culpability for his actions. He tells America that he never "told you what you did to Uncle Max after he came over from Russia." This line is in reference to Max Livergant, Ginsberg's uncle on his mother's side of the family, who was met with his own hardships after immigrating to America for being both a communist and a Jew. Ginsberg, here, is in effect saying that if America can act badly, so can he.

Lines 41-50

Ginsberg then shifts his focus away from politics - for the moment - and to the media. Ginsberg often had a kind of "love/hate" relationship with the media. He did not shy away from media attention, especially during the 1960's where his political activism often drew a lot of attention. Yet, while he often appeared in the media, he also often took the opportunity to criticize the media as well. These lines in "America" are some of his earliest public critiques of America's growing reliance on media.

Ginsberg uses Time magazine as his example, here. During this period, *The Time* was the most successful and one of the most read periodicals in America. To be on the cover of *The Time* magazine was to grab the attention of the nation and of the world. Ginsberg here criticizes America, not just for seeing all events through the lens of the media (represented by *The Time*) but also for letting its "emotional life" be affected by the magazine. Ginsberg suggests here that the country is really being run by the media, who can affect the emotional outcry of citizens who can then strike fear into their elected representatives. Political and social decisions, therefore, are not being made on rational and humanitarian bases. Instead, they are being made by leaders who are more afraid of how the media might portray them for their decisions.

But Ginsberg makes a surprising turn in the next few lines of the poem. While he spent most of the last stanza of the poem abdicating himself from personal responsibility, he suddenly starts to take responsibility for the "emotional" reactions that media causes. He admits that he reads *The Time* magazine every week. He admits that its news is just as important for his own

understanding of the world as it is for everyone else. He is surrounded by *The Time* magazine and, hence, the media. He, who hopes to hold himself to a higher standard of justice and love, cannot escape the way his own perception of events is clouded by media interpretation. *The Time* magazine, he says, helps him to know where he stands in the world. This happens, of course, to be beneath all of the "serious" people in the world, but it does not change the fact that he himself adapts and conforms to the societal norms imposed by *The Time* magazine and the media.

Ginsberg then makes an admission that changes the tone and focus of the poem: he suddenly realizes that "I am America" and that "I am talking to myself again" (49-50). Ginsberg started the stanza by telling America that "I'm addressing you," (41) and ends the stanza by realizing that the "you" is really himself. His own conformity, his own willingness to accept the place in life and the roles of career and personhood within the American context, makes him just as much part of America as anyone else.

Lines 51-60

The next stanza returns to the political and builds on the psychedelic nature of the poem. While the whole poem has demonstrated a form of spontaneous thought and stream of consciousness writing, this stanza makes particular use of this style.

Ginsberg begins by claiming that "Asia is rising against me" (51). He is referencing two particular events here: the first is the rise of China as a communist power in the East. The United States and Russia had fought throughout the first half of the twentieth century to influence the politics of China and its population. The Chinese Civil War ended in 1949 with the victory of the Communist Party of China. This naturally meant that China would become an ally of the USSR, a setback for US foreign relations in that part of the world following the allied victory in World War II. But Ginsberg is also referencing his own engagement with Asian religion and culture. As a college student Ginsberg had studied Zen Buddhism. Buddhism would be an important religious outlook for many of the Beat writers, including Kerouac and Neal Cassady, as they sought to reach higher levels of consciousness using drugs like LSD. By claiming that "Asia is rising against me," Ginsberg is relating how the tenets of Buddhism - peace, love, transcendence - testify against the America that he himself claimed identity with in the previous stanza. Ginsberg acknowledges that he doesn't have "a china

man's chance" of avoiding this collision of values. He uses a derogatory phrase here mainly to set the tone of discrimination that he has now admitted he participates in.

Ginsberg then decides that he had "better consider my national resources." Again, Ginsberg has become the personified country that he began the poem in conversation with. Here, he mixes both the personal and the national. He has "two joints of marijuana millions of genitals / an unpublishable private literature..." (54). Ginsberg seems here to be self-deprecating, noting how the lifestyle that he lives (drugs, sex, art) is a poor resource for the monumental challenge to his identity and the political identity of the country. Moving to a broader scope, he notes that he also has "jet planes 1400 miles an hour and twenty-five-thousand mental institutions" (55-56). The comparisons here are stark. These lines beg the question of why a country with such technological advances criminalizes and punishes their insane in such inhumane ways. Ginsberg's own views of insanity were influenced by his mother's psychological problems that saw her live much of her life in and out of mental institutions. Ginsberg then admits that he is not even bringing up the most damning evidence: "...my prisons...(and) the millions of underprivileged..." (57). He ends the stanza with another example of discrimination. He says that he wants "to be President despite the fact that I'm a Catholic." Ginsberg himself was Jewish, but he makes this point because during this time it was widely assumed that a Catholic could not be elected President, though this assumption would fall only a few years later with the election of John F. Kennedy.

Lines 61-77

These lines begin by attacking America's economic modes of production and ends with a political rant on communist Russia. The poem returns here to a less personal point of view. While Ginsberg realized that he himself was America, and then began to introspectively examine his complicity in the America that he was attacking, he has given up this line of thought and returned to conversation with a separate personified America. He accuses America of being in a "silly mood" and that this prevents him from writing a true "holy litany" of the country's faults.

He begins with a kind of acquiescence to American values. He uses Henry Ford, whose assembly line method of production revolutionized industry in the beginning of the twentieth century and made America the economic superpower that it became. Ginsberg says that he will "continue like Henry Ford" with his poetry, writing it not from an emotional and artistic point

of view but instead with an eye towards profit. This it he American way, Ginsberg suggests. Everything is done for profit and nothing valuable comes without business sense. This, of course, goes against the values of worker rights and unionizing that Ginsberg says he once adhered to. His profit motive will make him "$2500 apiece $500 down" for his poems, as if he were selling used cars.

But Ginsberg's conscious then speaks up, as if another more interior voice has added its opinion to the matter. Ginsberg begins to make demands of America for justice, using historical examples to make his case. He tells America to "Free Tom Mooney" (65), a labour leader in the early twentieth century who had been falsely imprisoned for a San Francisco bombing in 1916. He tells America to "...save the Spanish Loyalists" (66), the leftist army supported by the Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War who fought the Fascist uprising supported by Nazi Germany. He tells America that "...Sacco & Vanzetti must not die" (67), a reference to a famous legal case in which two men, Ferdinando Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian born labourers with anarchist political views, were accused of murder and tried without due process. They were executed, sparking a controversy over the rights of the accused. Ginsberg then separates himself from his previous identity with America by telling it that "...I am the Scottsboro boys" (68), a reference to a 1931 incident in Scottsboro, Alabama where nine black men were tried and convicted of raping two white women and sentenced to death. The Supreme Court overruled the death penalty sentences, citing unfair representation for the defendants and lack of due process. Ginsberg uses all of these historical examples to demonstrate to America that is not the country that it presents itself to be in patriotic statements like the National Anthem or the Pledge of Allegiance. He wants the country to remember that there is great injustice in its work as well.

Ginsberg then moves into eight lines of "stream of consciousness" writing in which he remembers a meeting of a Communist Party cell that his mother took him to when he was seven years old. Here, he explains his earlier statement about how he was a communist as a child and how he was not sorry for this fact. He remembers this meeting fondly, recounting that "everybody was angelic and sentimental about the workers it was all so sincere you have no idea what a good thing the party was..." (71-73). As if to counter the damning claims of injustice that Ginsberg levels against America in the previous lines, he then begins to cite historical socialist and communist leaders who he felt worked for justice and peace, not for war and violence which were the charges levelled against leftists during this period of American

history. Ginsberg cites Scott Nearing, an economist who advocated for pacifism and socialism; Mother Bloor, a leading figure in the Socialist Party of America in the early twentieth century who fought for workers' rights; the "Silk-strikers," a radical group of silk workers in Ginsberg's hometown of Paterson, New Jersey who organized a strike against silk manufactures; and Israel Amter, a Socialist party leader in the early twentieth century. These are Ginsberg's examples of the decency of a political ideology that the American government sought to destroy. Ginsberg, being coy, proclaims that "Everybody must have been a spy" (75-76), a sarcastic comment on the government's paranoia over all Socialist or Communist activity during this period. Ginsberg then makes a plea to America in line 77. "America you don't really want to go to war."

Lines 78-86

As the poem begins to close, Ginsberg continues his rant on America's discriminatory attitudes, it's unthinking patriotism, and its unjust treatment of minority racial and political groups. Yet, in these lines, Ginsberg moves from an angry tone to a biting sarcasm. He moves his conversation from an attack on a personified country to a sarcastic attack on the citizens of the actual country. He begins with trying to imitate American colloquial speech, an indicator that he's mocking the uninformed and uneducated who would blindly follow a blind patriotism. The antagonists, Ginsberg says, are "Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And them Russians" (79). He then makes fun of America's paranoia over communist Russia by making ridiculous statements like "Russia wants to eat us alive" and "She wants to take our cars from out our garages" and "Her wants to grab Chicago" (80-82). Ginsberg mocks the misdirected fear of those that choose not to learn and not to think for themselves about the political and social state of their country. Those uneducated persons can think only that Russia, and therefore all communist and socialist sympathizers, wants to steal the American way of life. Ginsberg tries to point out the absurdity of such thought just as he is trying to point out that the American way of life is bankrupt to begin with and not worth stealing. His most devastating blow to American discrimination comes in lines 85 and 86: "That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read. Him need big black / niggers. Hah. Her make us all work sixteen hours a day. Help."

These lines function on several levels. First, Ginsberg continues his mockery of American ignorance by continuing to use forms of colloquial speech. He uses wrong pronouns and incorrect verb tenses, suggesting the ludicrousness of the populist fears of people who have

not even learned to read correctly. He also makes use of sounds, a part of the poem that can only be accurately assessed through a verbal reading. The sounds are meant to be primal, again suggesting that these ignorant populists are only a little above animals and certainly not as advanced as those that they fear. His derogatory use of Native Americans and African Americans here is a palpable display of their fear: The Russians, these ignorant populists believe, will elevate these minority groups to a status equal to their own. Communism will make all persons equal and these populists want only to maintain the discriminatory status quo. Finally, Ginsberg suggests that what these persons are most afraid of is that their middle class comfortable lifestyle will be taken from them and they will instead have to work for "sixteen hours a day," a plight that is simply untenable to the culture of laziness that has enveloped America.

Lines 87-93

The closing lines of the poem abandon the sarcasm and playful language of the previous lines. Ginsberg sets a more "serious" tone for the end by telling America upfront that "this is quite serious" (87). He is almost in disbelief over all that he has just accused the country of. The final four lines are Ginsberg's statement of action. He tells both the country and the reader that it's time for him to "get right down to the job" (90). He then qualifies what he can do: he cannot join the Army and he cannot work in a factory, both because of his political and social beliefs but also because he's "near sighted and psychopathic anyway," two conditions that would preclude him from this kind of service. Instead, Ginsberg suggests that he will have to find his own way to contribute to changing the social situation that he has just described in the poem, though he makes no positive statement towards what he will actually do. It is probable that in the 1950's, before the anti-war and civil rights activism of the 1960's, there was little outlet for political change and expression and therefore Ginsberg could not add a more detailed description of what work he would actually accomplish.

Instead, he makes a final statement that is both a statement of his difference and a statement of his desire to work towards a better America. "America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel." Putting one's shoulder to the wheel is an expression of hard work and labour. Yet this is contrasted by Ginsberg's use of the word "queer", a word that then denoted softness and an effeminate style. Ginsberg suggests that he will prove that even the outcasts, the weak, and the effeminate can affect change, a statement that would prove to be quite true in the coming decades.

Allen Ginsberg's "America" presents a sharp critique of American culture delivered by someone who has almost wholly repudiated its values. The poem's speaker addresses America directly, as if he were delivering a lecture or a sermon to the nation itself, rather than to its people. The nation's aggressive anti-Communist foreign policy and its culture of materialism and conformity are the primary targets of the speaker's harsh attack.

The poet emphatically denounces America's Cold War foreign policy. "America when will we end the human war?" he asks in the poem's fourth line. He follows that question with "Go [expletive] yourself with your atom bomb." The communists are not this speaker's enemies. Ginsberg's speaker informs America that he used to be a communist as a child and is not sorry for it; his mother took him to Communist cell meetings where "the speeches were free" and "everybody was angelic and sentimental about the workers." Now he brags about reading the works of Karl Marx. Near the end of the poem, the speaker satirizes America's fear of a takeover by the Soviet Union: "America you don't really want to go to war. / America it's them bad Russians. / Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And the Russians. / The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's power mad. She wants to take our cars from out our garages. / Her wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red Reader's Digest. Her wants our auto plants in Siberia."

American materialism also comes under attack in "America." The speaker begins the poem by declaring himself virtually bankrupt: "America I've given you all and now I'm nothing. / America two dollars and twenty-seven cents January 17, 1956." He asks, "When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks?" He wonders when America will send its eggs to India and care for its "millions of underprivileged who live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns." He jokingly asserts that he will make his living composing strophes and selling them as America peddles its Ford automobiles: "$2500 apiece $500 down on your old strophe." He condemns an America economy designed to "turn lathes in precision parts factories."

In the view of Ginsberg's speaker, *The Time* magazine represents America's cultural values. "Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?" he asks. *The Time* magazine is "always telling me about responsibility. Businessmen are serious. Movie producers are serious. Everybody's serious but me." The speaker sets himself apart from the culture of *The Time* magazine. "I smoke marijuana every chance I get," he asserts. "I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closest." He experiences "mystical visions

and cosmic vibrations" and refuses to say the Lord's Prayer. Ginsberg's narrator will not join the Army or work in a factory because he is "near-sighted and psychopathic." His heroes are individuals who lived outside mainstream American culture and suffered for it: the labour leader Tom Moody, imprisoned for murder in 1916 and pardoned twenty-three years later; the socialist activists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, executed for murder on weak evidence in 1927; and the Scottsboro boys, African American adolescents falsely accused and tried for rape during the 1930's.

10. Edge: Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath: Biography

Sylvia Plath was a twentieth century American poet and novelist whose vivid imagery, searing tone, and intimate topics cemented her place among the pantheon of great poets. Best known for her novel *The Bell Jar* and her second volume of poetry, *Ariel*, Plath's reputation has only grown since her death in 1963. She is considered a poet of the Confessional movement, which was led by Robert Lowell, but her work transcends this label and speaks to more universal truths than simply her own emotions. Although the sensational nature of her death by suicide has led some critics and readers to conflate the value of her life and art, Sylvia Plath's poetry demonstrates an astonishing capacity to engage with the art of poetry; many of her words and images have become fully entrenched in the literary consciousness.

Though her novel *The Bell Jar* has brought Sylvia Plath copious literary praise throughout the decades, it is not outlandish to assert that her poetry might in fact be her crowning achievement. Bold, visceral, moving, evocative, wrenching, perplexing, and gorgeous, her many poems run the gamut from simple and charming to terrifying and violent. They address such major themes as the pre-eminence of the patriarch, the sorrow of loss, the yearning for creative autonomy, a mother's love for her child, thoughts of suicide, and ruminations on nature, sex, and the body. Each poem is generally understood in terms of its chronology, as part of one of three distinct phases of the author's output.

Plath's first phase of poetry has been deemed her "juvenilia" phase. This term generally applies to the period around 1950 through 1955, just after the close of her twenty-third year, and refers to about 220 poems. They are not considered her best work and are often considered of interest only to scholars. Many of these poems address the challenge of being a woman in a patriarchal society, especially in regard to creative pursuits. However, many others concern

themselves with politics and more personal, psychological concerns. Some of the juvenilia poems were published in magazines, while others survive in typed copies, and yet Plath's husband Ted Hughes believed there could be many more yet to be uncovered.

The second phase of Plath's poetry dates from between 1956 and late 1959/early 1960. This phase produced most of the poetry that would be published in her first collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems*. Plath married Hughes in 1956, after which the couple moved to England, which would prove the setting for her new burst of creativity and psychological penetration. Some of these poems began to take on a "confessional" aspect through the influence of her teacher and mentor, Robert Lowell, whose *Life Studies* is considered the magnum opus of confessional poetry. The poems from this period explore imaginative dreamscapes, probe deep into the psyche, confront personal traumas, and allude to societal issues and ills. Hughes tried to paint this period as one defined mostly by intellectual exercises, and though Plath herself seemed to agree with that assessment, the work itself suggests far greater achievement and profundity than one would expect from simple exercises.

In 1960, William Heinemann published *The Colossus and Other Poems*. It included such poems as "The Colossus," "Full Fathom Five," "Hardcastle Crags," "Spinster," "Lorelei," and "The Stones." The collection was well-reviewed as heralding the strong voice of a young new poet. The American edition was published by Alfred M. Knopf in May 1962, with one poem dropped for that edition. Critics lauded her cleverness, her technique, and her sympathetic but fastidious approach to her subjects. Most of the reviews were scholarly, however, and often paternalistic; some encouraged Plath not to be too self-conscious in her writing.

The third stage of Plath's poetry was written during the period from 1960 until her death in 1963. This period was one of intense personal and psychological turmoil for Plath, as both her marriage and mental state disintegrated, even as she experienced a heightened level of creativity. The poems were dashed off quickly, but featured remarkable images, deep psychological insights, disturbing references to the Holocaust, and stunning experimentation. Many of these poems explored her relationship with and resentments towards her deceased father, and the poems that were written weeks or days before her death give insight into her tortured mental state. One of her most dedicated critics wrote that the poems of this period "typically combined psychic retrievals with intense domestic dramas," and that Plath produced "a collage of discourses, a cauldron of mourning."

After her suicide in 1963, Ted Hughes gathered together poems Plath intended for publication, and oversaw the release of *Ariel*. He purposefully left out several of the poems Plath had selected, and it was not until 2004 that a "corrected" edition was published using Plath's original conception for the volume. *Ariel* featured some of Plath's most famous poems: "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," "Contusion," "Edge," "Sheep in Fog," "Tulips," and "Medusa."

Sylvia Plath's poetry remains some of the most beloved and acclaimed work of the 20th century, challenging its readers with the complexity of its allusions, metaphors, and images, as well as startling and disrupting readers with the force of its insight, self-awareness, and psychological penetration.

Major Themes of Sylvia Plath

Death

Death is an ever-present reality in Plath's poetry, and manifests in several different ways. One common theme is the void left by her father's death. In "Full Fathom Five," she speaks of his death and burial, mourning that she is forever exiled. In "The Colossus," she tries in vain to put him back together again and make him speak. In "Daddy," she goes further in claiming that she wants to kill him herself, finally exorcising his vicious hold over her mind and her work.

Death is also dealt with in terms of suicide, which eerily corresponds to her own suicide attempts and eventual death by suicide. In "Lady Lazarus," she claims that she has mastered the art of dying after trying to kill herself multiple times. She sneers that everyone is used to crowding in and watching her self-destruct. Suicide, though, is presented as a desirable alternative in many of these works. The poems suggest it would release her from the difficulties of life, and bring her transcendence wherein her mind could free itself from its corporeal cage. This desire is exhilaratingly expressed in "Ariel," and bleakly and resignedly expressed in "Edge." Death is an immensely vivid aspect of Plath's work, both in metaphorical and literal representations.

Victimization

Plath felt like a victim to the men in her life, including her father, her husband, and the great male-dominated literary world. Her poetry can often be understood as response to these

feelings of victimization, and many of the poems with a male figure can be interpreted as referring to any or all of these male forces in her life.

In regards to her father, she realized she could never escape his terrible hold over her; she expressed her sense of victimhood in "The Colossus" and "Daddy," using powerful metaphors and comparisons to limn a man who figured heavily in her psyche.

Her husband also victimized her through the power he exerted as a man, both by assuming he should have the literary career and through his infidelity. Plath felt relegated to a subordinate, "feminine" position which stripped from her any autonomy or power. Her poems from the "Colossus" era express her frustration over the strictures under which she operated. For instance, "A Life" evokes a menacing and bleak future for Plath. However, in her later poems, she seems finally able to transcend her status as victim by fully embracing her creative gifts ("Ariel"), metaphorically killing her father ("Daddy"), and committing suicide ("Lady Lazarus", "Edge").

Patriarchy

Plath lived and worked in 1950s/1960s England and America, societies characterized by very strict gender norms. Women were expected to remain safely ensconced in the house, with motherhood as their ultimate joy and goal. Women who ventured into the arts found it difficult to attain much attention for their work, and were often subject to marginalization and disdain. Plath explored and challenged this reductionist tendency through her work, offering poems of intense vitality and stunning language. She depicted the bleakness of the domestic scene, the disappointment of pregnancy, the despair over her husband's infidelity, her tortured relationship with her father, and her attempts to find her own creative voice amidst the crushing weight of patriarchy. She shied away from using genteel language and avoided writing only of traditionally "female" topics. Most impressively, the work remains poetic and artistic - rather than political - because of her willing to admit ambivalence over all these expectations, admitting that both perspectives can prove a trap.

Nature

Images and allusions to nature permeate Plath's poetry. She often evokes the sea and the fields to great effect. The sea is usually associated with her father; it is powerful, unpredictable, mesmerizing, and dangerous. In "Full Fathom Five," her father is depicted as a

sea god. An image of the sea is also used in “Contusion,” there suggesting a terrible sense of loss and loneliness.

She also pulled from her personal life, writing of horse-riding on the English fields, in “Sheep in Fog” and “Ariel.” In these cases, she uses the activity to suggest an otherworldly, mystical arena in which creative thought or unfettered emotion can be expressed.

Nature is also manifested in the bright red tulips which jolt the listless Plath from her post-operation stupor, insisting that she return to the world of the living. Here, nature is a provoker, an instigator - it does not want her to give up. Nature is a ubiquitous theme in Plath’s work; it is a potent force that is sometimes unpredictable, but usually works to encourage her creative output.

The self

Plath has often been grouped into the Confessional movement of poetry. One of the reasons for this classification is that she wrote extensively of her own life, her own thoughts, her own worries. Any great artist both creates his or her art and is created by it, and Plath was always endeavouring to know herself better through her writing. She tried to come to terms with her personal demons, and tried to work through her problematic relationships. For instance, she tried to understand her ambivalence about motherhood, and tried to vent her rage at her failed marriage.

However, her exploration of herself can also be understood as an exploration of the idea of the self, as it stands opposed to society as a whole and to other people, whom she did not particularly like. Joyce Carol Oates wrote that even Plath’s children seemed to be merely the objects of her perception, rather than subjective extensions of herself. The specifics of Plath’s work were drawn from her life, but endeavoured to transcend those to ask more universal questions. Most infamously, Plath imagined herself as a Jew, another wounded and persecuted victim. She also tried to engage with the idea of self in terms of the mind and body dialectic. “Edge” and “Sheep in Fog” explore her desire to leave the earthly life, but express some ambivalence about what is to come after. “Ariel” suggests it is glory and oneness with nature, but the other two poems do not seem to know what will happen to the mind/soul once the body is eradicated. This conflict - between the self and the world outside - can be used to understand almost all of Plath’s poems.

The Body

Many of Plath's poems deal with the body, in terms of motherhood, wounds, operations, and death. In "Metaphors," she describes how her body does not feel like it is her own; she is simply a "means" towards delivering a child. In "Tulips" and "A Life," the body has undergone an operation. With the surgery comes an excising of emotion, attachment, connection, and responsibility. The physical cut has resulted in an emotional severing, which is a relief to the depressed woman. "Cut" depicts the thrill Plath feels on almost cutting her own thumb off. It is suggested that she feels more alive as she contemplates her nearly-decapitated thumb, and watches the blood pool on the floor. "Contusion" takes things further - she has received a bruise for some reason, but unlike in "Cut," where she eventually seems to grow uneasy with the wound, she seems to welcome the physical pain, since the bruise suggests an imminent end to her suffering. Suicide, the most profound and dramatic thing one can do to one's own body, is also central to many of her poems. Overall, it is clear that Plath was constantly discerning the relationship between mind and body, and was fascinated with the implications of bodily pain.

Motherhood

Motherhood is a major theme in Plath's work. She was profoundly ambivalent about this prescribed role for women, writing in "Metaphors" about how she felt insignificant as a pregnant woman, a mere "means" to an end. She lamented how grotesque she looked, and expressed her resignation over a perceived lack of options. However, in "Child," she delights in her child's perception of and engagement with the world. Of course, "Child" ends with the suggestions that she knows her child will someday see the harsh reality of life. Plath did not want her children to be contaminated by her own despair. This fear may also have manifested itself in her last poem, "Edge," in which some critics have discerned a desire to kill her children and take them with her far from the terrors of life. Other poems in her oeuvre express the same tension. Overall, Plath clearly loved her children, but was not completely content in either pregnancy or motherhood.

<u>About the Poem</u>

"Edge" was written six days before Sylvia Plath committed suicide on February 11th 1963 and it is supposedly her last piece. The form of the poem bears an interesting aspect: it consists of ten stanzas, with two lines each, which are held in enjambment. It is a meditation on the death of a woman. Written in the third person, the poem may give the impression of

offering a detached judgment of the dead woman. This point of view usually suggests a less subjective perspective than the first person. The apparently objective imagery of the poem, however, disguises a high degree of subjectivity on the part of the poet.

Detailed Summary

"Edge" begins with an implied thesis: A woman is "perfected" by death. It is not difficult to see at least three ways in which the woman has been "perfected." To "perfect" means to complete, to master, or to make flawless. While literally true that the woman has completed her life, "perfected" also suggests that the woman has mastered womanhood and has been made flawless through her death. These notions of completion, mastery, and achieved excellence are linked to death in the brief second line, "Her dead," which provides an approximate rhyme with the first line.

The second stanza notes "the smile of accomplishment" that adorns the dead body, suggesting that the woman is pleased by the perfection she has achieved. The poet then hints that the woman has achieved death through suicide. The "Greek necessity" that one imagines flowing "in the scrolls of her toga" strongly suggests the ritual suicides demanded of disgraced individuals in the classical world. Although most readers are familiar with the self-inflicted death by hemlock of the Greek philosopher Socrates, ritual suicide (like the toga) is actually associated with imperial Rome. Nevertheless, Plath is able to allude to her own writing through the clever description of the folds of the toga as "scrolls." The third and fourth stanzas explain the meaning of the woman's bare feet. They have taken her the length of her life with all its obstacles, but now "it is over." The sense of relief at journey's end is apparent.

A new and ominous element is introduced in the fifth stanza. Dead children, presumably the woman's own children, are described as white serpents. Each is coiled before a small "pitcher of milk," which is "now empty." Apparently, the children have each drunk the milk and coiled, foetus-like, at each pitcher; they are pale, or white, with death. One must consider the possibility that the children have been poisoned by their mother.

The sixth through eighth stanzas confirm this suspicion. The woman has "folded/ them back into her body." She is their mother, and she has taken her children with her into death. The first line of the poem, "The woman is perfected," now takes on yet another meaning: She becomes whole or complete as all the life that went forth from her is returned to her in death. The poet defends the murder of the children as the mere closing of a flower at the approach of

night. The rose draws in its petals (as the mother draws in her children) when the chill of the evening (or, in the case of the woman, death) descends upon the garden. The sensual but ghastly image of the night as a many-throated flower that “bleeds” its odours transforms the traditional literary meaning of flowers and gardens as emblems of love into omens of death.

From the lush imagery of the garden at nightfall, the ninth stanza turns to the stark moon of the night sky. The poet imagines the moon’s view of the grisly tableau of the dead bodies of mother and children. Like a nun in a white cowl, the moon in “her hood of bone” surveys the scene without sadness.

The final stanza of the poem explains the moon’s indifference: “She is used to this sort of thing.” The dead woman has re-enacted an ancient tragedy that the moon has witnessed over and over again. Further, the poem concludes with the hint that the moon bears some responsibility for the deaths. The moon’s “blacks crackle and drag.” The effect of the moon on the earth (dragging the oceans back and forth across the planet in tides) and on the menses of women account for the final verb. “Crackle,” however, suggests something more like sunspots, casting interference and static into the atmosphere and, perhaps, troubling individuals. Such a relationship between the moon and human behaviour is acknowledged in folklore (the werewolf is transformed under the light of a full moon) and even in our vocabulary (“lunatic” derives from the same root as “lunar”). The moon, it is implied, may have influenced the terrible events that “she” then observes impassively.

Analysis

This is Sylvia Plath’s last poem, written mere days before she committed suicide. It is a short, bleak, and brutal piece that reflects the depth of her depression. As is the case with many of her poems, the theme of death is quite conspicuous. There is a sense of finality and defeat; hope has fled. In fact, the woman is considered “perfected” rather than compromised, suggesting that her suicide was a mark of bravery and vision, not cowardice. Plath creates an eerie, sombre mood through the lack of colour and the repeated words that emphasize whiteness, blankness, and cold – “bare,” “white serpents,” “milk,” and “hood of bone” are some examples. There are also allusions to Medea (“the illusion of a Greek necessity”), who in the Greek myths avenged her husband’s betrayal by killing their two children. This allusion furthers the sense of suicidal feelings, especially when one remembers that the Greeks did not believe that suicide was unequivocally bad; in many cases, it was perceived as honourable.

This poem is generally characteristic of Plath's late work, which, as Tim Kendall writes, features "a style of heightened detachment and resignation in the face of an intractable destiny." This poem does not aim to please the reader; it defies poetic categories, and exists to express the poet's sense of hopelessness and detachment, rather than to communicate an idea to an audience. There is only one mention of what might be deemed pleasure – the woman smiles with a sense of accomplishment, perhaps at being dead herself, or perhaps because she took her children with her. Obviously, this sense of pleasure is ironic at best.

Indeed, the issue of infanticide looms heavy over this poem. Many critics interpret two particular lines - "Each dead child coiled, a white serpent," and "She has folded / Them back into her body as petals" - as evidence that Plath had seriously contemplated killing her own children as part of her suicide. She never attempted any deed of such atrocity, but the poem can be understood as at least a consideration of the possibility.

The moon is an interesting image. Personified as a woman, the moon looks down impassively because she is accustomed to such scenes of tragedy. The "perfected" woman's death is neither unnatural nor unusual, but instead merely one aspect of human existence. The ironic detachment lies in the social stigma against suicide, and the narrator's belief that it is of no great significance. It does not affect the cosmic order, as reflected in the moon's perspective. The female personification of the disinterested observer also suggests that women are more accustomed to tragedy than men are.

The short lines, with their sparse wording, may indicate Plath's exhaustion and anticipation of impending death. This interpretation explains why she would "smile with accomplishment" and delight at the idea of finality. She smiles because her feet have nowhere else to carry her. The accomplishment is doubly notable for her because they have already carried her so far. She takes little effort in fashioning the poem's form because "it is over." She has very little left to say, and certainly sees no need to defend herself. Instead, the poem is a confession of fatigue.

However, critic Stephen Gould Axelrod looks at the poem through a very different lens – that of postmodernist and linguistic criticism. In his reading, the text is indeterminate, with the words completely distinct from meaning. Axelrod refers to Roland Barthes's idea of the blank edge of discourse, wherein one can perceive the death of language. He considers "Edge" to be a "poetic epitaph." The scrolls and words of the poem are a "necessity," but the coiled

children (which represent poetry itself) are folded back into her empty self. The woman cannot actually be perfected because her texts are merely "warring forces of signification." No matter what she intended to write, the poems now mean various different things. As a result, the speaker has misread her own texts, the poet has miswritten her own poems, and they no longer express what she intended them to. Perhaps, therefore, the texts are telling the woman to live, to continue searching for the meaning behind their words. Axelrod concludes, "On an edge between metaphysics and indeterminacy as well as between life and death, Plath's last poem gapes at the space separating words from their referents and meanings, while the moon's shadows 'crackle and drag' to commemorate the dissolution." Of course, even from this interpretation, the sense of helplessness and misunderstanding of one's own passion and work feed the idea of suicidal depression. Nobody would deny that the poem, no matter whether it is to be taken literally or figuratively, is a bleak cry.

11. To live in the Borderlands means you: Gloria E. Anzaldua

Gloria E. Anzaldua: Biography

Gloria Anzaldua is a prominent Chicana feminist and cultural theorist whose most well-known work is *Borderlands/La Frontera.* She was born to sharecropper/field-worker parents on September 26th, 1942 in South Texas Rio, Grande Valley. After relocating at age 11 to the city of Hargill, Texas on the border of the United States and Mexico, she entered the fields to work. With her parents and siblings, Anzaldúa worked as a migrant worker for a year in Arkansas. In her writing, Anzaldúa uses a unique blend of eight languages, two variations of English and six of Spanish. In many ways, by writing in "Spanglish," Anzaldúa creates a daunting task for the non-bilingual reader to decipher the full meaning of the text. However, there is irony in the mainstream reader's feeling of frustration and irritation. These are the very emotions Anzaldúa has dealt with throughout her life, as she has struggled to communicate in a country where non-English speakers are shunned and punished. Language, clearly one of the borders Anzaldúa addresses, is an essential feature to her writing. Anzaldúa's poetic works treat the reader to a world full of sensory images, pain, and discovery. It is bolder and more unapologetic than her prose, and it is considerably easier to read than the first half of the book. In her poetry, it is unclear whether Anzaldúa is writing from memories, and unlike her earlier essays where her voice is omnipresent; the character voice occasionally shifts to third person. Anzaldúa died of diabetes complications on May 15, 2004.

Detailed Summary

In the poem "To live in the Borderlands means you," the author talks about living in the borderlands that people struggle to fit in. Also, the borderlands may be some places between America and Mexico. "To live in the borderlands mean you are neither hispana India Espanola ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half breed." It means people have multiple cultures that are living in the borderlands, so it is hard to describe which race they are. In addition, the author uses two languages in one poem again. Furthermore, "when you live in the Borderlands" has the same meaning with "cuando vives en la frontera." The author wants to demonstrate people lives in the borderlands know multiple languages. It can deepen the idea that people have multiple cultures that are living in the borderlands. So finding her identity is to include two cultures. However, she is criticized by her two cultures for being different. So she struggles to find her identity. The only way to have multiple cultures is living without borders so that people can be mixed of different cultures. In other words, borders impede people with multiple cultures or hybrids to find their identity.

Analysis

In the poem, Anzaldúa discusses living in the borderlands. Although the "borderlands" could be a geographic place, for example the border of Mexico and the United States, the author is referring to an individual struggle to fit in. The speaker is having trouble crossing the "borderlands" between being an American and a Mexican. The speaker writes, "To live in the borderlands mean you are neither hispana India Espanola ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half breed." In other words, one that is multi-cultured can never fit into the stereotype of one race. In one of the stanzas, the speaker discusses that the Mexicans call her "rajeta" (which refers to her being mixed) and that she gets criticized for denying the Anglo inside of her. Both sides of her culture seem to criticize her for being different. In a sense, the speaker is in a constant battle to figure out her identity. This can be demonstrated through the language of the poem. The speaker switches from English to Spanish on numerous occasions. For example, instead of repeating "when you live in the borderlands," she writes "cuando vives en la frontera." These phrases have the same meaning, yet are just written in a different language. She demonstrates that her world is a mix of two different cultures and essentially the only way to survive living as a multi-cultured individual is to live without borders ("sin fronteras"), and accept that her identity is composed of more than one culture.

SECTION B : PROSE AND FICTION

1. "Self-Reliance": Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson: Biography

Ralph Waldo Emerson—an American essayist, lecturer, and philosopher—was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on May 25, 1803. The son of a prominent Unitarian minister, Emerson entered Harvard at 14 and completed his education at Harvard Divinity School. Emerson served as a pastor at Boston's Second Church from 1829 to 1832 but resigned a year after the death of his first wife and during a period in which he began openly expressing doubts about the church. After traveling for several months in Europe in 1833, Emerson returned to the United States to begin a career as a lecturer. He married his second wife and moved to Concord, Massachusetts, in 1835. 1836 was a pivotal year in Emerson's life. He helped arrange the first meetings of the Transcendental Club, an intellectual group devoted to renovating American culture and literature, and he published "Nature," an important essay in which he articulated the key tenets of transcendentalism, a philosophy that prized individuality above all else. In 1837, he gave a lecture, "The American Scholar," on the need for a uniquely American literature, a theme that persisted in his work over the years. In the years that followed, Emerson began his friendship with Henry David Thoreau, another important transcendentalist and someone who encouraged Emerson to keep the journals that became important sources for his writing. Emerson also helped to establish the transcendentalist journal called *The Dial*, and he published several essay collections that established him as an important American intellectual. Emerson's health began declining in the late 1860s, and he ended his career as a lecturer in 1879. Emerson died in 1882 in Concord, Massachusetts, of complications of pneumonia.

About the Text

Published first in 1841 in *Essays: First Series* and then in the 1847 revised edition of *Essays*, "Self-Reliance" took shape over a long period of time. Throughout his life, Emerson kept detailed journals of his thoughts and actions, and he returned to them as a source for many of his essays. Such is the case with "Self-Reliance," which includes materials from journal entries dating as far back as 1832. In addition to his journals, Emerson drew on various lectures he delivered between 1836 and 1839.

The first edition of the essay bore three epigraphs: A Latin line, meaning "Do not seek outside yourself"; a six-line stanza from Beaumont and Fletcher's *Honest Man's Fortune*; and

a four-line stanza that Emerson himself wrote. Emerson dropped his stanza from the revised edition of the essay, but modern editors have since restored it. All three epigraphs stress the necessity of relying on oneself for knowledge and guidance.

The essay has three major divisions: the importance of self-reliance (paragraphs 1-17), self-reliance and the individual (paragraphs 18-32), and self-reliance and society (paragraphs 33-50). As a whole, it promotes self-reliance as an ideal, even a virtue, and contrasts it with various modes of dependence or conformity. Because the essay does not have internally marked divisions delineating its three major sections, readers should number each paragraph in pencil as this discussion will make reference to them.

Detailed Summary

Emerson opens his essay with three epigraphs that preview the theme of self-reliance in the essay. He then begins the essay by reflecting on how often an individual has some great insight, only to dismiss it because it came from their own imagination. According to Emerson, we should prize these flashes of individual insight even more than those of famous writers and philosophers; it is the mature thinker who eventually realizes that originality of thought, rather than imitation of what everyone else believes, is the way to greatness.

Emerson then argues that the most important realization any individual can have is that they should trust themselves above all others. Babies, children, and even animals are intuitively aware of this fact, according to Emerson, and so are worthy of imitation. Emerson sees self-reliance as a characteristic of boys, too, with their independent attitudes, lack of respect for authority, and willingness to pass judgment on everything they encounter.

Emerson then shifts to a discussion of the relationship between the individual and society by noting that when we are alone, we can be like babies or children, but when we get out into the world, that little voice inside that carries our truth slips away. Emerson argues that people must embrace nonconformity to recover their self-reliance, even if doing so requires the individual to reject what most people believe is goodness. Emerson believes that there is a better kind of virtue than the opinions of respected people or demands for charity for the needy. This goodness comes from the individual's own intuition, and not what is visible to society.

Besides, states Emerson, living according to the world's notion of goodness seems easy, and living according to one's own notions of goodness is easy in solitude, but it takes a truly brave person to live out one's own notions of goodness in the face of pressure from society.

Although it might seem easier to just go along with the demands of society, it is harder because it scatters one's force. Aware that being a nonconformist is easier argued than lived, Emerson warns that the individual should be prepared for disapproval from people high and low once he or she finally refuses to conform to society's dictates. It will be easy to brush off the polite disapproval of cultivated people, but the loud and rough disapproval of common people, the mob, will require all of the individual's inner resources to face down.

The other thing Emerson sees as a roadblock to the would-be nonconformist is the world's obsession with consistency. Really though, he argues, why should you be bound at all by your past actions or fear contradicting yourself? Emerson notes that society has made inconsistency into a devil, and the result is small-mindedness. He uses historical and religious examples to point out that every great person we have ever known refused to be bound by the past. If you want to be great, he says, embrace being misunderstood just like them. Emerson argues that the individual should have faith that inconsistency is an appearance only, since every action always reflects an underlying harmony that is rooted in one's own individuality. So long as the individual is true to themselves, their actions will be authentic and good.

Given his arguments in the first part of the essay, Emerson hopes by now that everyone realizes how ridiculous conformity is and the negative impact it is having on American culture. He describes American culture of the day as one of mediocrity that can only be overcome with the recognition that in each individual is a little bit of the universe, of God, and that wherever the individual lives authentically, God is to be found. Emerson believes people tap into that truth, into justice, and into wisdom by sitting still and letting the underlying reality that grounds us and all creation speak through us in the form of intuition. Everything else—time, space, even the past—appears as something apart from the underlying reality only because of our habits of thinking. Emerson counsels that people can escape that way of thinking by living in the present like plants do, and, like everything in nature, expressing one's self against all comers.

Emerson laments that his society has lost all sense of what it means to be self-reliant individuals. He describes his historical moment as a weak one that has birthed no great people, and city boys seeking professions quit as soon as they are confronted with an initial failure. Emerson admires the country boy who tries thing after thing, not at all concerned about any failure or conforming to society; these are the kinds of people Emerson believes will make America's history. If the individual wants to achieve true virtue, Emerson argues, they must go

to war against anything that oppresses their sense of individuality, even if people accuse them of gross immorality as a result. Taking care to meet their idea of their duties to loved ones or even to themselves will vindicate them and maybe even bring people around to their way of seeing. Ultimately, Emerson believes that living in this state of war against society is actually true virtue.

Emerson closes his essay by applying the abstract concept of self-reliance to specifics. He believes that self-reliance can revolutionize every part of society if we let it: We should quit praying for something outside of ourselves to save us and instead act. We should quit subordinating our experiences to religions and philosophies and instead listen to our intuition. Emerson argues that Americans especially should stop traveling abroad to become cultured and instead create their own arts, literature, and culture using the materials we find right here at home. Emerson believes that progress is beside the point: we should quit pushing for it because it only saps our strength; society does not progress in a straight line. Emerson argues that people should stop locating their identities in property and instead understand that the most valuable part of a man is inside of him. Self-reliance can even be applied to politics: Emerson argues that we should quit governing ourselves by political parties and instead have each man govern himself by intuition. Emerson concludes by noting that self-reliance is the true path to peace.

Themes

Transcendentalism

Ralph Waldo Emerson is one of the central figures associated with the American philosophical and literary movement known as transcendentalism. Transcendentalism thrived during the late 1830s to the 1840s in the US and originated with a group of thinkers in New England that included Emerson. The transcendentalists believed that the US needed reformation in its religion, arts, higher education, and culture. Emerson's "Self-Reliance" is one of the most important statements of transcendentalist beliefs and how they apply to everyday life.

In Emerson's transcendentalism, the individual is the supreme source of truth because the universe (or "Oversoul") is inside each individual, and each individual is a part of the universe, just as nature is. Emerson further argues that there is an underlying unity to everything, including the individual, and that seeing the parts of the universe as separate from

the individual is nothing more than a bad habit. That is why Emerson sees "children, babes, and brutes" as being "pretty oracles nature yields"—he means that they are not yet in the habit of seeing themselves as separate from everything around them.

Emerson therefore believes that the search for truth should always start with contemplation of the individual self and nature. He posits that when the individual engages in self-contemplation, they come to understand that the individual isn't separate from all parts of the universe but is instead "one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed." Emerson also argues that because all of creation is simply a reflection of an underlying truth, contemplating the individual is a very good shortcut to understanding the truth of existence. He believes that if each individual can just pay close enough attention to themselves and ignore the noise of other individuals and the senses, they will eventually understand that "we lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams."

Emerson's definition of the self-reflection needed to find this truth is very specific. He is careful to make clear that self-reflection is not merely intellectual, in the sense that it applies only to the individual reflecting on their own personal thoughts. While he certainly does believe that the individual should reflect on thoughts and ideas, Emerson explicitly makes clear that self-reflection also involves simply listening to one's instincts. In other words, he sees the individual's intuition as also containing the individual's truth. In fact, as Emerson puts it, intuition is the "primary wisdom... whilst all later teachings are tuitions." Ultimately, Emerson's guidelines for the practice of self-reflection can be summed up in his famous saying: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." He insists that the individual can only find truth within themselves — their whole self, in their conscious thoughts and deeper intuitions — and that only by "trusting thyself" can they access that truth. This idea is the foundation of Emerson's concept of self-reliance.

This philosophy was a radical departure for the time, and in conflict with traditional thought and society. In fact, Emerson specifically argues against the prevailing beliefs by stating that truth cannot be found in either the conventional morality of mass culture or in institutions, such as the church or government, because they discourage the individual from contemplating the self. Emerson argues that, instead, the individual can only find the truth by paying attention to their own mind and intuition. To Emerson, then, it is solitude, rather than

the company of others, that is most conducive to the discovery of the truth. Being able to hear one's inner voice, despite the influence of society, is what makes a person great.

But Emerson is under no illusion that hearing one's inner voice is easy. When Emerson states that "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages," he is pointing out two related but distinct things. First, he is stating that the individual's own insights and intuitions are more valuable and contain more truth than any of the received wisdom from society, and second, he is acknowledging that each individual has to learn this for himself. In other words, Emerson is admitting that such trust in oneself takes effort and is attained only through practice.

He also argues that the institutions and thinkers that most people assume serve as sources of truth are not truly such sources; upon examination, Emerson says, important religious and ethical moments in history are always the result of specific individuals. He claims that "[a]n institution is the lengthened shadow of one man; as, the Reformation, of Luther; Quakerism, of Fox; Methodism, of Wesley; Abolition, of Clarkson. Scipio, Milton called 'the height of Rome'; and all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons." The individual's influence underlies what eventually became the institution.

Emerson goes a step further by arguing that the institutions themselves and society as a whole can in fact serve as impediments to finding truth. Society actively reduces the likelihood of an individual accessing their own internal truth. As he puts it: intuition and insight "are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world." Society, in Emerson's transcendentalist view, is a force that the individual must escape in order to gain access to truth.

Nonconformity, Morality, and Individual Greatness

In keeping with his transcendentalist beliefs, Emerson was sceptical of forces that pushed the individual to conform to society. Emerson's rejection of society (including any of its established institutions) as a source of truth and morality fit into a broader historical moment occurring in America at the time when Emerson was writing (in the 1830s and 1840s). The Second Great Awakening, a religious revival movement, rejected many of the faiths settlers had brought with them from Europe and instead focused on spirituality as an emotional experience found in personal communion with a higher power, what Emerson would have seen

as the Oversoul. Other Americans embraced reform movements against slavery or utopian ideals that sought truth outside the regular confines of society, for example.

Those who rejected conventional morality were frequently met with harsh criticism by more conservative forces in society. In an America in which such criticism could make the difference between having a livelihood or not, and in which the local church was the central site for organizing society, nonconformity was a brave but hard choice. Emerson's "Self-Reliance" is an exhortation to Americans to refuse to conform despite the cost and a guide for those who wonder what can take the place of traditional morality.

Emerson's rejection of conformity stems from his idea that society is the source of immorality because it undercuts the independence of the individual. Society is characterized by "the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times" and it is the job of the individual to "hurl in the face of custom, and trade, and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works." He argues that the greatest act of morality is therefore to be a nonconformist. While Emerson saw most of society as viewing morality in traditional, Christian terms that focus on acts of faith as expressions of goodness, he believes it is more moral to live by the light of one's own conscience.

He even goes so far as to reject conventional charity that is motivated by conformity—that is, charity that is motivated by a desire to appear like a "good person" to the rest of society"—as being "a wicked Dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold." Emerson's use of the word "manhood" to describe his refusal to be dominated by social convention is typical. Emerson often uses the nineteenth-century language of manliness to encourage his readers to reject the constraints of society. According to Emerson, a true, self-reliant man—one who is independent in his opinions—is the equal of any other person regardless of birth and is worthy of respect simply because of his character. This definition stands in contrast to the conventional ideal of the time of the "gentleman"—a man who was respected by society because of his social standing, his education, his good birth, his good reputation, and his ability to demonstrate conventional good manners. Emerson claims that "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" because merely conforming to societal dictates hampers the ability of a person to be independent. According to this logic, attempting to blend into society by honouring its constraints leads the individual away from the ability to

listen to his own intuition, and thus “society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.”

Emerson understands that this conspiracy makes the resolution to be a nonconformist difficult because of societal pressures. Nevertheless, he believes that to achieve true independence and greatness, the individual must learn not to fear the disapproval of society. Emerson admits that regardless of his actions, the individual will always be judged by society. However, he argues that fear of such judgement should not be taken into account since, as he puts it, “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think.... It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” Furthermore, Emerson claims that trying to conform to societal expectations wastes one’s energy and genius because “it scatters your force.” He also argues that the individual must not be afraid even “when the ignorant and the poor are aroused, when the unintelligent brute force that lies at the bottom of society is made to growl and mow.” Being willing to offend the sensibilities of the common person on the street is, in Emerson’s mind, the mark of greatness. Considering that the common man was seen as the hero of American culture at this point, Emerson’s call to ignore him is actually a call to go against the grain of much of American culture of the day.

Anti-Enlightenment Ideas and American Culture

Emerson wrote “Self-Reliance” in 1841. The United States had won the Revolutionary War only 65 years earlier, and the Constitution had existed for just 52 years. In other words, the United States was still a very young nation, and Emerson shared with many other American writers and thinkers a preoccupation with finding and creating a uniquely American culture, one that was not so dependent upon Europe. Most thinkers of the earlier years of the United States had been influenced by the European Enlightenment, a period of history that roughly covers the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Enlightenment thinkers believed that reason was the most important guide for human actions and that society, through the application of reason, would improve and follow a steady path of progress. They further believed that the past, particularly the classical society of the Greeks and Romans, could serve as a model for both society and the arts.

Emerson, however, rejects the pure practice of Enlightenment ideals by the individual. Whimsy and inconsistency, which run counter to the Enlightenment ideals of reason and order, are virtues that Emerson believes can help the individual to become a more self-reliant thinker. In fact, when Emerson states that "[a] foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines," he is pointing out that holding ourselves up to such standards of rationality can actually interfere with the ability to be a great thinker. In advancing spontaneity and inconsistency as positive traits, Emerson (and transcendentalism more generally) was embracing the tenets of Romanticism, a nineteenth-century literary and cultural movement that placed greater emphasis on spontaneity, irregularity, and emotion than the Enlightenment movement that preceded it.

Emerson also rejects the Enlightenment view of history and progress. Enlightenment thinkers had a deep belief in the inevitability of progress if humanity would only rely on rationality. Emerson rejects this idea, insisting instead that the very idea of "progress" is false and damaging. At one point in "Self-Reliance," Emerson states that "Society never advances." In making this comment, Emerson isn't saying that things don't change. Rather, he is implying that the changes we see in society are not necessarily improvements. He is saying that even as things change, they do not progress according to the Enlightenment model. What we typically call progress is not, to Emerson, progress at all. He compares "the well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with … the naked New Zealander, whose property is a club, a spear, a mat, and an undivided twentieth of a shed to sleep under!" and claims that the New Zealander is the healthier of the two. Emerson believes that a person who might typically be called "primitive" has, precisely because they are not surrounded by the "society" and "progress" of modern life, a deeper connection with the things that are truly important: nature and their own individual selves.

Emerson's hostility to Enlightenment ideals also seems to emerge from a belief that American genius will only grow once the culture rejects the impulse to imitate Europe as a source of inspiration and instead focuses on materials and inspiration that are closer at hand. Just as Emerson believed that in "trusting thyself" a person could gain self-reliance, he believed that if American writers and artists would "trust" America and focus on elements that are specific to an American geography, they could achieve self-reliance in the artistic realm as well. According to Emerson, "[I]f the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of

the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also." Emerson's argument for American genius was typical of the day. While the prevailing wisdom (in both America and Europe) just after the turn of the century was that American culture and arts were provincial, many American writers and artists of this period sought to transform what was unique about the United States into sources for a truly American culture.

Nature

Emerson and other transcendentalists believed that nature—rather than society, institutions, or the Church—is the ultimate source of truth about the self, God, and existence. As Emerson put it in another essay he wrote, "The Foregoing generations beheld God and Nature face to face; we—through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe." In this quote, Emerson is saying that, while previous generations connected directly to God and Nature, the modern generation connects to those things only through the institutional leavings of the previous generation. Emerson advocates not settling for such an indirect connection, and he argues that actually engaging with nature offers the means of gaining that direct connection to existence, and, as a consequence, a deeper understanding of the self and self-reliance.

Emerson believes that "the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed." In this passage Emerson makes the case for that unity of things, and describes the way that people can experience those "calm hours" of nature in which they then experience unity.

But Emerson sees nature as a great teacher in a different way as well. He sees nature as providing the ultimate example of what it means to be self-reliant. As Emerson describes it, people should relate to the rest of existence in the way that "blade of grass or the blowing rose" do—there is "no time to them" and they "exist with God to-day," without dwelling on the past. However, Emerson continues: "man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future." Further, Emerson states, the individual "cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time."

Emerson's argument here underlies his view about the falseness of the concept of "progress," which involves a measuring against the past and future, rather than an engagement with the present. Emerson argues that God and existence happen solely in the present, and that only in nature can the individual see the present in its "richness." The self-reliant individual, though, attuned to nature and his (or her) inner self, is connected to the present, and therefore to the unity of everything. Emerson sees nature also as offering a more practical model of self-sufficiency. "Power," he states, "is in nature the essential measure of right. Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself." Nature therefore offers a "demonstration of the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul."

Emerson, of course, is also interested in human nature. But he argues that society—with its pressures to conform and to respect only what society itself teaches rather than what a person actually intrinsically thinks or feels—actually takes people out of their own nature. Emerson then argues that it is possible to find examples of a self-reliant human nature by paying attention to people that are closer to nature. Emerson sees babies and children as perfect examples of human nature in touch with itself. He calls them "pretty oracles nature yields" because they have not yet internalized societal expectations and habits of thoughts that lead them to devalue emotion and their own intuition. Celebrating the wilfulness of children, Emerson playfully remarks that "infancy conforms to nobody: all conform to it, so that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it."

Emerson extends his example to boyhood by remarking that the "nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say ought to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature." Like a baby, Emerson says, a boy is "independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict." Emerson adds that a grown man in the grip of societal expectations, on the other hand is "clapped into jail by his consciousness."

Emerson's ideas about the individual, then, are closely connected to his ideas about nature. Emerson's self-sufficient individual, in fact, is someone who is connected to and displays the same sorts of traits as nature itself. Further, Emerson argues that, despite the pressure to conform to society, all people (even the most conformist) still display some measure of self-reliance. As Emerson states, "no man can violate his nature." In other words, he is saying

that while conforming to societal expectations can warp or obscure a person's natural self-reliance, it can't eliminate it entirely. And, if people exercise that self-reliance, Emerson believes it will bring them back into their original connection to nature. As puts it, if individuals acknowledge that underlying nature, all of their actions will be "honest and natural in their hour."

2. **Moby Dick: Herman Melville**

Herman Melville: Biography

Herman Melville was born on the first of August in 1819 in New York City, the third of eight children of Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melvill. His ancestors included several Scottish and Dutch settlers of New York, as well as a number of prominent leaders in the American Revolution.

By June 1846 Melville came up with his first novel, *Typee*. This novel is the reputed story of his life among the cannibalistic Typee people for several months in 1842, but is likely a highly fictionalized dramatization of the actual events. Melville's second novel, *Omoo* (1847) details the adventures of another whaling journey in which Melville took part in a mutiny and landed in a Tahitian jail, from which he later easily escaped.

In August 1847 began a new book, *Mardi*, which would be published in 1849. The novel was another Polynesian adventure, but its fantastical elements and jarring juxtaposition of styles made it a critical and commercial disappointment. *The Successes Redburn* (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850) returned to the style that had made Melville famous, but neither work expanded the author's reputation.

In the summer of 1850, under the influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Melville bought the Arrowhead farm near Pittsfield so that he could live near Hawthorne, and the two men, who shared similar philosophies, became close. The relationship with Hawthorne reawakened Melville's creative energies, and in 1851 Melville published his most renowned novel, *Moby Dick*. Although now heralded as a landmark work in American literature, the novel received little acclaim upon its release. He followed this with *Pierre* (1852), a novel that drew from Melville's experiences as a youth, and the modest success *Israel Potter* (1855). Melville's most significant works outside of *Moby Dick* include the short stories that he wrote during this time period, including "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) and "Benito Cereno" (1855).

In 1856 Melville journeyed to Europe, and he followed this sojourn with the publication of *The Confidence Man* (1857), the final novel that Melville would publish during his lifetime. During his final years Melville did return to writing prose, and completed the novel *Billy Budd*, which was not published until 1924, several decades after his death. Melville completed *Billy Budd*, the story of a sailor who accidentally kills his master after being provoked by a false charge, in April of 1891, and five months later he died, on September 28 in New York City.

About the Text

The novel *Moby Dick* was the sixth novel published by Herman Melville, a landmark of American literature that mixed a number of literary styles including a fictional adventure story, historical detail and even scientific discussion. The story of the voyage of the whaling ship Pequod, the novel draws at least partially from the experiences of its author while a sailor and a harpooner on whaling ships before settling in New England as a writer.

The title character of *Moby Dick* was inspired by an article in Knickerbocker magazine in May 1839 entitled "Mocha Dick: or the White Whale of the Pacific." The author of this article, Jeremiah Reynolds, detailed the capture of a giant sperm whale legendary among whalers for its vicious attacks on ships. The whale was named as such after the Mocha Islands, the area where the whale was commonly sighted ("Dick" was used simply because it was a common male name). The origin of the "Moby" of the novel's title has never been conclusively determined.

By the time Melville had begun work on *Moby Dick*, he had lost a great deal of renown as a novelist following several disappointing novels. He intended *Moby Dick* as a return to the type of adventure stories such as *Typee* and *Omoo* that made his reputation, but the novel instead took a different turn. In his letters he described the novel as a romantic and fanciful adventure, yet the final novel took a far different turn. During this time Melville had become deeply influenced by his author and neighbour Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose cynical and imposing works bear some resemblance to the tragic epic that Melville produced. Shifting away from the romantic adventure he had promised his publisher and influenced by Shakespeare and Hawthorne, Melville delivered instead a bleak and digressive narrative.

The first publication of *Moby Dick* was in London in October of 1851. Entitled *The Whale*, the novel was published in three volumes and was censored for some of its political and moral content. The British publisher of the novel, Richard Bentley, inadvertently left out the

Epilogue to the novel, leading many critics to wonder how the tale could be told in the first person by Ishmael, when the final chapter witnesses the sinking of the Pequod with presumably no survivors.

The first American publication of the novel came the following month. The American version of the novel, published by Harper & Brothers, although fixing the narrative error of the British version through the inclusion of the epilogue, was poorly received by critics and readers who expected a romantic high seas adventure akin to Melville's first successes. The reputation of the novel floundered for many years, and it was only after Melville's death that it became considered one of the major novels in American literature.

Character List

Ishmael: The narrator, and a junior member of the crew of the Pequod. Ishmael doesn't play a major role in the events of the novel, but much of the narrative is taken up by his eloquent, verbose, and extravagant discourse on whales and whaling.

Ahab: The egomaniacal captain of the Pequod. Ahab lost his leg to Moby Dick. He is single-minded in his pursuit of the whale, using a mixture of charisma and terror to persuade his crew to join him. As a captain, he is dictatorial but not unfair. At moments he shows a compassionate side, caring for the insane Pip and musing on his wife and child back in Nantucket.

Moby Dick: The great white sperm whale. Moby Dick, also referred to as the White Whale, is an infamous and dangerous threat to seamen, considered by Ahab the incarnation of evil and a fated nemesis.

Starbuck: The first mate of the Pequod. Starbuck questions Ahab's judgment, first in private and later in public. He is a Quaker who believes that Christianity offers a way to interpret the world around him, although he is not dogmatic or pushy about his beliefs. Starbuck acts as a conservative force against Ahab's mania.

Queequeg: Starbuck's skilled harpooner and Ishmael's best friend. Queequeg was once a prince from a South Sea island who stowed away on a whaling ship in search of adventure. He is a composite of elements of African, Polynesian, Islamic, Christian, and Native American cultures. He is brave and generous, and enables Ishmael to see that race has no bearing on a man's character.

Stubb: The second mate of the Pequod. Stubb, chiefly characterized by his mischievous good humour, is easy-going and popular. He proves a bit of a nihilist, always trusting in fate and refusing to assign too much significance to anything.

Tashtego: Stubb's harpooner, Tashtego is a Gay Head Indian from Martha's Vineyard, one of the last of a tribe about to disappear. Tashtego performs many of the skilled tasks aboard the ship, such as tapping the case of spermaceti in the whale's head. Like Queequeg, Tashtego embodies certain characteristics of the "noble savage" and is meant to defy racial stereotypes. He is, however, more practical and less intellectual than Queequeg: like many a common sailor, Tashtego craves rum.

Flask: A native of Tisbury on Martha's Vineyard and the third mate of the Pequod. Short and stocky, Flask has a confrontational attitude and no reverence for anything. His stature has earned him the nickname "King-Post," because he resembles a certain type of short, square timber.

Daggoo: Flask's harpooner. Daggoo is a physically enormous, imperious-looking African. Like Queequeg, he stowed away on a whaling ship that stopped near his home. Daggoo is less prominent in the narrative than either Queequeg or Tashtego.

Pip: A young black boy who fills the role of a cabin boy or jester on the Pequod. Pip has a minimal role in the beginning of the narrative but becomes important when he goes insane after being left to drift alone in the sea for some time. Like the fools in Shakespeare's plays, he is half idiot and half prophet, often perceiving things that others don't.

Fedallah: A strange, "oriental" old Parsee (Persian fire-worshipper) whom Ahab has brought on board unbeknownst to most of the crew. Fedallah has a very striking appearance: around his head is a turban made from his own hair, and he wears a black Chinese jacket and pants. He is an almost supernaturally skilled hunter and also serves as a prophet to Ahab. Fedallah keeps his distance from the rest of the crew, who for their part view him with unease.

Peleg: A well-to-do retired whale man of Nantucket and a Quaker. As one of the principal owners of the Pequod, Peleg, along with Captain Bildad, takes care of hiring the crew. When the two are negotiating wages for Ishmael and Queequeg, Peleg plays the generous one, although his salary offer is not terribly impressive.

Bildad: Another well-to-do Quaker ex-whale man from Nantucket who owns a large share of the Pequod. Bildad is (or pretends to be) crustier than Peleg in negotiations over wages. Both men display a business sense and a bloodthirstiness unusual for Quakers, who are normally pacifists.

Father Mapple: A former whale man and now the preacher in the New Bedford Whale man's Chapel. Father Mapple delivers a sermon on Jonah and the whale in which he uses the Bible to address the whale men's lives. Learned but also experienced, he is an example of someone whose trials have led him toward God rather than bitterness or revenge.

Captain Boomer: The jovial captain of the English whaling ship the Samuel Enderby. Boomer lost his arm in an accident involving Moby Dick. Unlike Ahab, Boomer is glad to have escaped with his life, and he sees further pursuit of the whale as madness. He is a foil for Ahab, as the two men react in different ways to a similar experience.

Gabriel: A sailor aboard the Jeroboam. Part of a Shaker sect, Gabriel has prophesied that Moby Dick is the incarnation of the Shaker god and that any attempts to harm him will result in disaster. His prophecies have been borne out by the death of the Jeroboam's mate in a whale hunt and the plague that rages aboard the ship.

Detailed Summary

The novel is an epic tale of the voyage of the whaling ship the Pequod and its captain, Ahab, who relentlessly pursues the great Sperm Whale (the title character) during a journey around the world. The narrator of the novel is Ishmael, a sailor on the Pequod who undertakes the journey out of his affection for the sea. Ishmael announces his intent to ship aboard a whaling vessel. He has made several voyages as a sailor but none as a whaler. He travels to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he stays in a whalers' inn. Since the inn is rather full, he has to share a bed with a harpooner from the South Pacific named Queequeg. At first repulsed by Queequeg's strange habits and shocking appearance (Queequeg is covered with tattoos), Ishmael eventually comes to appreciate the man's generosity and kind spirit, and the two decide to seek work on a whaling vessel together. They take a ferry to Nantucket, the traditional capital of the whaling industry. There they secure berths on the Pequod, a savage-looking ship adorned with the bones and teeth of sperm whales. Peleg and Bildad, the Pequod's Quaker owners, drive a hard bargain in terms of salary. They also mention the ship's mysterious captain, Ahab,

who is still recovering from losing his leg in an encounter with a sperm whale on his last voyage.

The Pequod leaves Nantucket on a cold Christmas Day with a crew made up of men from many different countries and races. Soon the ship is in warmer waters, and Ahab makes his first appearance on deck, balancing gingerly on his false leg, which is made from a sperm whale's jaw. He announces his desire to pursue and kill Moby Dick, the legendary great white whale who took his leg, because he sees this whale as the embodiment of evil. Ahab nails a gold doubloon to the mast and declares that it will be the prize for the first man to sight the whale. As the Pequod sails toward the southern tip of Africa, whales are sighted and unsuccessfully hunted. During the hunt, a group of men, none of whom anyone on the ship's crew has seen before on the voyage, emerges from the hold. The men's leader is an exotic-looking man named Fedallah. These men constitute Ahab's private harpoon crew, smuggled aboard in defiance of Bildad and Peleg. Ahab hopes that their skills and Fedallah's prophetic abilities will help him in his hunt for Moby Dick.

The Pequod rounds Africa and enters the Indian Ocean. A few whales are successfully caught and processed for their oil. From time to time, the ship encounters other whaling vessels. Ahab always demands information about Moby Dick from their captains. One of the ships, the Jeroboam, carries Gabriel, a crazed prophet who predicts doom for anyone who threatens Moby Dick. His predictions seem to carry some weight, as those aboard his ship who have hunted the whale have met disaster. While trying to drain the oil from the head of a captured sperm whale, Tashtego, one of the Pequod's harpooners, falls into the whale's voluminous head, which then rips free of the ship and begins to sink. Queequeg saves Tashtego by diving into the ocean and cutting into the slowly sinking head.

During another whale hunt, Pip, the Pequod's black cabin boy, jumps from a whaleboat and is left behind in the middle of the ocean. He goes insane as the result of the experience and becomes a crazy but prophetic jester for the ship. Soon after, the Pequod meets the Samuel Enderby, a whaling ship whose skipper, Captain Boomer, has lost an arm in an encounter with Moby Dick. The two captains discuss the whale; Boomer, happy simply to have survived his encounter, cannot understand Ahab's lust for vengeance. Not long after, Queequeg falls ill and has the ship's carpenter make him a coffin in anticipation of his death. He recovers, however, and the coffin eventually becomes the Pequod's replacement life buoy.

Ahab orders a harpoon forged in the expectation that he will soon encounter Moby Dick. He baptizes the harpoon with the blood of the Pequod's three harpooners. The Pequod kills several more whales. Issuing a prophecy about Ahab's death, Fedallah declares that Ahab will first see two hearses, the second of which will be made only from American wood, and that he will be killed by hemp rope. Ahab interprets these words to mean that he will not die at sea, where there are no hearses and no hangings. A typhoon hits the Pequod, illuminating it with electrical fire. Ahab takes this occurrence as a sign of imminent confrontation and success, but Starbuck, the ship's first mate, takes it as a bad omen and considers killing Ahab to end the mad quest. After the storm ends, one of the sailors falls from the ship's masthead and drowns—a grim foreshadowing of what lies ahead.

Ahab's fervent desire to find and destroy Moby Dick continues to intensify, and the mad Pip is now his constant companion. The Pequod approaches the equator, where Ahab expects to find the great whale. The ship encounters two more whaling ships, the Rachel and the Delight, both of which have recently had fatal encounters with the whale. Ahab finally sights Moby Dick. The harpoon boats are launched, and Moby Dick attacks Ahab's harpoon boat, destroying it. The next day, Moby Dick is sighted again, and the boats are lowered once more. The whale is harpooned, but Moby Dick again attacks Ahab's boat. Fedallah, trapped in the harpoon line, is dragged overboard to his death. Starbuck must manoeuvre the Pequod between Ahab and the angry whale.

On the third day, the boats are once again sent after Moby Dick, who once again attacks them. The men can see Fedallah's corpse lashed to the whale by the harpoon line. Moby Dick rams the Pequod and sinks it. Ahab is then caught in a harpoon line and hurled out of his harpoon boat to his death. All of the remaining whaleboats and men are caught in the vortex created by the sinking Pequod and pulled under to their deaths. Ishmael, who was thrown from a boat at the beginning of the chase, was far enough away to escape the whirlpool, and he alone survives. He floats atop Queequeg's coffin, which popped back up from the wreck, until he is picked up by the Rachel, which is still searching for the crewmen lost in her earlier encounter with Moby Dick.

Themes

Limits of Knowledge

One of the novel's primary themes is that neither nature nor human life can be understood perfectly. At times during the voyage, the Pequod's crewmembers reflect, with feelings ranging from cheerful resignation to despair, on the uncertainty of their fate. This uncertainty parallels the doubts of religious faith. Ishmael notably remarks that "our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it." The implication is that complete knowledge of oneself and of God comes only in death. Ignorance is a condition of human life. Human ignorance is also represented by a lack of knowledge, among the Pequod's crew at sea, about the world beyond its sight: the vessel must rely on encounters with other ships to gather news and information, as well as to gather clues about where Moby Dick might be.

In this way, the Pequod's doomed pursuit of Moby Dick symbolizes man's futile pursuit of complete knowledge. In explaining life at sea and the nature of whales, Ishmael's narrative teems with detailed references to scientific, religious, historical, and literary texts relating to the whale and whaling history. However, Ishmael also emphasizes that the whale is "the one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last," and that the only way to know what a whale is really like is to go whaling oneself—a dangerous, often fatal enterprise. The whale, in its ultimate mystery, represents the limits of human knowledge.

Fate and Free Will

Despite their awareness of the limits of human knowledge, Ishmael and other characters are often trying to interpret signs of the world around them in order to determine their fates. At the beginning of the book, Ishmael intimates that it was fate that led him to decide, after many merchant voyages, to sign up for a whaling ship—although at the time it felt like he was doing so of his own free will. Over the course of the novel, it remains a question whether fate is a real force driving the book's events or whether it is something that exists primarily in characters' minds.

As Ishmael and Queequeg head towards the Pequod to set sail, a mysterious and intimidating stranger named Elijah (like the Biblical prophet) drops ominous hints about the voyage they have ahead. Prophecies, portents, and superstitions are a major part of life on board the Pequod. No one believes more strongly in fate than Ahab, whose monomaniacal pursuit of

Moby Dick is based, not just on the desire for revenge, but a belief that it is his destiny to slay the whale. This belief, combined with his egotism, actually leads him to ignore three major omens which suggest the voyage is doomed: the breaking of his quadrant, the compass needles going haywire after a storm, and the snapping of the ship's log-line. It remains unclear whether it is fate or Ahab's own free will that leads to his ruin.

Nature and Man

The novel centres on man's multi-faceted interaction with nature, whether by trying to control or tame it; understand it; profit from it; or, in Ahab's case, defeat it. The book implies that nature, much like the whale, is an impersonal and inscrutable phenomenon. Man tends to treat nature as an entity with motives or emotions, when in fact nature is ultimately indifferent to man. The cautious and pragmatic Starbuck is one character who sees the whale as just an animal; he admonishes Ahab for seeking revenge on Moby Dick, saying, "To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous." Ahab gives a long reply that suggests he sees the whale, not just as an animal, but as the mask for a higher entity, "some unknown but still reasoning thing… That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me." The novel portrays this defiance as both insane and blasphemous, contrasting it with the attitude of Starbuck, who avoids foolish risks and remains aware that he is there to kill whales for a living "and not to be killed by them for theirs."

Race, Fellowship, and Enslavement

The book explores many different forms of equality, fellowship, and enslavement in human relations. A notable example of fellowship and racial tolerance is Ishmael's close friendship with Queequeg. Although Ishmael is initially repulsed and terrified by Queequeg's appearance and background, he soon perceives Queequeg to be principled, loyal, affectionate, and talented. The two men become "married," in Queequeg's parlance, meaning that they vow to join their fates and lay down their lives for each other.

The organization of the Pequod is portrayed as more meritocratic and less racist than society at large. The crew is racially diverse, with rank and pay dependent on skill; meanwhile, the men are financially interdependent, since none of them are paid upfront and any profit will arise from collective success. This interdependence also takes a physical form: Ishmael notes

that the Pequod is distinct among whaling boats in that a harpooner and the crew member in charge of holding onto him with a rope are tied together, so that if the harpooner is dragged into the sea, the corresponding crew member will be dragged down too.

The Pequod does parallel conventional society in that the captain and mates are all white, while all the harpooners working under them (as well as many lower-order crew members) are non-white. However, all members of the Pequod's crew are subject to Ahab's whims and bouts of frenzy; in this sense, they are all equally enslaved. Early in the novel, Ishmael asks rhetorically, "Who ain't a slave?" He is referring to the fact that most people, and not just sailors like him, live at the beck and call of others; everybody follows orders, and everybody is subjugated in some way. Notably, Ishmael's chosen name ("Call me Ishmael," he says in the opening chapter, making it unclear whether it is his real or assumed name) is Biblical in origin, and refers to the prophet Abraham's son with the slave woman Hagar.

Madness

Through the contrasting characters of Ahab and Pip, the novel presents two very different portraits of madness and its consequences. Throughout the voyage, Ahab's madness holds sway over the sanity of other characters, most notably his reasonable and prudent first mate Starbuck. Insanity of a different kind is seen in Pip who, like Ahab, goes mad after a traumatic experience at sea. However, while Ahab's madness propels him to action, Pip's madness effectively paralyzes him and leaves his mind empty. Perhaps fittingly, then, Pip is the only person on board with whom Ahab develops an affectionate and protective relationship.

One of the interesting implications of madness aboard the Pequod, however, is the willingness of the members of the crew to go along with Ahab's strange quest, even when they recognize how difficult, perhaps impossible, it would be to find a single whale in all the oceans of the world. But the crew of the Pequod does sign on for the whale-hunt, motivated not simply by the presence of the gold doubloon (which eventually goes down with the ship), but by the mania Ahab has encouraged, the "monomaniacal" pursuit for one whale.

Religion

Religion is a major point of reference for Ishmael. In New Bedford, before the voyage, he visits a "Whale man's Chapel" and hears a long and heated sermon, delivered by the stern Father Mapple, that centres on the story of Jonah and the whale. The sermon recounts Jonah's futile attempt to flee God, and suggests that the harder Jonah tries to escape, the harsher

becomes his punishment. Father Mapple emphasizes that, after being swallowed by the whale, Jonah does not pray for deliverance, but accepts his punishment. Only then does God relent and bring Jonah to safety. After being saved from the whale and the sea, Jonah goes on, in Father Mapple's words, "to preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood." Jonah's preaching parallels Ishmael's eventual telling of his own whaling story, when he becomes (whether through luck, fate, or divine intervention) the lone survivor of the Pequod's wreck.

Although heavy with references to the Bible and Christianity, the book does not espouse one religion, instead suggesting that goodness can be found in people of any faith. After striking up a friendship with Queequeg, Ishmael quickly becomes tolerant of his new friend's religion, even going so far as to participate in Queequeg's ritual homage to a carven idol—a practice explicitly forbidden by Christianity. Religious tolerance is also a notable part of life on board the ship, with so-called heathens and Christians working side by side.

3. **Huckleberry Finn: Mark Twain**

Mark Twain: Biography

Christened as Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the man who would call himself Mark Twain was born on November 30, 1835 in the small river town of Florida, Missouri, just 200 miles from Indian Territory. The sixth child of John Marshall Clemens and Jane Lampton, Twain lived in Florida, Missouri until the age of four, at which time his family relocated to the town of Hannibal in hopes of improving their living situation.

By lineage, Twain was a Southerner, as both of his parents' families hailed from Virginia. The slaveholding community of Hannibal, a river town with a population of 2000, provided a mix of rugged frontier life and the Southern tradition, a lifestyle that influenced Twain's later writings, including the Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Few black slaves actually resided in Hannibal, and the small farms on the delta were no comparison to the typical Southern plantation. In Hannibal, blacks were mostly held as household servants rather than field workers, but were still under the obligations of slavery.

In his youth, Twain was a mischievous boy, the prototype of his character, Tom Sawyer. After traveling to Europe, in the beginning of his career, for a lecture series, Twain experienced a turning point in his career. Twain's earliest novel, *The Gilded Age*, written in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner, was published in 1873. The novel is about the 1800s era of corruption and exploitation at the expense of public welfare. *The Gilded Age* was Twain's first

extended work of fiction and marked him in the literary world as an author rather than a journalist.

After the broad success of *The Gilded Age*, Twain began a period of full-time writing. In 1880, his third daughter, Jean, was born. By the time Twain reached age fifty, he was already considered a successful writer and businessman. His popularity sky-rocketed with the publications of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882), and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). By 1885, Twain was considered one the greatest character writers in the literary community.

Twain died on April 21, 1910, having survived his children Langdon, Susan and Jean as well as his wife, Olivia. In his lifetime, he became a distinguished member of the literati, and was honoured by Yale, the University of Missouri, and Oxford with literary degrees. With his death, many volumes of his letters, articles, and fables were published, including: *The Letters of Quintas Curtius Snodgrass* (1946); *Simon Wheeler, Detective* (1963); *The Works of Mark Twain: What is Man? and Other Philosophical Writings* (1973); and *Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals* (1975-79). Perhaps more than any other classic American writer, Mark Twain is seen as a phenomenal author, but also as a personality that defined an era.

About the Text

Twain began work on *Huckleberry Finn*, a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, in an effort to capitalize on the popularity of the earlier novel. Huck was already well known to an American audience thirsting for more of Twain's brand of humour. This new novel took on a more serious character, however, as Twain focused increasingly on the institution of slavery and the South. Twain soon set *Huckleberry Finn* aside, perhaps because its darker tone did not fit the optimistic sentiments of the *Gilded Age*. In the early 1880s, however, the hopefulness of the post–Civil War years began to fade. Reconstruction, the political program designed to reintegrate the defeated South into the Union as a slavery-free region, began to fail. The harsh measures the victorious North imposed only embittered the South. Concerned about maintaining power, many Southern politicians began an effort to control and oppress the black men and women whom the war had freed.

Character List

Huckleberry "Huck" Finn: The protagonist and narrator of the novel. Huck is the thirteen-year-old son of the local drunk of St. Petersburg, Missouri, a town on the Mississippi River.

Frequently forced to survive on his own wits and always a bit of an outcast, Huck is thoughtful, intelligent (though formally uneducated), and willing to come to his own conclusions about important matters, even if these conclusions contradict society's norms. Nevertheless, Huck is still a boy, and is influenced by others, particularly by his imaginative friend, Tom.

Tom Sawyer: Huck's friend, and the protagonist of *Tom Sawyer*, the novel to which *Huckleberry Finn* is ostensibly the sequel. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Tom serves as a foil to Huck: imaginative, dominating, and given to wild plans taken from the plots of adventure novels, Tom is everything that Huck is not. Tom's stubborn reliance on the "authorities" of romance novels leads him to acts of incredible stupidity and startling cruelty. His rigid adherence to society's conventions aligns Tom with the "sivilizing" forces that Huck learns to see through and gradually abandons.

Widow Douglas and Miss Watson: Two wealthy sisters who live together in a large house in St. Petersburg and who adopt Huck. The gaunt and severe Miss Watson is the most prominent representative of the hypocritical religious and ethical values Twain criticizes in the novel. The Widow Douglas is somewhat gentler in her beliefs and has more patience with the mischievous Huck. When Huck acts in a manner contrary to societal expectations, it is the Widow Douglas whom he fears disappointing.

Jim: One of Miss Watson's household slaves. Jim is superstitious and occasionally sentimental, but he is also intelligent, practical, and ultimately more of an adult than anyone else in the novel. Jim's frequent acts of selflessness, his longing for his family, and his friendship with both Huck and Tom demonstrate to Huck that humanity has nothing to do with race. Because Jim is a black man and a runaway slave, he is at the mercy of almost all the other characters in the novel and is often forced into ridiculous and degrading situations.

Pap: Huck's father, the town drunk and ne'er-do-well. Pap is a wreck when he appears at the beginning of the novel, with disgusting, ghostlike white skin and tattered clothes. The illiterate Pap disapproves of Huck's education and beats him frequently. Pap represents both the general debasement of white society and the failure of family structures in the novel.

The Duke and The Dauphin: A pair of con men whom Huck and Jim rescue as they are being run out of a river town. The older man, who appears to be about seventy, claims to be the "dauphin," the son of King Louis XVI and heir to the French throne. The younger man, who is about thirty, claims to be the usurped Duke of Bridgewater. Although Huck quickly realizes

the men are frauds, he and Jim remain at their mercy, as Huck is only a child and Jim is a runaway slave. The duke and the dauphin carry out a number of increasingly disturbing swindles as they travel down the river on the raft.

Judge Thatcher: The local judge who shares responsibility for Huck with the Widow Douglas and is in charge of safeguarding the money that Huck and Tom found at the end of Tom Sawyer. When Huck discovers that Pap has returned to town, he wisely signs his fortune over to the Judge, who doesn't really accept the money, but tries to comfort Huck. Judge Thatcher has a daughter, Becky, who was Tom's girlfriend in *Tom Sawyer* and whom Huck calls "Bessie" in this novel.

The Grangerfords: A family that takes Huck in after a steamboat hits his raft, separating him from Jim. The kind-hearted Grangerfords, who offer Huck a place to stay in their tacky country home, are locked in a long-standing feud with another local family, the Shepherdsons. Twain uses the two families to engage in some rollicking humour and to mock an overly romanticizes ideas about family honour. Ultimately, the families' sensationalized feud gets many of them killed.

The Wilks Family: At one point during their travels, the duke and the dauphin encounter a man who tells them of the death of a local named Peter Wilks, who has left behind a rich estate. The man inadvertently gives the con men enough information to allow them to pretend to be Wilks's two brothers from England, who are the recipients of much of the inheritance. The duke and the dauphin's subsequent conning of the good-hearted and vulnerable Wilks sisters is the first step in the con men's increasingly cruel series of scams, which culminate in the sale of Jim.

Silas and Sally Phelps: Tom Sawyer's aunt and uncle, whom Huck coincidentally encounters in his search for Jim after the con men have sold him. Sally is the sister of Tom's aunt, Polly. Essentially good people, the Phelpses nevertheless hold Jim in custody and try to return him to his rightful owner. Silas and Sally are the unknowing victims of many of Tom and Huck's "preparations" as they try to free Jim. The Phelpses are the only intact and functional family in this novel, yet they are too much for Huck, who longs to escape their "sivilizing" influence.

Aunt Polly: Tom Sawyer's aunt and guardian and Sally Phelps's sister. Aunt Polly appears at the end of the novel and properly identifies Huck, who has pretended to be Tom, and Tom, who has pretended to be his own younger brother, Sid.

Detailed Summary

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn opens by familiarizing us with the events of the novel that preceded it, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Both novels are set in the town of St. Petersburg, Missouri, which lies on the banks of the Mississippi River. At the end of *Tom Sawyer*, Huckleberry Finn, a poor boy with a drunken bum for a father, and his friend Tom Sawyer, a middle-class boy with an imagination too active for his own good, found a robber's stash of gold. As a result of his adventure, Huck gained quite a bit of money, which the bank held for him in trust. Huck was adopted by the Widow Douglas, a kind but stifling woman who lives with her sister, the self-righteous Miss Watson.

As *Huckleberry Finn* opens, Huck is none too thrilled with his new life of cleanliness, manners, church, and school. However, he sticks it out at the bequest of Tom Sawyer, who tells him that in order to take part in Tom's new "robbers' gang," Huck must stay "respectable." All is well and good until Huck's brutish, drunken father, Pap, reappears in town and demands Huck's money. The local judge, Judge Thatcher, and the Widow try to get legal custody of Huck, but another well-intentioned new judge in town believes in the rights of Huck's natural father and even takes the old drunk into his own home in an attempt to reform him. This effort fails miserably, and Pap soon returns to his old ways. He hangs around town for several months, harassing his son, who in the meantime has learned to read and to tolerate the Widow's attempts to improve him. Finally, outraged when the Widow Douglas warns him to stay away from her house, Pap kidnaps Huck and holds him in a cabin across the river from St. Petersburg.

Whenever Pap goes out, he locks Huck in the cabin, and when he returns home drunk, he beats the boy. Tired of his confinement and fearing the beatings will worsen, Huck escapes from Pap by faking his own death, killing a pig and spreading its blood all over the cabin. Hiding on Jackson's Island in the middle of the Mississippi River, Huck watches the townspeople search the river for his body. After a few days on the island, he encounters Jim, one of Miss Watson's slaves. Jim has run away from Miss Watson after hearing her talk about selling him to a plantation down the river, where he would be treated horribly and separated from his wife and children. Huck and Jim team up, despite Huck's uncertainty about the legality or morality of helping a runaway slave. While they camp out on the island, a great storm causes the Mississippi to flood. Huck and Jim spy a log raft and a house floating past the island. They capture the raft and loot the house, finding in it the body of a man who has been shot. Jim refuses to let Huck see the dead man's face.

Although the island is blissful, Huck and Jim are forced to leave after Huck learns from a woman onshore that her husband has seen smoke coming from the island and believes that Jim is hiding out there. Huck also learns that a reward has been offered for Jim's capture. Huck and Jim start downriver on the raft, intending to leave it at the mouth of the Ohio River and proceed up that river by steamboat to the free states, where slavery is prohibited. Several days' travel takes them past St. Louis, and they have a close encounter with a gang of robbers on a wrecked steamboat. They manage to escape with the robbers' loot.

During a night of thick fog, Huck and Jim miss the mouth of the Ohio and encounter a group of men looking for escaped slaves. Huck has a brief moral crisis about concealing stolen "property"—Jim, after all, belongs to Miss Watson—but then lies to the men and tells them that his father is on the raft suffering from smallpox. Terrified of the disease, the men give Huck money and hurry away. Unable to backtrack to the mouth of the Ohio, Huck and Jim continue downriver. The next night, a steamboat slams into their raft, and Huck and Jim are separated.

Huck ends up in the home of the kindly Grangerfords, a family of Southern aristocrats locked in a bitter and silly feud with a neighbouring clan, the Shepherdsons. The elopement of a Grangerford daughter with a Shepherdson son leads to a gun battle in which many in the families are killed. While Huck is caught up in the feud, Jim shows up with the repaired raft. Huck hurries to Jim's hiding place, and they take off down the river.

A few days later, Huck and Jim rescue a pair of men who are being pursued by armed bandits. The men, clearly con artists, claim to be a displaced English duke (the duke) and the long-lost heir to the French throne (the dauphin). Powerless to tell two white adults to leave, Huck and Jim continue down the river with the pair of "aristocrats." The duke and the dauphin pull several scams in the small towns along the river. Coming into one town, they hear the story of a man, Peter Wilks, who has recently died and left much of his inheritance to his two brothers, who should be arriving from England any day. The duke and the dauphin enter the town pretending to be Wilks's brothers. Wilks's three nieces welcome the con men and quickly set about liquidating the estate. A few townspeople become sceptical, and Huck, who grows to admire the Wilks sisters, decides to thwart the scam. He steals the dead Peter Wilks's gold from the duke and the dauphin but is forced to stash it in Wilks's coffin. Huck then reveals all to the eldest Wilks sister, Mary Jane. Huck's plan for exposing the duke and the dauphin is about to unfold when Wilks's real brothers arrive from England. The angry townspeople hold

both sets of Wilks claimants, and the duke and the dauphin just barely escape in the ensuing confusion. Fortunately for the sisters, the gold is found. Unfortunately for Huck and Jim, the duke and the dauphin make it back to the raft just as Huck and Jim are pushing off.

After a few more small scams, the duke and dauphin commit their worst crime yet: they sell Jim to a local farmer, telling him Jim is a runaway for whom a large reward is being offered. Huck finds out where Jim is being held and resolves to free him. At the house where Jim is a prisoner, a woman greets Huck excitedly and calls him "Tom." As Huck quickly discovers, the people holding Jim are none other than Tom Sawyer's aunt and uncle, Silas and Sally Phelps. The Phelpses mistake Huck for Tom, who is due to arrive for a visit, and Huck goes along with their mistake. He intercepts Tom between the Phelps house and the steamboat dock, and Tom pretends to be his own younger brother, Sid.

Tom hatches a wild plan to free Jim, adding all sorts of unnecessary obstacles even though Jim is only lightly secured. Huck is sure Tom's plan will get them all killed, but he complies nonetheless. After a seeming eternity of pointless preparation, during which the boys ransack the Phelps's house and make Aunt Sally miserable, they put the plan into action. Jim is freed, but a pursuer shoots Tom in the leg. Huck is forced to get a doctor, and Jim sacrifices his freedom to nurse Tom. All are returned to the Phelps's house, where Jim ends up back in chains.

When Tom wakes the next morning, he reveals that Jim has actually been a free man all along, as Miss Watson, who made a provision in her will to free Jim, died two months earlier. Tom had planned the entire escape idea all as a game and had intended to pay Jim for his troubles. Tom's Aunt Polly then shows up, identifying "Tom" and "Sid" as Huck and Tom. Jim tells Huck, who fears for his future—particularly that his father might reappear—that the body they found on the floating house off Jackson's Island had been Pap's. Aunt Sally then steps in and offers to adopt Huck, but Huck, who has had enough "sivilizing," announces his plan to set out for the West.

Themes

Racism and Slavery

Although Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* two decades after the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, America—and especially the South—was still struggling with racism and the aftereffects of slavery. By the early 1880s, Reconstruction, the

plan to put the United States back together after the war and integrate freed slaves into society, had hit shaky ground, although it had not yet failed outright. As Twain worked on his novel, race relations, which seemed to be on a positive path in the years following the Civil War, once again became strained. The imposition of Jim Crow laws, designed to limit the power of blacks in the South in a variety of indirect ways, brought the beginning of a new, insidious effort to oppress. The new racism of the South, less institutionalized and monolithic, was also more difficult to combat. Slavery could be outlawed, but when white Southerners enacted racist laws or policies under a professed motive of self-defence against newly freed blacks, far fewer people, Northern or Southern, saw the act as immoral and rushed to combat it.

Although Twain wrote the novel after slavery was abolished, he set it several decades earlier, when slavery was still a fact of life. But even by Twain's time, things had not necessarily gotten much better for blacks in the South. In this light, we might read Twain's depiction of slavery as an allegorical representation of the condition of blacks in the United States even after the abolition of slavery. Just as slavery places the noble and moral Jim under the control of white society, no matter how degraded that white society may be, so too did the insidious racism that arose near the end of Reconstruction oppress black men for illogical and hypocritical reasons. In Huckleberry Finn, Twain, by exposing the hypocrisy of slavery, demonstrates how racism distorts the oppressors as much as it does those who are oppressed. The result is a world of moral confusion, in which seemingly "good" white people such as Miss Watson and Sally Phelps express no concern about the injustice of slavery or the cruelty of separating Jim from his family.

Intellectual and Moral Education

By focusing on Huck's education, *Huckleberry Finn* fits into the tradition of the bildungsroman: a novel depicting an individual's maturation and development. As a poor, uneducated boy, for all intents and purposes an orphan, Huck distrusts the morals and precepts of the society that treats him as an outcast and fails to protect him from abuse. This apprehension about society, and his growing relationship with Jim, lead Huck to question many of the teachings that he has received, especially regarding race and slavery. More than once, we see Huck choose to "go to hell" rather than go along with the rules and follow what he has been taught. Huck bases these decisions on his experiences, his own sense of logic, and what his developing conscience tells him. On the raft, away from civilization, Huck is especially free from society's rules, able to make his own decisions without restriction. Through deep

introspection, he comes to his own conclusions, unaffected by the accepted—and often hypocritical—rules and values of Southern culture. By the novel's end, Huck has learned to "read" the world around him, to distinguish good, bad, right, wrong, menace, friend, and so on. His moral development is sharply contrasted to the character of Tom Sawyer, who is influenced by a bizarre mix of adventure novels and Sunday-school teachings, which he combines to justify his outrageous and potentially harmful escapades.

The Hypocrisy of 'Civilized' Society

When Huck plans to head west at the end of the novel in order to escape further "sivilizing," he is trying to avoid more than regular baths and mandatory school attendance. Throughout the novel, Twain depicts the society that surrounds Huck as little more than a collection of degraded rules and precepts that defy logic. This faulty logic appears early in the novel, when the new judge in town allows Pap to keep custody of Huck. The judge privileges Pap's "rights" to his son as his natural father over Huck's welfare. At the same time, this decision comments on a system that puts a white man's rights to his "property"—his slaves—over the welfare and freedom of a black man. In implicitly comparing the plight of slaves to the plight of Huck at the hands of Pap, Twain implies that it is impossible for a society that owns slaves to be just, no matter how "civilized" that society believes and proclaims itself to be. Again and again, Huck encounters individuals who seem good—Sally Phelps, for example—but who Twain takes care to show are prejudiced slave-owners. This shaky sense of justice that Huck repeatedly encounters lies at the heart of society's problems: terrible acts go unpunished, yet frivolous crimes, such as drunkenly shouting insults, lead to executions. Sherburn's speech to the mob that has come to lynch him accurately summarizes the view of society Twain gives in *Huckleberry Finn*: rather than maintain collective welfare, society instead is marked by cowardice, a lack of logic, and profound selfishness.

Guilt/shame

Huck experiences guilt and shame at various points throughout the novel, and these feelings force him into serious questions about morality. Huck's guilt is largely tied to the religious morality he learned from Widow Douglas. Not long after he and Jim set out on their journey, Huck realizes that by helping Jim escape he has done harm to Jim's owner, Miss Watson. He explains: "Conscience says to me, . . . 'What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean?' . . . I got to feeling so mean and so miserable I most wished

I was dead" (Chapter 16). Here Huck recognizes that has broken the Golden Rule of Christianity, which states, Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Huck remains conflicted until near the end of the book. The breaking point comes in Chapter 31, when he finds himself unable to pray. Huck realizes that in his heart he doesn't believe Jim should be returned to slavery, and saying so in a prayer would result in him "playing double" and hence lying to God. When he finally resolves to help Jim escape for the last time, Huck banishes the last vestiges of guilt.

Empathy

The theme of empathy is closely tied to the theme of guilt. Huck's feelings of empathy help his moral development by enabling him to imagine what it's like to be in someone else's shoes. The theme of empathy first arises when Huck worries about the thieves he and Jim abandon on the wrecked steamboat. Once he's escaped immediate danger, Huck grows concerned about the men: "I began to think how dreadful it was, even for murderers, to be in such a fix." Huck's concern drives him to go and find help. Another significant example of empathy in the book comes in Chapter 23, when Huck wakes up to Jim "moaning and mourning to himself." Huck imagines that Jim is feeling "low and homesick" because he's thinking about his wife and children: "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks for their'n. It doesn't seem natural, but I reckon it's so." Despite the residual racism in this comment, Huck's capacity for empathy has a strong humanizing power.

Adventure

Ironically given the book's title, the theme of "adventure" in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* tends to conjure a sense of immaturity and childish make-believe. The book begins by pointing backward to its prequel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and the boyish exploits that resulted in Tom and Huck striking it rich. Chapter 2 continues this type of adventure, with Tom and his "Gang" of highwaymen. This spirit of adventure as play follows Huck beyond St. Petersburg. But the real-life situations Huck and Jim find themselves in frequently demonstrate that adventure is not what Tom and his games have made it out to be. The first of these situations occurs in Chapters 12 and 13, when Huck gets excited about a wrecked steamboat, but quickly flees upon discovering that three real murderers are hiding out there. By the end of the book, when Tom returns and tries to enforce an overly complicated and "romantical" plan for Jim's escape, the very foundations of adventure have come to strike

Huck as childish and unrealistic. Even so, Huck retains some lust for adventure, which he demonstrates when he declares his intent to leave Pikesville and "light out for the Territory."

Money/wealth

Money does nothing but cause problems in this book. Huck complains that ever since he came into a significant sum of money at the end of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, he has had to suffer attempts to "sivilize" and educate him. In the early chapters of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the biggest problem Huck's money brings him is his father, Pap. Pap mainly wants access to Huck's money so he can buy more alcohol, and his capacity for anger and violence becomes clear when Huck refuses to hand over any cash. Further money-related problems arise following the initial appearance of the duke and the dauphin, who swindle common townsfolk out of their money. Their scams cause anxiety for Huck and wreak havoc in all of the small towns they visit. The only time money seems like it might have a redemptive power is at the end of the novel, when Tom gives Jim forty dollars to pay his way back north. For Jim, money holds the promise of liberation. But given the many problems money has brought throughout the book, it seems unlikely that money alone will guarantee Jim his freedom.

4. **The Sound and The Fury: William Faulkner**

William Faulkner: Biography

William Faulkner was born in 1897 in New Albany, Mississippi, to a prominent Southern family. A number of his ancestors were involved in the Mexican-American War, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction, and were part of the local railroad industry and political scene. Faulkner showed signs of artistic talent from a young age, but became bored with his classes and never finished high school.

Faulkner grew up in the town of Oxford, Mississippi, and eventually returned there in his later years and purchased his famous estate, Rowan Oak. Oxford and the surrounding area were Faulkner's inspiration for the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, and its town of Jefferson. These locales became the setting for a number of his works. Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha novels" include *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Hamlet* (1940), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942), and they feature some of the same characters and locations.

Faulkner was particularly interested in the decline of the Deep South after the Civil War. Many of his novels explore the deterioration of the Southern aristocracy after the destruction of its wealth and way of life during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Faulkner populates Yoknapatawpha County with the skeletons of old mansions and the ghosts of great men, patriarchs and generals from the past whose aristocratic families fail to live up to their historical greatness. Beneath the shadow of past grandeur, these families attempt to cling to old Southern values, codes, and myths that are corrupted and out of place in the reality of the modern world. The families in Faulkner's novels are rife with failed sons, disgraced daughters, and smouldering resentments between whites and blacks in the aftermath of African-American slavery.

Faulkner's reputation as one of the greatest novelists of the twentieth century is largely due to his highly experimental style. Faulkner was a pioneer in literary modernism, dramatically diverging from the forms and structures traditionally used in novels before his time. Faulkner often employs stream of consciousness narrative, discards any notion of chronological order, uses multiple narrators, shifts between the present and past tense, and tends toward impossibly long and complex sentences. Not surprisingly, these stylistic innovations make some of Faulkner's novels incredibly challenging to the reader. However, these bold innovations paved the way for countless future writers to continue to experiment with the possibilities of the English language. For his efforts, Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949. He died in Mississippi in 1962.

About the Text

The Sound and the Fury was published in 1929, although it was one of the first novels Faulkner wrote. Many critics and even Faulkner himself think that it is the best novel that he wrote. Its subject is the downfall of the Compson family, the offspring of the pioneer Jason Lycurgus Compson. The family consists of Jason Compson III and his wife Caroline, their four children Jason IV, Quentin, Candace (Caddy), and Maury (whose name is changed in 1900 to Benjamin), Caroline's brother Maury Bascomb, and their family of black servants: Dilsey and Roskus and their children Versh, T.P. and Frony. In 1928 when the story mainly takes place, two other important characters are Quentin, Caddy's illegitimate daughter, and Luster, Frony's son.

Each of the first three sections of the novel is narrated by a different member of the Compson family; the first is narrated by Benjamin, the second by Quentin (Jason III's son, not Caddy's daughter), and the third by Jason IV. The fourth section is a third person narrative, although many readers see it as "narrated" by Dilsey, the Compson's old black servant. Although narrated by the three brothers and the servant, the focus of the novel is really the sister Caddy. Each of the three brothers has a different view on Caddy and her promiscuity. To Benjy Caddy is a gentle caretaker whose absence - caused by her promiscuity and marriage - fills his adult life with a sense of loss. To Quentin, Caddy's sexuality is a sign of the dissolution of the antebellum Southern world of family honour and the event that spurs him to commit suicide. To Jason, Caddy's promiscuity means the loss of a job opportunity and is the reason he is stuck at a desk job that he finds demeaning, as well as the reason he is stuck at home with a hypochondriac mother, retarded brother, rebellious illegitimate niece and family of servants who are eating him out of house and home. The last section of the novel provides a less biased view of Caddy's life and the downfall of the Compson family. Faulkner himself acknowledged the fact that the novel revolves around the absent centre of Caddy and her story; he claims that the novel began as a single idea - an image of a little girl up a tree with muddy drawers - and grew into a short story entitled "Twilight." But Faulkner loved Caddy's character so much that he developed this short story into an entire novel.

The first three sections are narrated in a technique known as "stream of consciousness", in which the writer takes down the character's thoughts as they occur to him, paying little attention to chronology of events or continuity of story line. The technique is the most marked in the first section, wherein Benjy's mind skips backward and forward in time as he relives events from the past while simultaneously conducting himself in the present. Quentin's section is slightly more ordered, although his agitated state of mind causes him to experience similar skips in time. Jason's section is almost totally chronological, much more structured than the first two. In order to make reading this difficult novel easier, Faulkner at one time suggested printing it in coloured ink in order to mark the different time periods, but this was too expensive. Instead, in the first section, he writes some sentences in italics in order to signal a shift in time.

Not much happens in the three days in which the novel is mainly set; instead the stream of consciousness narration allows the reader to experience the history of the Compson family and step into the lives of this dwindling Southern family. The troubled relationships of the

family are at once mundane and sweepingly tragic, pulling the reader into its downward spiral. Faulkner represents the human experience by portraying events and images subjectively, through several different characters' respective memories of childhood.

Character List

Jason Compson III: The head of the Compson household until his death from alcoholism in 1912. Mr. Compson is the father of Quentin, Caddy, Jason IV, and Benjy, and the husband of Caroline.

Caroline Compson: The self-pitying and self-absorbed wife of Mr. Compson and mother of the four Compson children. Caroline's hypochondria preoccupies her and contributes to her inability to care properly for her children.

Quentin Compson: The oldest of the Compson children and the narrator of the novel's second chapter. A sensitive and intelligent boy, Quentin is preoccupied with his love for his sister Caddy and his notion of the Compson family's honour. He commits suicide by drowning himself just before the end of his first year at Harvard.

Caddy Compson: The second oldest of the Compson children and the only daughter. Actually named Candace, Caddy is very close to her brother Quentin. She becomes promiscuous, gets pregnant out of wedlock, and eventually marries and divorces Herbert Head in 1910.

Jason Compson IV: The second youngest of the Compson children and the narrator of the novel's third chapter. Jason is mean-spirited, petty, and very cynical.

Benjy Compson: The youngest of the Compson children and narrator of the novel's first chapter. Born Maury Compson, his name is changed to Benjamin in 1900, when he is discovered to be severely mentally retarded.

Miss Quentin: Caddy's illegitimate daughter, who is raised by the Compsons after Caddy's divorce. A rebellious, promiscuous, and miserably unhappy girl, Miss Quentin eventually steals money from Jason and leaves town with a member of a traveling minstrel show.

Dilsey: The Compsons' "Negro" cook, Dilsey is a pious, strong-willed, protective woman who serves as a stabilizing force for the Compson family.

Roskus: Dilsey's husband and the Compsons' servant. Roskus suffers from a severe case of rheumatism that eventually kills him.

T.P.: One of Dilsey's sons, T.P. gets drunk with Benjy and fights with Quentin at Caddy's wedding.

Versh: Another of Dilsey's sons and Benjy's keepers.

Frony: Dilsey's daughter. Frony is also Luster's mother and works in the Compsons' kitchen.

Luster: Frony's son and Dilsey's grandson. Luster is a young boy who looks after and entertains Benjy in 1928, despite the fact that he is only half Benjy's age.

The Man with The Red Tie: The mysterious man with whom Miss Quentin allegedly elopes.

Damuddy: The Compson children's grandmother, who dies when they are young.

Uncle Maury Bascomb: Mrs. Compson's brother, who lives off his brother-in-law's money. Benjy is initially named after Uncle Maury, but Benjy's condition and Caroline's insecurity about her family name convince her to change her son's name.

Mr. And Mrs. Patterson: The Compsons' next-door neighbours. Uncle Maury has an affair with Mrs. Patterson until Mr. Patterson intercepts a note Maury has sent to her.

Charlie: One of Caddy's first suitors, whom Benjy catches with Caddy on the swing during the first chapter.

Dalton Ames: A local Jefferson boy who is probably the father of Caddy's child, Miss Quentin.

Shreve MacKenzie: Quentin's roommate at Harvard. A young Canadian man, Shreve reappears in *Absalom, Absalom!* one of Faulkner's later novels, which is largely narrated by Shreve and Quentin from their dorm room at Harvard.

Spoade: A Harvard senior from South Carolina. Spoade once mocked Quentin's virginity by calling Shreve Quentin's "husband."

Gerald Bland: A swaggering student at Harvard. Quentin fights with Gerald because he reminds him of Dalton Ames.

Mrs. Bland: Gerald Bland's boastful, Southern mother.

Deacon: A black man in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to whom Quentin gives his suicide notes.

Julio: The brother of an Italian girl who attaches herself to Quentin as he wanders Cambridge before his suicide.

Sydney Herbert Head: The prosperous banker whom Caddy marries. Herbert later divorces Caddy because of her pregnancy.

Lorraine: Jason's mistress, a prostitute who lives in Memphis.

Earl: The owner of the farm-supply store where Jason works. Earl feels some loyalty toward Mrs. Compson and thus puts up with Jason's surliness.

Uncle Job: A black man who works with Jason at Earl's store.

Reverend Shegog: The pastor who delivers a powerful sermon on Easter Sunday at the local black church in Jefferson.

Detailed Summary

April Seventh, 1928: Benjy accompanies Luster as he searches for a quarter to go to the circus that night. At the same time, he relives memories of his youth, most of which have to do with Caddy. He remembers, for example, the night his grandmother (Damuddy) died, when Caddy climbed a tree to look in the parlour windows, showing her siblings her muddy drawers. He also remembers her precocious sexuality, which led to her pregnancy and marriage, taking her out of his life. He can smell the change in Caddy; when she is young and pure she smells like trees to him, and when she begins to have sex she no longer smells like trees. He has a specific order to the day's events, and when Luster interrupts this order, he howls.

June Second, 1910: This section follows the events of the last day of Quentin's life, as he makes meticulous preparations for his suicide. He puts on clean clothes and packs all his belongings, then buys two flat irons to weight himself down with and heads out of town (he is attending Harvard at the time). He arrives in a little riverside town and meets up with a small immigrant girl, who follows him around until her brother finds them and accuses him of kidnapping her. He also runs into his friends, who are in town for a picnic. He ends up getting into a fight with one of them when he confuses his rantings on women with those of Dalton Ames, the boy who got his sister pregnant. He returns to Cambridge to clean his clothes, then heads back out to the same town to drown himself in the river. Throughout the day he is haunted by memories of Caddy, especially of her affair with Dalton Ames, her pregnancy, and her marriage to Herbert Head.

April Sixth, 1928: This section follows Jason through his day as he deals with Quentin, Caddy's illegitimate daughter, who skips school and sleeps around. He takes her to school but then sees her skipping later with one of the musicians who is in town for the circus. Furious, he chases the two of them out of town but loses them when they let the air out of his tires. At the same time, he is dealing with the finances of his life. He loses $200 in the stock market, and also receives a $200 check from Caddy for Quentin's upkeep. He cashes this check, then makes out a fake check for his mother to burn. He resents Quentin as the symbol of the job he was deprived of when Caddy divorced Herbert Head. We discover that he has embezzled thousands of dollars from Caddy, money that should have been Quentin's.

April Eighth, 1928: This section continues to follow Jason while also following Dilsey through her day. It is Easter Sunday, and Dilsey takes her family and Benjy to church and is powerfully affected by Reverend Shegog's sermon. She proclaims that she has seen the beginning and the end, the first and the last. At the same time, Jason wakes to discover that Quentin has run away and has taken the money he was saving in a strongbox in his room, $7,000 in total. Caroline is sure that Quentin has committed suicide like her namesake, but Jason drives out of town trying to find her. He meets up with the traveling circus in the next town, but is forcibly driven away by some circus workers. The owner of the circus tells him that Quentin and her boyfriend have left town. He returns to Jackson. At the end of the section, Luster is taking Benjy to the graveyard. When Luster takes a wrong turn, Benjy starts to howl, and Jason, who has just returned to town, stops the carriage and turns it the right way.

Themes

Time, Memory, and the Past

Faulkner deals with the concept of time in a unique way in *The Sound and the Fury*. Benjy, the book's first narrator, is mentally disabled and completely lacks a sense of time. Faulkner creates the sensation of Benjy's perceptions by shifting the narrative years backwards or forwards mid-paragraph, as certain words and sensations remind Benjy of past experiences. This allows Faulkner to make surprising and poignant connections between past and present events. Quentin, the next narrator, is the opposite of Benjy – Quentin is obsessed with time, and cannot seem to escape its inexorable passing. Quentin's main preoccupation is with the lost glory of his family (as represented by Caddy's lost virginity), so the constant chiming of clocks and the ticking of his grandfather's watch becomes a symbol of the decline he cannot

escape. Among the main characters, Dilsey has the only healthy relationship with time and the past, as she is able to step back and see herself and the Compson family as a small piece of history – she has seen the beginning, and now she sees the end.

The title of the novel itself, *The Sound and the Fury*, comes from a monologue in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where the speaker laments the pointlessness of an individual life within the relentless march of time and history. This theme then becomes generally symbolic of the overarching decline of the Compson family, as well as its individual members. The characters are unable to forget the past and move into the modern world. They cannot see themselves without pride and self-absorption, even as time marches on and leaves them broken behind it.

Decline and Corruption

One of the overarching themes of the book is the decline of the Compson family, which also acts as a symbol of the decline of the South itself. The family was once a model of the wealthy, slave-owning Southern aristocracy before the Civil War. By the time of the novel, however, the Compsons have lost most of their wealth and land, despite their feeble attempts to halt their downward spiral. They sell off most of their land to pay for Quentin's education at Harvard – itself an attempt to maintain their social status – but this too backfires with Quentin's suicide. By the end of the novel and the appendix, Jason, the last male Compson, has sold everything and lives above a farm supply store.

The Compson decline manifests itself physically, mentally, and morally: Jason III is an alcoholic, Caroline is a self-obsessed hypochondriac, Benjy is severely mentally disabled, Caddy is disgraced and disowned, Quentin is suicidal, and Jason IV is bitter, greedy, and cruel. The Compson line literally ends with *The Sound and the Fury*, as Jason is incapable of loving and so seems unlikely to get married and have legitimate children.

This theme also applies to the "Southern values" held dear by the Compsons, and extends to the Old South itself. Faulkner shows how the aristocracy declined after the Civil War, when the slave-based wealth of the upper-class whites was destroyed, but old families like the Compsons still clung to outdated systems and traditions. Caddy tramples on the ideal of the chaste Southern lady, and Quentin's suicidal obsession with his sister's chastity is a perversion of the chivalrous, honourable Southern gentleman. Only Dilsey seems to preserve the old Southern values – honour, kindness, hard work, and religious faith – without the

corruption of self-absorption. This is significant in that Dilsey is also the main black character in the novel, a servant to the Compsons and not actually part of the family. Yet her character is Faulkner's only hint at redemption for the South – that by holding onto purer versions of its original values, the South might someday heal itself.

Words and Language

Faulkner's innovative and often confusing language is the most unique part of *The Sound and the Fury*. Each section of the book is told in a different narrative style, where the writing itself blends with the themes and stories it describes: Benjy's section is muddled and subjective, while Jason's is clear but brutal. The winding sentences and stream-of-consciousness style mirror the struggles of the narrators as they try to make sense of a past that seems as real as the present. Within the plot itself, repeated phrases and memories are important to each character, like Caddy's name to Benjy.

While the writing is original and beautiful, the style and use of multiple narrators actually seems to point to the failure of language, especially in its ability to capture the truth of an emotion or event. Different points of view, perspectives of time and memory, and narrative styles are needed to properly tell the story of *The Sound and the Fury*, but even then they can only hint at the truths Faulkner is trying to express. The tortured stream of consciousness of sections like Quentin's creates the feeling of struggle, of trying to work through memory and suffering through thoughts and words. In this way Faulkner is both telling the story and offering a meditation on the failure of language to truly capture life.

Sin and Sexuality

For a traditional Southern lady, sexuality is associated with sin and virginity with innocence, but Caddy tramples on "Southern chastity" by becoming sexually active at an early age. The association of sexuality with sin and "uncleanness" is symbolically foreshadowed by Caddy's dirty underwear as a child. Though sexuality is a personal subject and not inherently sinful – except in this traditional Southern worldview – all of Caddy's brothers become obsessed with Caddy's promiscuity. Quentin's guilt involves what he allowed to happen (and how it stained the family honour) but also his own possessive love for Caddy herself. His obsession with her chastity is so tormenting to him because it stems from both a desire to protect her and a repressed desire to have her for himself. Jason, however, sees Caddy's

sexuality as a personal affront and another opportunity for bitterness, as her divorce cost him a potential job at a bank.

Miss Quentin, Caddy's illegitimate daughter, inherits her mother's promiscuous nature, but Miss Quentin feels no shame for her actions, as she no longer subscribes to the notion of sex as inherently sinful. Indeed, when compared to Quentin's obsessions and Jason's bitter rage, Caddy and Miss Quentin become two of the more positive characters in the book. They at least, in comparison to the other Compsons, are capable of love.

Race and Class

The setting of *The Sound and the Fury* is Mississippi in the early 1900s, when slavery was still a recent memory, and the Compson family has black live-in servants who are basically slaves in all but technicality. Slavery ended with the Civil War in the 1860s, but African-Americans remained as second-class citizens. Most of the policies of reparations and equal rights failed, which left the wealthy, slave-owning aristocracy broken but the former slaves themselves not much better off than before. This left an ever-present tension between blacks and whites in everyday society. Within the novel, the black servants are scorned by the Compsons, but it becomes clear that the Gibsons are saner and capable than the Compsons themselves, as they have not been corrupted by their own family pride and slave-owning history. The Compson family ends with the novel, but the Gibsons "endured." The Compsons also see themselves as superior to the other whites of Jefferson, clinging to their glorious past and blind to their present corruption.

Dilsey, the matriarch of the Gibsons, is the strongest positive character of the book and has her own section, though she isn't given a narrative voice like the Compson brothers. Instead, the novel's most progressive accomplishment is simply treating the Gibsons with the same unsympathetic, deeply human characterization as the Compsons. Nothing is sentimental or idealized, and it is only Dilsey's calm fortitude in the face of corruption and madness that can endure the tragedy of the Compsons' world.

5. Tar Baby: Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison: Biography

Toni Morrison was born as Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. As a child, Morrison was an avid reader and excellent student. She studied English and

classics at Howard University and completed a master's program in literature at Cornell University. When several of her classmates at Howard had difficulty pronouncing her first name, Morrison changed it to Toni (a derivative of her middle name). At Cornell, Morrison studied the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, and their experimental, stream-of-consciousness narratives, told from multiple perspectives, would have a great effect on her fiction.

In 1970, Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. She followed this work with *Sula* (1974), which received a nomination for a National Book Award, and *Song of Solomon* (1977), which won a National Books Critics Circle Award. After Morrison published *Tar Baby* in 1981, she began working on *Beloved*, the novel that would not only earn her a Pulitzer Prize in 1988 but would also ensure Morrison a place in the pantheon of American literature. Morrison's recent work includes the novels *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), and *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012), *God Help the Child* (2015); *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), a collection of lectures she gave at Harvard University; and a series of children's books written with her son Slade based on *Aesop's Fables*. In 1993, she became the first African American to win a Nobel Prize in Literature. She died on 5th August 2019.

About the Text

Tar Baby was published in 1981. When Morrison was writing *Tar Baby*, the Civil Rights Movement was just picking up popularity in the 1950s and 60s. As African Americans were fighting to end segregation and violence against them, they were also working to equalize their economic opportunities and potential. The nonviolent tactics of the civil rights movement were deemed passive and too open to assimilation, and during the late 1960s, those who criticized racial integration created the black power movement, emphasizing racial pride and meeting violence with violence.

Tar Baby tells of characters who find themselves caught between the diverging and increasingly incompatible agendas of the two movements working for similar end results. The protagonist Jadine Childs is a fashion model who has an education, but Son was raised in an all-black community in Florida. Childs is almost completely assimilated, while Son is capable of pleasing almost everyone but feels most connected to his black community. The tension between these two characters who live with ideals on completely opposite sides of the spectrum

create a moving force in the plot. Morrison completely abandons social realism, instead writing about race and women in a realistic and symbolic way.

Character List

Jadine Childs: A beautiful, black, twenty-five-year-old orphan and one of the novel's two protagonists. Jadine has eyes the colour of mink and works as a model. She studied art history at the Sorbonne in Paris, an education paid for by Valerian Street. Men constantly pursue her, and sometimes Jadine feels confused about their attentions. Ondine and Sydney, who work for Valerian, helped raise Jadine, but Jadine does not feel a strong sense of family. She values art, culture, and cosmopolitan, urban life, but her relationship with Son causes her to question these values and lack of familial ties. Although Jadine is an independent thinker, she sometimes feels unsure about her thoughts or decisions.

Son: Jadine's lover and the novel's second protagonist. A very handsome black man, Son arrives at L'Arbe de la Croix as a fugitive and immediately upsets the house's staid way of life. He believes that white people and black people are fundamentally different and cannot live together, and he feels a strong connection to the natural world. He is capable of great passion and loyalty, especially to those he loves specifically and to other blacks generally. But he can also be very violent: He accidentally killed his wife after catching her with another man and then spent time as a soldier. His criminal past means that he has several aliases; his real name is William Green.

Valerian Street: A wealthy, retired candy manufacturer and owner of L'Arbe de la Croix. Valerian is seventy years old and white, and he employs all of the novel's major black characters except for Son. He is determined to enjoy his retirement; he particularly enjoys gardening and spending time in his greenhouse. Valerian sometimes fails to take things as seriously as he should, and he can be stubborn and mean. But the revelation that his wife, Margaret, abused their son, Michael, devastates Valerian. By the end of the novel, Valerian has turned from a strong-willed man of business into an invalid.

Margaret Street: Valerian's second wife and the mother of their son, Michael. Younger than Valerian by twenty years, Margaret was once known as the "Principal Beauty of Maine," because she was a high school beauty queen. Much of her life has been defined by her attractive appearance, which includes red hair and lovely pink and white colouring. Very vain, Margaret seems to lack anything else to think about besides her looks. She has a cruel streak, which led

her to abuse Michael when he was a young child. She hates the island and wants to return to the United States. When Valerian becomes incapacitated, she finds pleasure in taking care of him.

Sydney: Valerian's long-time butler, Ondine's husband, and Jadine's uncle. A self-described "Philadelphia Negro," Sydney is very proud and conducts himself with a lot of dignity. He expects respect and distrusts Son. He sometimes talks back to Valerian but ultimately obeys his boss.

Ondine: The Streets' cook, Sydney's wife, and Jadine's aunt. Ondine is black, very opinionated, and particularly scornful of Margaret. Jadine calls Ondine "Nanadine," and sometimes she regards Ondine as a surrogate mother.

Gideon (Also Called Yardman): The black handyman at L'Arbe de la Croix. Valerian fires him and Thérèse for stealing apples. Son discovers his true name and much of his past history. Gideon lived in the United States for a long time, hoping to make his fortune, but failed to live up to his ambitions. His wife, Thérèse, tricked him into moving back to the island.

Thérèse: Gideon's wife and the onetime laundress for the Streets. Thérèse is black, passionate, and prejudiced against anyone not from the island, especially Americans. She particularly hates Ondine and Sydney. The Streets and the members of Jadine's family call her Mary. Valerian fires her, along with Gideon, for stealing apples, which further deepens her hatred of Americans. She used to be a wet nurse for the white American babies on the island, but the invention of formula put her out of business and almost caused her to starve.

Michael Street: The son of Valerian and Margaret. Michael only appears in flashbacks, but other characters discuss him frequently. Valerian and Jadine fault Michael for "exoticizing" black people, instead of treating them like ordinary human beings. But generally Michael is thought of as well intentioned and kind. He studies anthropology and performs a lot of community service.

Alma Estée: The daughter of Gideon and Thérèse. She sometimes helps at L'Arbe de la Croix. The American characters in the novel call her Mary, the same name they call her mother. After her parents are fired, she ends up working in the janitorial services of the island's airport. She has questionable ideas about beauty and obsesses over finding the right wig.

Ryk: Jadine's rich, white boyfriend and would-be fiancé. He gives Jadine a very expensive and luxurious sealskin coat but fails to treat her very affectionately and seems not to respect her.

Dr. Michelin: A friend and confidante of Valerian's. Dr. Michelin is a Frenchman exiled from Algeria.

Dawn: A New York friend of Jadine's. Dawn thinks Son is very handsome, and she offers Jadine and Son a place to stay when they are in New York.

Soldier: One of Son's closest childhood friends. Soldier irritates Jadine, but he nevertheless gives her a lot of unsolicited information about Son's early life.

Ellen: Soldier's wife. Jadine finds her stupid and unsophisticated.

Cheyenne: Son's first wife. Son accidentally killed her while he was trying to punish her for her adultery.

Old Man: Son's father. His real name is Franklin Green.

Carl: A friend of Son's from Eloe. He gives Son and Jadine a ride when they first arrive in Florida.

Aunt Rosa: Son's aunt. Jadine stays with her when she visits Florida. Aunt Rosa embodies Southern womanhood.

Drake: A childhood friend of Son's.

Ernie Paul: A childhood friend of Son's.

B. J. Bridges: A famous poet, and one of Michael's favourite teachers. Margaret invites him to celebrate Christmas at L'Arbe de la Croix, but he fails to arrive.

Detailed Summary

Shortly before Christmas, an unidentified sailor jumps overboard and swims toward the harbour of Queen of France in the middle of the night. Unable to reach shore, he climbs aboard a small yacht and stows away. When the yacht lands, he disembarks onto a small island called Isle des Chevaliers, and he hides again, this time at a house called L'Arbe de la Croix. Valerian Street and his wife, Margaret, live in the house, along with their servants, including Ondine and Sydney. Jadine Childs, the niece of Ondine and Sydney, has come to visit. Before coming

back to the island, she studied at the Sorbonne, an education for which Valerian paid, and worked as a model in Paris.

Margaret and Valerian fight a lot, mostly because Margaret has invited a number of guests to come stay, against Valerian's wishes. One of these guests is the Streets' son, Michael, but Valerian doubts that he will really come. After a particularly fierce argument at dinner one night, Margaret goes to her room, but she quickly returns to the dining room screaming. Sydney runs to Margaret's room and returns to announce that there is a man hiding in her closet. Everyone but Valerian is terrified. Valerian invites the man, whose name is Son, to stay the night.

The next morning, Margaret, who is extremely upset with Valerian, locks herself in her room. Meanwhile Jadine's rich, white boyfriend, Ryk, has sent her a luxurious sealskin coat. Son shows up in her room as she tries on the coat, and they talk in a flirtatious way that eventually starts to frighten Jadine. After Son makes some sexually crude remarks, Jadine threatens to report him to Valerian, after which she goes to find Valerian.

As another servant, Thérèse, does laundry, she thinks about Son, who had been in the house for several days prior to his discovery and whom Thérèse had been feeding. With Jadine gone to find Valerian, Son showers in her bathroom. When he is clean, he looks much more attractive. He finds Valerian before Jadine does, and he impresses Valerian with his knowledge of gardening and his sense of humour. Valerian tells Sydney to help Son get new clothes, and Gideon, another servant, and Thérèse take him shopping in a town near L'Arbe de la Croix. When Jadine sees the cleaned-up Son, she decides not to tell Valerian about his behaviour in her bedroom. Instead, she invites Son on a picnic at the beach, and they talk a lot about their backgrounds. Despite their differences, they seem to connect on some level. On the way back from the picnic, their car runs out of gas, and Son leaves to retrieve gas from a pump at the pier. While Jadine waits, she decides to seek shelter from the sun and abandons the car. On her way to some nearby trees, she gets stuck in a swamp but manages to escape. Ondine is upset that Jadine and Son seem to be getting closer, but she does not intervene.

When Christmas arrives, Michael fails to show up, and the other guests get delayed because of bad weather. Margaret's spirits sink, and she abandons her elaborate cooking projects and leaves Ondine to finish them. At Christmas dinner, Valerian upsets Ondine, Sydney, and Son when he announces that he fired Gideon and Thérèse for stealing apples. A

heated argument breaks out. At the end of it, Ondine reveals that Margaret abused Michael when he was a boy. Valerian goes into shock, and Son and Jadine leave the table and go to bed together.

Soon after, Jadine and Son leave the island. They go to New York, having a great, carefree time as lovers. They live in a borrowed apartment, and neither of them has a permanent job, but they don't seem to care very much about money. Meanwhile, back on the island, things are much more subdued, and Valerian refuses to let Margaret explain her actions to him. Ondine and Sydney worry that they will be fired.

When spring arrives, Jadine and Son visit his hometown of Eloe, Florida. The trip is a disaster for their relationship, because Jadine hates Eloe, and Son loves it. The many differences between Jadine and Son come to the surface, and their divisions tear them apart when they end up back in New York. They fight more and more frequently. After a particularly violent confrontation, Jadine leaves Son and New York behind. She intends to return to Paris, but first she stops at Isle des Chevaliers to retrieve her sealskin coat. Ondine is upset that Jadine seems to care more about the coat than about either Ondine or Sydney, but her anger does not detain Jadine, and ultimately she heads to Paris, telling Ondine and Sydney not to tell Son where she has gone. Soon after she departs, Son arrives in Queen of France, and Thérèse agrees to take him to Isle des Chevaliers by boat, so he can look for Jadine. But instead of piloting him to L'Arbe de la Croix as she had promised, Thérèse leaves Son on a foggy part of the island, and she suggests that he still has a choice. He can either keep searching for Jadine, or he can join the race of wild horsemen on the island, descendants of the first slaves brought there. The island opens to accommodate Son as he joins the horsemen.

Themes

The Shackles of Femininity

Tar Baby explores how being a woman imprisons the female characters. The novel's male characters tend to see the women as stupid or inferior, simply because they are women. Gideon constantly criticizes Thérèse for her ignorance, while Valerian ignores Margaret's desire to leave the island. Son insults Jadine by asking her how many sexual favours she had to perform to be given expensive presents and modelling jobs. The men do not see the women as individuals.

With the exception of Jadine, the women in the novel are associated with motherhood and fertility, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. Ondine mothers Jadine, Thérèse mothers Alma Estée and Son, and Thérèse once worked as a wet nurse. Margaret longs to see her son, Michael, but it turns out that she abused him when he was a child. Thérèse believes that white women kill their babies, in part because Valerian's first wife had a series of abortions. Margaret's actions and Thérèse's beliefs show that being a mother does not always bring fulfilment to women and can sometimes imprison them as well. Margaret's unhappiness as a wife and mother led her to abuse her child. Over the course of the novel, Jadine tries on the different options available to women: a career woman in Paris, a daughter on Isle des Chevaliers, and a mother figure to Son in New York. But none of these roles leads to satisfaction, and the constraints of her gender continue to bind and frustrate her.

Nature vs. Civilization

The conflict between nature and civilization runs throughout *Tar Baby*. Most characters embody either nature or civilization/culture. For example, Son, Thérèse, Gideon, the residents of Eloe, and the wild horsemen represent nature. These characters value racial and familial connection, and they demonstrate the importance of places of origin. They have a strong belief in the past and in the reality of myth, and they believe that no actions in the present can be divorced from the actions of the past. In contrast, Jadine and her urban friends believe in the importance of education and European forms of culture, and they deny the values associated with nature. For them, nature is something to be mastered or overpowered. They appreciate the idea of a kind of cosmopolitan rootlessness, where people are free to separate from their racial, familial, and geographical pasts. Nevertheless, Sydney seems to blend values from both nature and civilization: He places a lot of importance on family and believes in the importance of education. But he rejects the natural world in favour of the lively Philadelphia of his youth and young adulthood. He shrinks from anything, or anyone, that seems wild, including Son, and this makes Sydney unyielding and a little unlikable.

To some degree, the black characters align with nature, and the white characters with civilization. As she struggles to figure out what it means to be black, Jadine moves from the civilization side to the nature side. She goes to rural Florida to visit Son's hometown, and together she and Son seem to reject the material trappings of civilization. But, at the end, Jadine chooses civilization and white culture by returning to Europe. Son too must choose between nature and civilization at the end of the novel; readers do not know which he chooses. The

novel itself argues that, despite the character of Sydney, nature and civilization cannot be synthesized, but it does not seem to favour one over the other either.

The Connections Between Youth and Power

When a character looks young or beautiful, that character tends to have a lot of power. Son looks magnificent after he showers and goes to charm Valerian in the greenhouse. Margaret's beauty also once captivated Valerian. Likewise, aging reflects a character's loss of control or influence. As Valerian loses power, he becomes exhausted and begins to age rapidly, and he has become an invalid by the end of the novel. Jadine starts to look old as she and Son fight constantly in New York, but, having abandoned Son and the compromises she was forced to make with him, Jadine begins to look young again when she boards the plane for Paris. Conversely, some characters seem ageless or of indeterminate age. Thérèse and the wild horsemen exist in perfect harmony with nature, and they remain untamed. Ondine, a servant, has always seemed old to Margaret, and Old Man's age is reflected in his nickname. These ageless or old characters seem able to withstand the impact of other people or change on their physical beings. The faces and bodies of characters reflect their personalities and the outcome of decisions they once made.

Black life as subordinate

Undeniably, the characters and their stories are trying to tell us something through their point of view, but ironically, they are often misguided by the limitations of their point of view. For instance, when taken as singular, the wet-nurse in early retirement represents a kind of transition away from communal dependence; in the future, it seems families will not have to work as hard to survive because of luxury. But when taken in harmony with all the rest of these stories, as well as the constant thematic portraits to this effect, it is clear that Toni Morrison is depicting the range of options for black people. They can be beautiful and exotic, so that people like Michael can fetishize them, or they can find work by becoming subordinate to white people.

Section C : Drama

1. **The Emperor Jones: Eugene O'Neill**

Eugene O'Neill: Biography

Eugene O'Neill is perhaps one of the best-known American playwrights of all time, and received numerous accolades throughout his lengthy career. He is best categorized as a playwright in the realist school, and is credited with bringing realism, a dramatic technique initially employed by the European playwrights Anton Chekhov and Henrik Ibsen, to the United States. He often wrote about Americans living in desperate conditions, and his play *Long Day's Journey into Night* is considered one of the greatest American plays of all time.

O'Neill was born in New York City, at a hotel called the Barrett House, the son of Irish immigrants, James O'Neill and Mary Ellen Quinlan. His father was an actor, and so was often on tour, and Eugene grew up with an awareness of and appreciation for the theatre. He first harnessed his abilities as a playwright on Cape Cod with the Provincetown Players in 1916. The Provincetown Players had theatres in Provincetown and Greenwich Village, and they frequently produced O'Neill's work.

Beyond the Horizon was O'Neill's first play to premiere on Broadway, in 1920, and won the Pulitzer. That same year, he wrote *The Emperor Jones*, which premiered to great acclaim. His other plays include *Anna Christie*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and *Ah, Wilderness!* a comedy.

In spite of his success, O'Neill had an unhappy personal life, with marital struggles and estranged relationships with his children. Additionally, he suffered from alcoholism and depression. In 1936, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 1953, he died at the age of 65 in a hotel in Boston.

Historical Context of *The Emperor Jones*

The Emperor Jones was produced in 1920 and published in 1921. It was the playwright's first foray into Expressionist writing. The play is a commentary on the United States' occupation of Haiti, and the play comments in broader terms on American imperialism around the globe. In 1915, amid rising global tensions prior to World War I, the US invaded Haiti as a show of strength and influence to intimidate Germany. There were a number of

influential Germans living in Haiti at that time and because they married Haitians, they were able to circumvent Haitian laws forbidding foreigners from purchasing Haitian land. The 1915 Haitian-American Convention was a treaty that granted the US economic oversight over Haiti for a ten-year period. During that period, the US overhauled Haiti completely. It invested in infrastructure, established National Guards, and reinstituted impressed labour of Haitians to reach these goals, while also putting policies in place to redirect a major percentage of Haiti's economy to repay loans to the US and France. When Germany lost the war in 1918, the US maintained occupancy of Haiti even as President Woodrow Wilson spoke hypocritically about the need for countries to govern themselves. In this way, the character of Jones comes to represent America's knowledge that it was indeed exploiting Haiti, while the natives' victory over Jones suggests a hope that American imperialism would be overthrown.

Character List

Brutus Jones: The titular emperor of an unidentified West Indies island spent ten years working as a train porter in the United States before a game of dice spiralled wildly out of control. He killed a man named Jeff over a dispute during a game of craps. After getting thrown in jail, Brutus then killed a prison guard and escaped America as a stowaway on a ship bound for the Indies. Once on the island, he recognized how impressive he was to the natives and exploited their gullibility to become ruler. The play picks up at the exact moment that Jones' subjects begin to grow tired of him and start staging a revolt. Jones is depicted as greedy and prideful, without thinking of the ethical implications of his misdeeds. His misdeeds begin to catch up with him, however, when he enters the dark forest, and is attended by haunting hallucinations about his sordid past. He ends up becoming his own worst enemy, panicking in the face of his own conscience and making his way back to the very place where he entered the forest, where the revolutionaries are waiting to kill him.

Smithers: Ostensibly a friend of Jones, but a profoundly racist white Cockney trader who looks upon Jones with thinly veiled malice. Smithers is the one to warn Jones of the revolution, and can hardly believe it when the natives manage to make silver bullets with which to kill their emperor. Smithers is a crooked and evil character, who seems to always side with whoever has power.

Lem: Lem was the leader before Jones' arrival, and is the leader of the insurrection which finally kills the ill-fated emperor. Lem already tried to assassinate Jones by shooting him, but

failed. In the wake of the accident, Jones convinces his subjects that he possesses magical powers and can be brought down only by a silver bullet. Following this logic, Lem stages a revolution and melts down a bunch of coins in order to make the silver bullets that end up killing Jones.

Old Native Woman: The old woman is in and out of the story by the end of the first scene, but plays a significant role in the narrative. The play opens with Smithers arriving to an empty palace. When he finds the old woman she tells him that a rebellion is underway and Jones is in danger.

The Witch-Doctor: The witch-doctor is merely a figment of the emperor's fevered imagination, appearing in a weird hallucinatory sequence near the end of the story. He is an image of Africa, a spiritual shaman who wants to make Jones into a human sacrifice to a god-like crocodile lying in wait in a nearby river.

Detailed Summary

It's late afternoon in the emperor's whitewashed throne room. An old black native woman pokes her head around a doorway and when she decides the coast is clear, she begins to sneak across the room. An old white sailor, Smithers, intercepts her halfway across the floor. When Smithers threatens her with a whip, the woman explains that all the natives have run away to the hills. As the woman runs away, Smithers whistles.

Moments later, Brutus Jones, the emperor, enters the throne room with an annoyed, sleepy look on his face. He's wearing a heavily decorated uniform. Jones yells and threatens to hurt whoever woke him up. Smithers catches Jones's attention, admits that he woke Jones up, and tells Jones that he has news. Jones sits on his throne and demands that Smithers tell him the news. Smithers sarcastically asks Jones where the court and the servants are, but Jones just yawns and says they're drinking rum in town—and Smithers should know this, given how much time he spends drinking with the natives. When Smithers scoffs that drinking is part of his job, Jones sneers. Smithers angrily reminds Jones that he helped Jones when he first arrived on the island. Jones puts a hand on his revolver and reminds Smithers to be polite. When Smithers apologizes, Jones insists that he's an entirely different person now. Smithers retorts that nobody else would hire Jones once it got out that he'd been in jail in the United States, but Jones simply looks at Smithers and says that he knows Smithers has been in jail too.

Jones explains that he's not acting as emperor for the glory: he puts on a show to entertain the natives, but he just wants their money. When Smithers says that the natives are out of money, Jones laughs and says that's not true, since he's still emperor. Smithers asks Jones about his law-breaking habits. Jones insists that the emperor doesn't have to follow the laws, especially since "big stealin'" like he does is what made him emperor. Smithers declares that Jones truly did trick the natives, and remarks on Jones's good luck. Jones is offended, but Smithers says that Jones's story about the silver bullet was luck: when Jones first came to the island, he got into an altercation with one of the natives and when the man's gun misfired, Jones shot him and then said that he could only be killed by silver bullets. The natives bought it, and Jones laughs that the natives are fools. Smithers asks Jones if the rumours are true and he had a silver bullet made. Jones says they are, and explains that he told the natives that he'll kill himself with it. Jones pulls out the bullet and tells Smithers that it's his good luck charm.

Jones explains that at the first whiff of trouble, he'll resign, take his money, and leave. Smithers knowingly asks Jones if he won't go back to the states, and Jones says he could, since he wasn't ever in jail there. Smithers is disbelieving and asks Jones about the stories that Jones killed white men in the states. Jones insists he's not scared of lynching. Further, Jones says he'll kill Smithers if he doesn't straighten up. Smithers tries to laugh, and Jones tells more of his story: he suggests he might've gone to jail for killing a black man who cheated him at dice, and then he might've also killed a prison guard. He says that all of this might not be true, but Jones will kill Smithers for telling anyone. Smithers seems terrified and reminds Jones that he's always been a friend, and finally tells Jones his news. When Jones rings the bell to call his servants, nobody comes. Jones is enraged. After a moment, he composes himself and declares that it's time to resign. Smithers warns Jones about Lem, the native chief, as Lem hates Jones. Smithers also warns Jones about the creepiness of the forest, but Jones brushes off these warnings. He insists that the natives are stupid, his escape will be easy, and if the natives do catch him, he'll commit suicide with his silver bullet. The sound of a tom-tom reaches the palace. Smithers explains that the natives have begun to prepare to cast spells. Jones insists he's not scared and reminds Smithers that he's an upstanding member of the Baptist Church. Smithers laughs and Jones bids him goodbye.

As night falls, Jones reaches the edge of the forest. The heat is oppressive and he mops sweat off his brow. Jones listens to the tom-tom and wonders if the natives have begun to cross the plain. To calm his nerves, Jones decides it's time to eat and he scans the ground in search

of his white stone. He finds it, but instead of finding food under it, there's nothing. Jones discovers that there are many white stones, none of which have food under them—he's in the wrong spot. Jones is distraught and lights a match to see better. The tom-tom's rhythm quickens, and Jones flings the match away. He decides that lighting it was stupid, as it'll give his location away. Jones turns around to scan the plain as the "little formless fears," grub-like creatures with glittering eyes, crawl out of the forest. Jones turns to face the forest and asks the forest if it's mocking him. The formless fears laugh in reply, and Jones leaps in fright. He yells, pulls out his gun, and shoots at them. They scuttle into the forest, and Jones listens to the tom-tom. He tells himself that the fears were just pigs and urges himself into the forest.

Several hours later, the moonlight illuminates a clearing. Jeff, the black man Jones killed in the States, crouches and throws dice on the ground. Jones comes into view on the edge of the clearing and tries to cheer himself up. He picks at his uniform, which is torn. As Jones enters the clearing, he hears the clicking sound of the dice. He sounds afraid as he remarks that it sounds like dice. Suddenly, he notices Jeff. Jones is transfixed and he addresses Jeff, wondering with fear how Jeff ended up on the island. Jones asks Jeff if he's a ghost. Jeff doesn't reply, and Jones shoots Jeff. When the smoke clears, Jeff is gone. The tom-tom's beat gets faster, and Jones runs back into the forest.

Just before midnight, Jones stumbles upon a road. His uniform is even more torn, and he yells that he's melting in the heat. Jones pulls off his coat and flings it away. As Jones rests, he wonders where the road came from. He's never seen it before and becomes terrified that there are ghosts around. Jones prays to God that he doesn't see any more ghosts. As Jones studies the moon, a silent chain gang of black convicts walks onto the road, supervised by a white prison guard. When Jones notices the chain gang, the gang begins working on the road. The guard looks angrily at Jones and motions for him to join the convicts, and Jones obeys as though he's in a trance. Jones has no shovel but he matches the shovelling motions of the others; despite this, the guard whips him anyway. Angry, Jones lifts his arms over his head as though he has a shovel in his hands to hit the guard over the head with. When he finally realizes he has no shovel, he pleads with the convicts to lend him one of theirs. Cursing, Jones pulls out his revolver and shoots the guard in the back. As he does, the forest and the chain gang disappear, the tom-tom increases tempo, and Jones crashes away into the woods.

A few hours later, Jones reaches a clearing with a stump in the middle of it. He falls to his knees to plead with Jesus to forgive him for killing Jeff and the prison guard, and for stealing

from the natives. Jones looks at his tattered shoes and decides they're making his feet hurt more. He takes them off and holds them in his lap as a silent crowd of white Southerners, dressed in clothing from the 1850s, enters the clearing. They gather around the stump as an attendant lead in a group of slaves. Jones notices nothing until the auctioneer calls the crowd to attention and taps Jones on the shoulder, motioning for him to get on the stump. Jones leaps up in an attempt to get away, and the auctioneer describes Jones's strengths to the assembled planters. When the auctioneer begins the bidding, Jones realizes he's being sold at a slave auction. A planter finally purchases Jones and the auctioneer pushes Jones towards the man. Angrily, Jones draws his gun and shoots both the auctioneer and his purchaser. The clearing disappears and the tom-tom beats faster. Jones runs away.

After wandering for another two hours, Jones wanders into a clearing that's long and skinny, with vines creating an arched ceiling. His pants are so torn; he's wearing little more than a loincloth. Jones wails to God wondering what he'll do, since he only has his silver bullet left. He decides he needs to rest and throws himself onto the ground. The moonlight brightens incrementally and two rows of black men, also wearing loincloths, come into view. They sit along each side if the clearing, swaying as though they're in a ship. They begin to wail rhythmically, and Jones notices them. Though he tries to ignore them, Jones raises his voice to join theirs. As the voices fade, Jones continues his mad dash through the forest.

Early in the morning, Jones enters another clearing by a river, still wailing. He moves as though he's in a trance and sinks to his knees beside a pile of rocks that resemble an altar. Jones asks God to protect him as a Congo witch doctor jumps out from behind a tree. The witch doctor begins to dance and chant to the beat of the tom-tom, and Jones watches in fascination. The doctor dances a story of being pursued by devils and as the tension rises, Jones begins chanting and beating the ground in time. Suddenly, the witch doctor motions to Jones, and Jones understands that he's going to be offered as a sacrifice. From the river, the witch doctor calls a crocodile god. The crocodile stares at Jones as the witch doctor motions for Jones to approach it. The tom-tom reaches a fever pitch as Jones cries out, grabs his gun, and shoots the crocodile with his silver bullet. The crocodile returns to river and the witch doctor disappears, but Jones just lies facedown and cries.

At dawn, Lem, his soldiers, and Smithers approach the edge of the forest from the clearing. One soldier discovers the spot where Jones entered the forest. Smithers is disgusted, but Lem calmly tells Smithers that they'll catch Jones. As Smithers continues to insult the

natives, Lem continues to reply with the same thing. When they hear snapping twigs in the forest, Lem sends in soldiers. Smithers reasons that the snapping could be Jones and the sound of rifles comes from the woods. Lem smiles and tells Smithers that Jones is dead. He explains that he and his men spent the night casting charms and melting their money to make silver bullets. Smithers laughs when he learns that the natives truly believe Jones's assertion that he can only be killed by silver bullets, and he calls Lem crazy. Soldiers emerge from the forest carrying Jones's dead body. Smithers mocks Jones's body and mocks the natives as they carry Jones away.

Themes

Racism

The Emperor Jones tells the story of Brutus Jones, a porter on a train car who, after killing a black man and then a white prison guard in the United States, escapes to a Caribbean island. On the island, he quickly sets up an empire, with himself as emperor. He amasses vast wealth by levying heavy taxes on the black natives and by engaging in various forms of corruption. When he learns from a white trader named Smithers that his black native subjects are planning to revolt against him, he embarks on a journey through the forest to escape by sea. As Jones wanders through the forest at night, with the sound of the natives' drums constantly beating in the background, he is faced with various native-summoned apparitions that force him to confront the fact that in making himself emperor and exploiting the natives, he was "performing whiteness"—putting into practice the lessons he learned by watching the white people who mistreated and exploited him in the United States. Furthermore, he comes to realize that his race and all that comes with it isn't something that he can escape or deny.

The play opens with Jones already having established himself as emperor. He is extremely powerful—the natives believe that he is charmed and can only be killed by silver bullets. He's rich from the taxes and other sorts of corrupt business that his role allows him to engage in without consequences. In one sense, by turning himself into a rich and powerful emperor, Jones overturns the racist situation that defined his life of exploitation and impoverishment in the United States. However, the play's take on racism isn't nearly that simple. Jones doesn't just set himself up as an emperor; rather, he makes himself emperor over other black people and uses his position to exploit and oppress those black people in order to

enrich himself. Jones seeks power and exploits the less powerful, just as he himself was exploited by white people in the United States.

Furthermore, Jones explicitly states that he was able to successfully install himself as emperor and tax the natives dry by using what he learned from white people during his time working as a porter: that "big stealin'" brings fame and fortune. With this, the play then connects whiteness and white people to exploitation, corruption, and seeking power. It also makes the case that Jones, in making himself emperor, is acting like a white person. To this point, Jones does hold what can be described as "racist" views toward the natives he oppresses, whom he views as dumb and gullible. More broadly, this dynamic suggests that white racism and exploitation create a kind of cycle, in which white culture defines the terms of success—power and wealth—and then anyone who tries to gain that success will necessarily have to act like a white person in order to achieve it. White racism and exploitation, the play suggests, create only more exploitation and more racism.

After learning of the natives' imminent revolt against him, Jones flees into the forest, and confronts apparitions summoned by the natives. His interactions with these apparitions force him to relive his own personal history (which took place in the early twentieth century) and the history of slavery in the United States. As he wanders, he encounters apparitions of the black man and the white prison guard he killed, and then experiences being sold at a slave auction, being a passenger on a slave ship bound for the US, and finally, a sacrificial ceremony performed by a witch doctor in the Congo. As Jones descends through time and confronts these apparitions, the things that signify his façade of white power get stripped away and his belief in his own power erodes until he's nothing more than a scared, animalistic man with no power of any sort. Through these apparitions, the natives force Jones to admit that he's black, thereby insisting that it's impossible to escape this knowledge no matter how high he climbs. Within the logic of the play and in the light of the rampant racism of the time period in which it was written (around 1920), the play leaves the viewer with the assertion that black individuals like Jones who seek to better themselves by performing whiteness are doing so futilely: that they'll never escape the fact that they're black and will always be seen as such, and that even in trying to escape they are only ever re-enacting the exploitation and racism that afflicted them in the first place.

The play's exploration of race is further complicated by the character of Smithers, a cantankerous, racist white sailor who seems to be enriching himself through Jones's own

corrupt practices. Smithers appears in the first and last scenes of the play, and in those scenes he functions as a kind of narrator. In the first scene Smithers introduces Jones to the audience and in the last, he accompanies the black natives to the edge of the forest where they then kill Jones. By having Smithers open and close the play, he is established as an interpreter of events, and the viewer is encouraged to identify with him and with his interpretation. Put another way, the play literally sets up Jones to be viewed through a lens of whiteness, as provided by Smithers. There are a few implications of this structural dynamic. First, the fact that Smithers appears to respect Jones more than he does the natives highlights even further the way that Jones's own ascent to power is based on the racist and exploitative viewpoints he learned from white men. Second, even though Smithers occupies a very small place in the action itself, his role as interpreter affords him a great deal of power: his way of interpreting those events is given precedence. So, in a play about a black emperor, it is still a white man who holds the most power. Essentially, both thematically and structurally, the play seems to suggest that there is no escape for black people, no matter how high they ascend, from white racism and oppression.

History and Collective Memory

As Jones runs into the forest to escape the rebelling natives, he encounters apparitions summoned by the natives that force him to confront his history, both on a personal level and on a much grander scale. By forcing Jones to watch and experience his past and a condensed history of the black slave experience over the previous 200 years, the play asserts that it's impossible for a black person to truly escape the legacy of slavery, as that legacy continues to inform the lives of the black community regardless of what they do or where in the world they go.

Jones's initial relocation to the island in the Caribbean is an attempt to escape his own past and the larger history of slavery in the United States. He escapes to the island after first murdering another man in a dice game, which can be seen as exemplifying the kind of black on black violence that occurs specifically under a regime of white power that deprives black people of any other significant means of gaining money than illicit gambling. While imprisoned for the first murder, Jones then kills a white prison guard and escapes to the Caribbean. In doing so he literally kills a representative figure of white authority in the United States, and then escapes to a country where no such authority exists. Once in the Caribbean, Jones operates under the assumption that he'll truly be able to escape his past by escaping the place—the

United States—in which that past took place. Jones does find that on the island he can elevate himself far higher than he ever would've been able to in the US. It's also significant that he undertakes this entire endeavour alone. By acting alone, Jones seems to feel that he is able to divorce himself from the biases and cultural narratives that keep him trapped in the collective memory of slavery in the United States. Put another way, Jones seems to initially believe that memory and the past are inseparable from locale and community, and that simply by changing locale, a person can escape their past, escape their community, and go on to rewrite the direction of their future.

As Jones begins his journey through the forest, he sets out believing that he's going to remain separated from his past and the slavery-ridden history of his former black community and ancestors. However, the apparitions that the natives send to torment Jones make it abundantly clear that Jones's initial belief that he left his past behind in the United States is foolish and impossible. The apparitions first force Jones to accept his personal history by sending the ghost of Jeff, the black man he murdered, and then apparitions of the prison guard and other black convicts who also worked on the chain gang. They then immerse Jones in a slave auction, a slave ship, and finally, a religious sacrifice in the Congo. As these apparitions progress from one to the next, Jones interacts with them progressively more and more—though he only talks to Jeff (and in doing so, seems aware that Jeff is long dead), Jones participates unwillingly in the chain gang, and later seems unable to resist joining the black slaves in their wails and rocking in the slave ship. By making it seem with these later apparitions as though Jones participates out of instinct, the play suggests that Jones's very identity as an American black man inherently includes his slave ancestry and his even earlier African ancestry. Standing on the auction block and participating in tribal rituals are things that are, per the logic of the play, branded into the collective memories of African Americans, and are therefore part of Jones's history that cannot be ignored.

Though Eugene O'Neill's identity as a white man and the era in which the play was written complicates some of these ideas (it's possible, for instance, to read a very sinister message to black viewers that African Americans will never escape slavery and achieve any sense of equality) in a contemporary context, the same message serves as a poignant reminder that there are still racist systems at work in American society that oppress and dehumanize people of colour daily.

Power and Systemic Oppression

The Emperor Jones takes place in the time period in which it was written (late 1910s, possibly into the early 1920s), and it's very important to consider the play in the context of its time. As an African American and a Pullman porter, Jones would have been subjected to Jim Crow laws and other forms of systemic oppression that reminded him daily that he was black and therefore powerless. The Emperor Jones, then, explores what happens when someone like Jones internalizes these systems of power, and then goes on to perpetuate them in his own empire once he's given the chance to do so.

Prior to the start of the play, Jones spent ten years working as a porter on Pullman sleeper trains. In this line of work (which was considered one of the most desirable jobs for African Americans at the time), Jones would have been in close contact with white people in an environment that considered black porters to be lesser than the white passengers. Through immersion in this oppressive environment, Jones had the opportunity to listen to his white passengers speak and by doing so, he developed his own ideas about how people gain power. He comes to believe that small crime lands people in jail, while crimes on a larger scale—what he calls "big stealin'"—earn people fame and fortune.

Jones's realization about the way the world works reflects the greater system of race relations in the United States: Jim Crow laws and other legalized forms of oppression made it legal to jail or otherwise punish African Americans for crimes that weren't policed nearly as harshly if the perpetrator was white. In fact, most racially motivated white crime, no matter how brutal, wasn't prosecuted at all. Jones and Smithers discuss lynching at one point, a practice of extra-judicial hanging of black people that white people used to create an environment of intense fear and exert often unchecked power over their black neighbours. This entire system—both the legal system that privileged white people and the extrajudicial violence that ensured black people were too frightened to fight against the system—enabled not just an environment in which it was possible for white people to commit these humanitarian crimes of disempowering, killing, and intimidating African Americans, but also allowed them to reap major economic benefits for doing so by exploiting black labour. In essence, then, Jones's recognition of "big stealin'" functions as a condemnation of the entire system of racist white society, which legally functioned as a kind of theft of black bodies, labour, and wealth.

Coming out of this system after serving time in jail for killing both a black man and a white prison guard, Jones escapes to an island in the Caribbean to install himself as emperor. Rather than take the opportunity to dismiss the systems that kept him down in the United States, Jones instead perpetuates them with disastrous results. Upon arrival on the island, Jones doesn't choose to view the black natives as people worthy of respect, just like he is. Instead, he conceptualizes them as dumb and gullible and takes the opportunity to subjugate them in much the same way white people did to him when he lived in America. Jones taxes the natives as much as he possibly can and keeps them functioning in a state of fear at all times, which consequently allows him to live in luxury as the emperor of the island. Further, though the play never includes scenes in which Jones speaks to the natives, it implies that he enjoys talking down to them—or at the very least, he enjoys talking badly about them to others. Interestingly too, even before he learns that the natives have already begun their revolt, Jones is acutely aware of the fact that a native uprising is inevitable. This in turn suggests an understanding—on both Jones's and the play's part—that existing under these circumstances is untenable and damaging, and cannot last.

When considered in terms of the racial oppression that Jones faced in the United States during the 1910s, the play suggests that these systems of power are insidious and, horrifically, are internalized by the victims. Though Jones seeks to remedy his own oppression by seizing power and subjugating others, his eventual death at the hands of his subjects makes the consequences of perpetuating systems like this abundantly clear. In this way, the play offers the possibility that the only way to truly escape oppression is to escape the system that enables that oppression.

Godliness, Humanity, and Fear

When Brutus Jones crowns himself emperor of the Caribbean island, he elevates himself to the level of a god. His subjects are forced to worship and serve him without question, and he conceptualizes himself as far superior to them in every way. As a final touch, Jones plays into the natives' superstitions by telling them that he can only be killed by a silver bullet. However, after the natives' revolt against him and Jones journeys through the forest to escape the uprising, he slowly sheds the things that mark him as a powerful, godlike figure and must then accept his own humanity. Ultimately he must face his death, as all humans must.

When the audience first meets Jones, he's storming through his white palace and is dressed in an ostentatious military uniform. Both the colour of the palace and his uniform are intended to convey the fact that he's a powerful figure who is above being treated like any other man. The myth surrounding his ability to be killed only by a silver bullet supports this façade, as it implies that he's not truly a human man and is instead something above and beyond humanity. Further, Jones sees the fact that he was able to convince the natives that this is true as proof that he is truly superior, suggesting in turn that his godliness comes in part from his ability to hoodwink his subjects by using their beliefs to his advantage. The one thing that Jones lacks, and the one thing that therefore sets him apart from the rest of humanity per the logic of the play, is fear. For example, though Jones believes that an eventual native uprising is inevitable, he's entirely confident in his escape plan, which will allow him to escape unscathed, rich, and able to move on and continue living in luxury elsewhere.

With fear, or the lack of it, established as the one thing that separates Jones from his subjects, the apparitions that the natives send to torment Jones through his night in the forest can be seen as an attempt, first and foremost, to reintroduce fear into his understanding and consequently to reconnect him with his humanity. When Jones first sets off, he's jaunty, cocky, and confident in his escape. He's prepared with sturdy boots, his pistol loaded with five lead bullets and one silver bullet (in case he needs to commit suicide to keep up the charade with the natives), and enough food stashed at the edge of the forest to last him through the night. He believes both that his plan is too airtight to fail, and that the natives are too dumb to be able to successfully give chase.

The natives, however, are prepared to return Jones to a human state by reintroducing fear into his emotional vocabulary. At the same time, they've also found a way to reduce Jones from his godlike state by treating it in a pragmatic way: since Jones has convinced the natives that he can only be killed by a silver bullet, they spend the night fabricating silver bullets to kill him. As Jones travels through the woods, he becomes progressively more dishevelled and sheds his uniform, ending the play wearing little more than a loincloth. This is a physical representation of his loss of his sense of his own godliness and a return to his own humanity—in the end, his body is all he has. Similarly, as Jones encounters the natives' apparitions, he becomes increasingly more fearful. He uses his lead bullets to destroy each apparition, and finally, uses his silver bullet to destroy the crocodile god summoned by the witch doctor—a symbolic representation of the death of Jones's own sense of godliness. By the time Jones

completes his circular journey and returns to the edge of the woods where he began, mostly naked and without bullets, Jones is truly human, terrified of what he's created in the natives and scared for his own life. The natives promptly take his life, using their own silver bullets.

Though Smithers mocks the natives' use of silver bullets as ridiculous (he is fully aware that Jones can absolutely be killed with lead bullets), there is a symbolic power to it. In using silver bullets to kill Jones, the natives simultaneously kill Jones the man and the idea of Jones the god. Jones's death, then, truly brings Jones down to earth by asserting his humanity and mortality as inarguable facts. The fact of his death exemplifies the cost of believing oneself to be above death and other worldly consequences, and exposes his initial belief in his own godliness—or, more broadly, the thought that anyone is superior to others in such a way as to act as a god over them—as the foolish and dangerous thought that it always was.

2. **The Glass Menagerie: Tennessee Williams**

Tennessee Williams: Biography

Tennessee Williams was a master playwright of the twentieth century, and his plays *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof* are considered among the finest of the American stage. At their best, his 25 full-length plays combined lyrical intensity, haunting loneliness, and hypnotic violence. He is widely considered the greatest Southern playwright and one of the greatest playwrights in the history of American drama.

Born in Columbus as Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1911, moved to St. Louis, Missouri as a child. His father was a heavy drinker, and his mother was prone to hysterical fits. At age sixteen, the already prolific Williams won five dollars for an essay entitled "Can a Good Wife be a Good Sport?" Williams attended the University of Missouri, where he frequently entered writing contests as a source of extra income. After Williams failed military training during junior year, his father pulled him out of college and put him to work in a shoe factory, which Williams despised. At age twenty-four, Williams suffered a nervous breakdown and left his job. After struggling with his sexuality through his youth, he finally started a new life as a gay man, with a new name, a new home, and a promising new career.

In the early 1940s, Williams moved between several cities for different jobs and playwriting classes, while also working at MGM as a scriptwriter. In 1944 came the great turning point in his career: *The Glass Menagerie*. First produced in Chicago to great success, the play transferred to Broadway in 1945 and won the NY Critics Circle Award. While success

freed Williams financially, it also made it difficult for him to write. He went to Mexico to work on a play originally titled *The Poker Night*. This play eventually became one of his masterpieces, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It won Williams a second NY Critics' Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize in 1947, enabling him to travel and buy a home in Key West as an escape for both relaxation and writing. The year 1951 brought *The Rose Tattoo* and Williams' first Tony award, as well as the successful film adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Vivian Leigh.

The following years were some of Williams' most productive. His plays were a great success in the United States and abroad, and he was able to write works that were well-received by critics and popular with audiences, including *The Rose Tattoo* (1950), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Night of the Iguana* (1961), and many others. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* won Williams his second Pulitzer Prize, and was his last truly great artistic and commercial success.

He gave American theatre goers unforgettable characters, an incredible vision of life in the South, and a series of powerful portraits of the human condition. He was deeply interested in something he called "poetic realism," namely the use of everyday objects which, seen repeatedly and in the right contexts, become imbued with symbolic meaning. His plays also seemed preoccupied with the extremes of human brutality and sexual behaviour: madness, rape, incest, nymphomania, as well as violent and fantastic deaths. Williams himself often commented on the violence in his own work, which to him seemed part of the human condition; he was conscious, also, of the violence in his plays being expressed in a particularly American setting. As with the work of Edward Albee, critics who attacked the "excesses" of Williams' work often were making thinly veiled attacked on his sexuality. Homosexuality was not discussed openly at that time, but in Williams' plays the themes of desire and isolation reveal, among other things, the influence of having grown up gay in a homophobic world. Overwork and drug use continued to take their toll on him, and on February 23, 1983, Williams choked to death on the lid of one of his pill bottles. He left behind an impressive body of work, including plays that continue to be performed the world over. In his worst work, his writing is melodramatic and overwrought, but at his best Tennessee Williams is a haunting, lyrical, and powerful voice, and one of the most important forces in twentieth-century American drama.

About the Play

The Glass Menagerie was written in 1944, based on reworked material from one of Williams' short stories, "Portrait of a Girl in Glass," and his screenplay, *The Gentleman Caller*. In the weeks leading up to opening night (December 26, 1944 in Chicago), Williams had deep doubts about the production - the theatre did not expect the play to last more than a few nights, and the producers prepared a closing notice in response to the weak advance sales. But two critics loved the show, and returned almost nightly to monitor the production.

The Glass Menagerie is loosely autobiographical. The characters all have some basis in the real-life family of Tennessee Williams: Edwina is the hopeful and demanding Amanda, Rose is the frail and shy Laura (whose nickname, "Blue Roses," refers directly back to Williams' real-life sister), and distant and cold Cornelius is the faithless and absent father. Tom is Williams' surrogate. Williams actually worked in a shoe warehouse in St. Louis, and there actually was a disastrous evening with the only gentleman caller who ever came for Rose. Thomas was also Tennessee Williams' real name, and the name "Thomas" means twin - making Tom the surrogate not only for Williams but also possibly for the audience. He is our eye into the Wingfields' situation. His dilemma forms a central conflict of the play, as he faces an agonizing choice between responsibility for his family and living his own life.

The play is replete with lyrical symbolism. *The Glass Menagerie*, in its fragility and delicate beauty, is a symbol for Laura. She is oddly beautiful and, like her glass pieces, easy to destroy. The fire escape is most closely linked to Tom's character and to the theme of escape. Laura stumbles on the escape, while Tom uses it to get out of the apartment and into the outside world. He goes down the fire escape one last time at the end of the play, and he stands on the landing during his monologues. His position there metaphorically illustrates his position between his family and the outside world, between his responsibility and the need to live his own life.

The play is non-naturalistic, playing with stage conventions and making use of special effects like music and slide projections. By writing a "memory play," Tennessee Williams freed himself from the restraints of naturalistic theatre. The theme of memory is important: for Amanda, memory is a kind of escape. For Tom, the older Tom who narrates the events of the play, memory is the thing that cannot be escaped, for he is still haunted by memories of the sister he abandoned years ago.

Character List

Amanda Wingfield: Laura and Tom's mother. A proud, vivacious woman, Amanda clings fervently to memories of a vanished, genteel past. She is simultaneously admirable, charming, pitiable, and laughable.

Laura Wingfield: Amanda's daughter and Tom's older sister. Laura has a bad leg, on which she has to wear a brace, and walks with a limp. Twenty-three years old and painfully shy, she has largely withdrawn from the outside world and devotes herself to old records and her collection of glass figurines.

Tom Wingfield: Amanda's son and Laura's younger brother. An aspiring poet, Tom works at a shoe warehouse to support the family. He is frustrated by the numbing routine of his job and escapes from it through movies, literature, and alcohol.

Jim O'Connor: An old acquaintance of Tom and Laura. Jim was a popular athlete in high school and is now a shipping clerk at the shoe warehouse in which Tom works. He is unwaveringly devoted to goals of professional achievement and ideals of personal success.

Mr. Wingfield: Amanda's husband and Laura and Tom's father. Mr. Wingfield was a handsome man who worked for a telephone company. He abandoned his family years before the action of the play and never appears onstage. His picture, however, is prominently displayed in the Wingfields' living room.

Detailed Summary

The Glass Menagerie is a memory play, and its action is drawn from the memories of the narrator, Tom Wingfield. Tom is a character in the play, which is set in St. Louis in 1937. He is an aspiring poet who toils in a shoe warehouse to support his mother, Amanda, and sister, Laura. Mr. Wingfield, Tom and Laura's father, ran off years ago and, except for one postcard, has not been heard from since.

Amanda, originally from a genteel Southern family, regales her children frequently with tales of her idyllic youth and the scores of suitors who once pursued her. She is disappointed that Laura, who wears a brace on her leg and is painfully shy, does not attract any gentlemen callers. She enrols Laura in a business college, hoping that she will make her own and the family's fortune through a business career. Weeks later, however, Amanda discovers that Laura's crippling shyness has led her to drop out of the class secretly and spend her days

wandering the city alone. Amanda then decides that Laura’s last hope must lie in marriage and begins selling magazine subscriptions to earn the extra money she believes will help to attract suitors for Laura. Meanwhile, Tom, who loathes his warehouse job, finds escape in liquor, movies, and literature, much to his mother’s chagrin. During one of the frequent arguments between mother and son, Tom accidentally breaks several of the glass animal figurines that are Laura’s most prized possessions.

Amanda and Tom discuss Laura’s prospects, and Amanda asks Tom to keep an eye out for potential suitors at the warehouse. Tom selects Jim O’Connor, a casual friend, and invites him to dinner. Amanda quizzes Tom about Jim and is delighted to learn that he is a driven young man with his mind set on career advancement. She prepares an elaborate dinner and insists that Laura wear a new dress. At the last minute, Laura learns the name of her caller; as it turns out, she had a devastating crush on Jim in high school. When Jim arrives, Laura answers the door, on Amanda’s orders, and then quickly disappears, leaving Tom and Jim alone. Tom confides to Jim that he has used the money for his family’s electric bill to join the merchant marine and plans to leave his job and family in search of adventure. Laura refuses to eat dinner with the others, feigning illness. Amanda, wearing an ostentatious dress from her glamorous youth, talks vivaciously with Jim throughout the meal.

As dinner is ending, the lights go out as a consequence of the unpaid electric bill. The characters light candles, and Amanda encourages Jim to entertain Laura in the living room while she and Tom clean up. Laura is at first paralyzed by Jim’s presence, but his warm and open behaviour soon draws her out of her shell. She confesses that she knew and liked him in high school but was too shy to approach him. They continue talking, and Laura reminds him of the nickname he had given her: “Blue Roses,” an accidental corruption of pleurosis, an illness Laura had in high school. He reproaches her for her shyness and low self-esteem but praises her uniqueness. Laura then ventures to show him her favourite glass animal, a unicorn. Jim dances with her, but in the process, he accidentally knocks over the unicorn, breaking off its horn. Laura is forgiving, noting that now the unicorn is a normal horse. Jim then kisses her, but he quickly draws back and apologizes, explaining that he was carried away by the moment and that he actually has a serious girlfriend. Resigned, Laura offers him the broken unicorn as a souvenir.

Amanda enters the living room, full of good cheer. Jim hastily explains that he must leave because of an appointment with his fiancée. Amanda sees him off warmly but, after he

is gone, turns on Tom, who had not known that Jim was engaged. Amanda accuses Tom of being an inattentive, selfish dreamer and then throws herself into comforting Laura. From the fire escape outside of their apartment, Tom watches the two women and explains that, not long after Jim's visit, he gets fired from his job and leaves Amanda and Laura behind. Years later, though he travels far, he finds that he is unable to leave behind guilty memories of Laura.

Themes

Memory

In his monologue that opens the play, Tom announces, "The play is memory." The play is Tom's memory of the past, and all of the action takes place in his head. That action is therefore dramatic, sentimental, and emotional, not realistic. As is fitting in a play that is itself a memory of the past, in *The Glass Menagerie* the past haunts all the characters.

Tom the character (the Tom who Tom is remembering as he "creates" the play) feels trapped by memory. He sees the past as a physical and emotional restraint that prevents him from living his life. And yet there is something in it that holds him, too—he is compelled to return to memory over and over again. His repetitive actions, such as smoking and going to the movies, demonstrate both his desire to escape and the relentless cycle of the past. And the fact that the play itself is a memory he feels the need to transform into a play suggests that Tom has still not escaped that past. Amanda uses her memories like a veil to shield her from reality. She clings to the Southern belle version of herself who received seventeen gentleman callers in a weekend.

As the play progresses, and things do not work out as Amanda hopes they will, she clutches the past more desperately. When the gentleman caller arrives, she wears a ridiculously frilled dress and slips into a Southern accent, becoming her former self rather than accepting the reality of her present situation. Laura retreats to the past as a safe haven, a perfect world removed from time. Her delicate memories, such as being called "Blue Roses," are much like her fragile glass menagerie in their perfection and fragility. Unlike the other characters, Jim is not haunted by his past: he remembers his youth but does not feel the need to re-live it. Nonetheless, when the Wingfield's treat him as the high-school hero he used to be, and with the help of the candlelight and the music, he seems to slip into this memory. But when the glass unicorn breaks and the spell is broken, he returns to his own life, outside the Wingfields' memories.

Abandonment

The male characters in the play all abandon Amanda and Laura. The father, whom we never see, has abandoned the family: he worked for the telephone company and "fell in love with long distances." The traumatic effect of this abandonment on Amanda, and Amanda's resulting fear about her own helplessness, is clear in her relentless quest for Laura to gain business skills and then to marry. Jim's abandonment of Laura forms the play's dramatic climax: The Wingfield's (not to mention the audience) hope against hope that somehow he will stay, though there is always the sense that he cannot, even before the glass unicorn shatters. Tom, meanwhile, spends the entire play in tension between his love for his mother and sister and his desire to pursue his own future, thus abandoning his family. Yet, at the same time, Tom has in some sense already abandoned Amanda and Laura before the play has even begun, since the entire play is actually his memory of the past.

But does Tom really abandon his family? Even though he leaves them physically, the fact that he remembers them through the act of creating the play indicates that he has never entirely left, that in leaving them he paradoxically became closer to them, more deeply connected to them. He left them, but in the play he also immortalizes them, transforms Amanda and Laura into a kind of glass menagerie of his own. "Oh Laura, Laura," he says at the play's end, "I tried to leave you behind, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!"

Illusions and Dreams

Tom explains that in creating the play from his memory that he is giving "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion," and the stage directions of the play are designed to create a nostalgic, sentimental, non-realistic atmosphere to create the unreal yet heightened effects of a dream. The lighting in each scene adds emphasis and shadows: for example, the electric light that goes out, the candelabra, moonlight, the paper lantern that hides the broken lightbulb, Tom's lit cigarette, all draw attention to the artistic, emotional, and artificial nature of the play. The stage illusions in the gentleman caller scene—the switch from electricity to candlelight, the music on the Victrola—further this sense of an unreal, dreamlike realm. Though the scene begins as comedy, the lighting and music tenderly develop it into romance, which then shatters into tragedy as the glass unicorn breaks and the dream shifts suddenly back to reality.

The characters in the play are also full of dreams, though these dreams operate in different ways. Tom dreams about escape from his present life. He writes poetry in the

warehouse, discusses joining the merchant marines, and escapes into action-adventure movies. He comments to Jim, at one point, that all of the people at the movies are there to escape into illusion and avoid real life. Amanda's dreams are desperate attempts to escape the sadness of her present, and as such they become self-delusions, blinding her to reality and to the desires of her children. She insists that Tom will fulfil her vision of him as the successful businessman. And when the dream of Laura in business school falls apart, rather than see reality Amanda constructs a new fantasy life for her daughter in the realm of gentleman callers and marriage prospects.

For Laura, dreams do not take the form of ambitions, but instead offer her a refuge from the pain of reality. Unlike Amanda, Laura does not delude herself by pretending that her physical disabilities do not exist. Instead, she retreats from the world by surrounding herself with perfect, immortal objects, like her glass menagerie and the "Jewel Box" she visits instead of going to business school classes. Tom suggests that Jim might have once had high hopes for himself but has since slipped into mediocrity, which might show Tom projecting onto Jim and not necessarily how Jim sees himself. Unlike the Wingfields, Jim neither lives in a dream world of the past nor in a secret future dream-life, but in the present. And yet Jim is himself hoping for a career in radio and television—an industry that might be described as being in the business of creating dreams or believable illusions—and in this way the play suggests that the Wingfield's are not alone in their susceptibility to dreams.

Escape

Escape in the play operate in two directions: from the real world into the world of memory and dreams, as Amanda and Laura demonstrate; or from the world of memory and dreams into the real world, as Tom desires. Amanda and Laura escape reality by retreating into dream worlds. Amanda refuses to see things as they are, insisting on seeing what she wants to see. Amanda still lives as a past version of herself, even as she projects ambitions onto Laura. Rather than accepting Laura's peculiarities or Tom's unhappiness, she escapes into her fantasy version of the world as she thinks it should be.

Laura escapes from the imposing structures of reality into worlds she can control and keep perfect: her memories, the glass menagerie, the freedom of walking through the park. When Amanda confronts Laura, she tries to escape by playing music loudly enough to block out the argument. However, both Amanda and Laura can see their present situations, and they

do try to make their realities better. Amanda raises subscriptions for magazines to earn money. Instead of escaping the fighting, Laura serves as peacemaker between Amanda and Tom.

Tom does not want to escape into dreams or other fantasy worlds—he wants to physically escape, to leave. And even when he can't bring himself to actually leave, he is constantly escaping from something: he escapes from the apartment onto the fire escape; he escapes from the coffin in the magic show; and he sneaks away at the warehouse to write poetry, a mental and physical escape from a menial job. He fantasizes about joining the merchant marines and escaping from not only his claustrophobic life but also the landlocked Midwest. Tom goes to the movies every night to watch an escapist fantasy on the screen. He also uses alcohol to escape reality: we see bottles in his pockets, and "going to the movies" is a euphemism for getting drunk. Yet all of Tom's escape mechanisms are cyclical: while they offer the promise of freedom, they also trap him. "I'm leading a double life," Tom shouts at Amanda at the end of Scene Three. He intends to hurt her so that he might break free of her power over him, but ultimately, he can't escape his love for his family.

3. Dutchman: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)

Amiri Baraka: Biography

A model of the self-made African-American national, poet and propagandist Imamu Amiri Baraka is a leading exponent of black nationalism and latent black talent. Baraka, who was originally named Everett LeRoi Jones, earned a reputation for militancy among radical contemporaries Stokely Carmichael, Huey P. Newton, and the Black Panthers. He has thrived as activist, poet, and playwright of explosive oratories produced on the stages of New York, Paris, Berlin, and Dakar, Senegal.

Baraka was born on October 7, 1934, in Newark, New Jersey, to upscale parents. After graduate work at Columbia University and the New School for Social Research and a dismissal from the United States Air Force for suspicious activities, he influenced the black community's economy and politics and earned a reputation as a polemical dramatist and Beat poet.

Baraka's early success derives from a play, *A Good Girl Is Hard to Find* (1958), and *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* (1961), an introduction to a life's work revealing the black man's pain. He journeyed to Cuba in 1960, which radicalized his thinking about oppression in the third world. Newly energized, he wrote *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963), and edited *The Moderns: An Anthology of New Writings in America* (1963).

The bluntness of his radical thinking, as displayed in *The Dead Lecturer: Poems* (1964), influenced the establishment of the American Theatre for Poets.

Baraka's early flash of brilliance did not go unnoticed. In his late twenties, he earned a John Hay Whitney Fellowship and an Obie for the violent drama *Dutchman* (1963), a taut, menacing vehicle for black consciousness-raising. It succeeded off-Broadway the same year he produced *The Toilet, The Baptism, and The Slave*. The latter is an explosive drama depicting racist confrontations of the times. A kingpin of the Black Arts Movement by 1964, Baraka was visiting scholar at the University of Buffalo. After his adoption of a Muslim name, he settled in Harlem to write *J-E-L-L-O* (1965), a denunciation of a public figure, and autobiographical fiction, *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965), which earned him a Guggenheim Fellowship. His work sharpened in *Home: Social Essays* (1966) and fuelled the drive for the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School, one of New York City's cultural landmarks. He completed *Arm Yourself or Harm Yourself* (1967) and collaborated with Larry Neal on *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968).

Outside these literary coups, Baraka's Marxist-Leninist activism has placed him in positions of power. In March 1972, he led the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. While residing in Newark, he focused on black activism and Afro-Islamic culture with the establishment of Spirit House, a gathering spot and drama centre. As Baraka developed black community, his artistry altered from dense obscurities to the positive, youth-centred style of Langston Hughes. His anthology, *Black Magic: Sabotage, Target Study, Black Art: Collected Poetry 1961-1971* (1969), demonstrates his emergence as an American writer respected by outspoken peers. Perpetually in print, he produced short fiction in *Tales* (1967) and issued additional nonfiction, *In Our Terribleness: Some Elements and Meanings in Black Style* (1969) in collaboration with Billy Abernathy; *Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965* (1971); and *Afrikan Congress: A Documentary of the First Modern Pan-African Congress* (1972).

In his mature years, Baraka published *The Motion of History, Six Other Plays* (1978), containing the pageant Slave Ship, which was staged off Broadway. He anthologized verse in *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (1979) and previously unpublished autobiography in Selected *Plays and Prose of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (1979). At age 50, he issued *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (1984), followed by more prose commentary in *Reflections on Jazz Blues* (1987). His honours include a National Endowment for the Arts

award and a Guggenheim fellowship. Baraka's brief tenure as Poet Laureate of New Jersey (2002–2003) involved controversy over a public reading of his poem "Somebody Blew Up America?", which resulted in accusations of anti-Semitism and negative attention from critics and politicians. Despite this, Baraka is remembered as a highly influential activist and poet who helped to pave the way for great advancements in African American literature and arts. He died on January 9, 2014 in Newark, New Jersey.

About the Text

Amiri Baraka is known for his drama, poetry, and founding of the Black Arts Movement. His works Dutchman and The Slave are considered companion pieces in Black America's "consciousness epic." At the time of their staging and publication, Baraka was still known as LeRoi Jones and had yet to publish his revolutionary and artistic credos and manifestos.

Baraka wrote Dutchman in less than twenty-four hours and first staged it in 1964 in New York City at the Cherry Lane Theatre. It flummoxed mainstream critics, with Newsweek saying, "while Dutchman is indeed powerful and violent, so is an aircraft carrier, which is not by those tokens a work of art." The New York Times mused, "If this is the way the Negroes really feel about the white world around them, there's more rancour buried in the breasts of coloured conformists than anyone can imagine. If this is the way even one Negro feels, there is ample cause for guilt as well as alarm, and for a hastening of change."

Dutchman went on to win an Obie Award for Off-Broadway productions. Baraka also adapted Dutchman for the screen in 1966 with the same title. Dutchman presents a stylized encounter that illustrates hatred between blacks and whites in America as well as the political and psychological conflicts facing black American men in the 1960s. Set in a New York City subway car, the play involves Clay, a young, middle-class black man who is approached seductively by Lula, a white fellow passenger. Lula provokes Clay to anger and finally murders him.

The Black Arts Movement

Amiri Baraka (the name LeRoi Jones taken for himself) was the founder of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), a group of politically-oriented artists, poets, playwrights, musicians, novelists, and essayists active in the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. Baraka's poem "Black Art"

became a de facto manifesto with lines such as “We want a black poem. And / a Black World. / Let the world be a Black Poem.”

The assassination of Malcolm X in February of 1965 was an important moment for radical black activists. Some joined the Black Panther Party, while others gravitated toward creative expression. The goal was for black people to create art for black people to help raise consciousness and achieve liberation. In a 1968 essay, “The Black Arts Movement,” Larry Neal said the Black Arts Movement was the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.” In 1969, Baraka explained “nationalist art”: “The Art is the National Spirit. That manifestation of it. Black Art must be the Nationalist’s vision given more form and feeling, as a razor to cut away what is not central to National Liberation. To show that which is. As a humanistic expression it is itself raised. And these are the poles, out of which we create, to raise, or as raised.”

The moment that the BAM began is usually pinpointed as Baraka opening the Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem not long after Malcolm X’s death. The works it produced travelled to Chicago, Detroit, and San Francisco. Baraka’s *Dutchman* was one of the most shocking and influential works to come out of the Black Arts Movement.

Negro Digest (later *Black World*) published the work of emerging black writers, and Third World Press was similarly committed to publishing black poets and writers. *The Black Scholar* was the first scholarly journal to focus on black studies. Other publications included *Freedomways*, *The Liberator*, and *Black Dialogue*. Britannica notes that the literature of the Movement was “generally written in black English vernacular and confrontational in tone, addressed such issues as interracial tension, socio-political awareness, and the relevance of African history and culture to blacks in the United States.”

The most impactful publication was *Negro Digest/Black World*. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* explains, “…it was sold on newsstands nationwide. Originally patterned on *Reader’s Digest*, *Negro Digest* changed its name to *Black World* in 1970, indicative of [Hoyt] Fuller’s view that the magazine ought to be a voice for Black people everywhere. The name change also reflected the widespread rejection of ‘Negro’ and the adoption of ‘Black’ as the designation of choice for people of African descent and to indicate identification with both the diaspora and Africa. The legitimation of ‘Black’ and ‘African’ is another enduring legacy of the Black Arts movement. *Negro Digest* / *Black World* published

both a high volume and an impressive range of poetry, fiction, criticism, drama, reviews, reportage, and theoretical articles. A consistent highlight was Fuller's perceptive column "Perspectives" ('Notes on books, writers, artists and the arts') which informed readers of new publications, upcoming cultural events and conferences, and also provided succinct coverage of major literary developments. Fuller produced annual poetry, drama, and fiction issues, sponsored literary contests, and gave out literary awards. Fuller published a variety of viewpoints but always insisted on editorial excellence and thus made *Negro Digest* / *Black World* a first-rate literary publication."

With regard to music, jazz musicians such as John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Archie Shepp collaborated with the Cultural Nationalists. Scholars see some of the music produced during the BAM as paving the way for hip-hop.

Though significant cultural expressions that gave utterance to African Americans' rage, frustration, and zeal to bring about change, some of the works in the Black Arts Movement were/are controversial or problematic. Hannah Foster explains, "[these works] also often alienated both black and white mainstream culture with their raw shock value which often embraced violence. Some of the most prominent works were also seen as racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and sexist. Many works put forth a black hyper masculinity in response to historical humiliation and degradation of African American men but usually at the expense of some black female voices." Women were a prominent part of the movement despite the behaviour of some black members. Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry, and Ntozake Shange achieved lasting fame.

The Black Arts Movement started to fade with some leading members' shifting to Marxism, as well as the larger acceptance by a white mainstream audience in the mid-1970s. Of the BAM's legacy, *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* says, "In addition to advocating political engagement and independent publishing, the Black Arts movement was innovative in its use of language. Speech (particularly, but not exclusively, Black English), music, and performance were major elements of Black Arts literature. Black Arts aesthetics emphasized orality, which includes the ritual use of call and response both within the body of the work itself as well as between artist and audience. This same orientation is apparent in rap music and 1990s 'performance poetry' (e.g., Nuyorican Poets and poetry slams). While right-wing trends attempt to push America's cultural clock back to the 1950s, Black Arts continues to evidence resiliency in the Black community and among other

marginalized sectors. When people encounter the Black Arts movement, they are delighted and inspired by the most audacious, prolific, and socially engaged literary movement in America's history."

Character List

Lula: A pretty white woman thirty years of age, she stares flirtatiously at Clay and then sits with him on the subway. She is a mysterious character possessing seemingly supernatural deductive powers, able to make frighteningly accurate deductions concerning Clay's background and history. Lula is a temptress through and through: physically beautiful, she carries herself with a palpable confidence and is skilled in emotionally manipulating a person. Later on, it is revealed that, beneath all her beauty, she is a predator and possessive of racist beliefs; she mercilessly breaks down Clay's perception of himself with her insults and insinuations, and then she dispatches him coldly with a knife through the heart.

Clay: An African-American man in his early twenties. He rides along with Lula in the subway car sitting near her. Well dressed, well groomed, and garbed in an expensive three-piece suit, he exudes confidence, responding to Lula's advances with assurance and security, but he also becomes easily disconcerted by her. As the play proceeds, Lula systematically breaks down his veneer of self-assurance and control, revealing Clay to be a diffident character until he gets fed up with her abuse and fights back.

Train Conductor: An aged African-American man who only comes on stage at the end of the play. It is unclear if he knows what happened to Clay.

Grace: A liberal white woman once married to Walker, with whom she had two daughters. She left him due to his behaviour when he was involved in the black liberation movement; subsequently, she married Easley, a liberal white man. She is profoundly disturbed by Walker showing up in her house and reminds him of how terrible he made her feel when they were married. She says that he hates white people and when he spoke of wanting to kill them, it upset her. She dies when an explosion rocks the house and knocks beams down on her.

Walker: A middle-aged black man once married to Grace and now the leader of the black liberation movement in his city. He is torn in multiple directions by ideas, his past, his inclination for poetry and other aspects of Western culture, his leadership role in the black liberation movement, and his awareness that he cannot be neutral in the face of injustice. He wants his daughters but ends up leaving them in the destroyed house; he kills Easley, and he

tries to come to terms with his anguish over Grace, their failed marriage, and his role in the movement.

Easley: An arrogant, white, liberal professor, he married Grace after she left Walker. He tries to hold Walker accountable for his views and point out his hypocrisies, but he often evinces his own ignorance about black people's experiences. He tries to tackle Walker but, unfortunately, Walker shoots him and he dies.

Grace and Walker's daughters: Unseen on stage, they are killed at the end of the play when the house is destroyed.

Detailed Summary

Dutchman is a one-act play. Nearly all of the conflict and interactions in the play happen between the two main characters, Lula, a white woman, and Clay, a black man. The scene opens up with the pair in a New York subway. The audience finds Clay, sitting alone reading a magazine, seemingly oblivious to the presence of the woman sitting down the seat next to him eating an apple. Lula accuses Clay of ogling her, an act he vehemently denies. She then proceeds to accuse him of a couple of racial stereotypes, managing in the process to correctly deduce where Clay lives and where he's heading. Mysteriously, she even seems to know about Warren—Clay's friend—giving him details like his appearance and manner of speaking; her nearly supernatural comprehension of his past and intimate details of his life shock Clay.

Lula continues to seduce Clay, provoking him sexually. She teasingly places her hand on his leg and suggestively slices her apple, feeding him the portions. Having correctly guessed his destination, she compels Clay to take her along, suggesting that she'd be willing to sleep with him afterward if she were invited. Her constant baiting gets his notice. Although he is receptive to Lula's provocations, he does not initiate any direct propositioning for sex. Lula, however, wants Clay to be even more aggressive; seeing that he doesn't seem to be taking the bait, she grows angry. Her mood and approach shift drastically from seduction to abuse.

Lula insults Clay's accent, saying that he has no right to wear such a fancy suit; then, she proceeds to berate his lineage. Clay's responses to Lula change drastically as well, becoming apologetic and defensive where they were previously self-assured and masculine. She continues to berate him, criticizing him for being black and unresponsive, and then she starts to dance alluringly and toss her possessions into the aisle of the car. Other riders begin to populate the car where once it was empty.

Lula invites Clay to dance with her, teasing him, challenging him to "do the nasty" with her. Clay opposes her provocations, but eventually, he is fed up. He grabs her and throws her to the floor, slapping her twice while maligning her background and life of ease. He then orders her to leave him be.

Clay now begins a soliloquy, telling the audience of the challenges that a black person must go through. He rants, asserting that white people still maintain distinctions of culture, happily allowing black artists to perform "black dances" and produce "black music" but not the other way around. He also alleges that these so-called "artistic pursuits" are exploitative at their core, keeping blacks preoccupied enough so they remain disinterested with trying to break into the "white world." Clay continues his passionate tirade.

All the while, Lula listens, seemingly uninterested. After his monologue, Clay readies himself to leave, but Lula suddenly stands up and dispassionately stabs him in the heart twice. She then commands the other passengers to throw his corpse out at the next stop. Towards the end of the play, Lula makes eye contact with yet another young black man who has just entered the subway car. A black train conductor passes through, respectfully tipping his hat to Lula.

Themes

Race Relations and Conflicts

It is clear that race relations are the main theme of the play. Jones has a very deeply pessimistic outlook on race relations, suggesting that if African-Americans take a more passive and peaceful approach in dealing with racist structures and systems, white supremacy will still eventually find a way to impose itself upon them and ultimately destroy them; such is the case with Clay and Lula. The title of the play itself is an allusion to the exceedingly cynical outlook on the matter of race relations: it is a reference to The Flying Dutchman, the legendary ghost ship cursed to sail the seas and never find a port. The play posits that attempts to better race relations, no matter how well-intentioned, are ultimately a doomed endeavour—much like the cursed vessel

The Mutability of the African-American Male's Identity

Clay's name suggests malleability and Walker's suggests itinerancy, which is Jones's way of suggesting that a black man in America is fighting to carve out an identity in a country that has denied him autonomy, individuality, and power for centuries. Both Clay and Walker are torn

between aspects of white society, culture, and their own nascent or burgeoning identities within their race. Walker is a leader of the black liberation movement but is anguished by his love for Western literature, politics, and a Western woman (Grace). Clay is, Lula sneers, a wannabe white man in his attire and composure, full of repressed rage and sexuality. She's speaking from a place of her race's prejudices and fears, but she isn't entirely wrong about Clay not really knowing who he is. His monologue expresses this, especially when he sadly concludes that he doesn't exactly know what to do about his anger.

Stereotypical Sexuality of African-American Men

Jones asserts that mainstream society largely expects the average African-American male to assume the socially-manufactured persona of the swaggering, ultra-alpha, hyper-sexualized male. Lula is written as a representation of how white mainstream culture pigeonholes and ultimately tries to define the sexual identity of the African-American male. Ironically, Lula is a temptress patterned after Eve, as evidenced by the presence of the apple: she is the aggressive one, initiating the barely-restrained sexual innuendoes. Clay responds warily to her baiting, responding to a flirtation with a flirtation but not aggressively pursuing Lula. The play suggests that the norm for men of Clay's age and generation is that they ought to be the sexual aggressor. Clay's actions confirm that it is indeed foolishness and weakness to not accept Lula's advances, but his inability or refusal to respond to her overt come-ons makes a compelling case against his supposed masculinity.

Complicity

The subway is empty when Lula begins her seduction of Clay, but, over time, it begins to be filled with other people. They listen and watch as Lula berates Clay, behaves crazily, and eventually kills him. At her request, they throw his body out of the car and eventually file out without a care or misgiving. They are public witnesses to this very public ritual, complicit in Clay's death. Jones suggests they are just as complicit because they did nothing to stop it, which also forces the audience/reader to acknowledge how he or she might be doing something similar.

Slavery

The play is set in contemporary America, there are numerous allusions to slavery. Lula mocks Clay as an Uncle Tom and references plantations. Clay says plantations are where the blues were born. Slavery is the historical explanation for the marginalized position of black

people in the 1960s, and the power dynamics are still mirrored in Lula/Clay, as well as in society as a whole between black and white.

Women as Bitch and/or Whore

Lula is the emblematic temptress and destroyer. She is Eve, the downfall of Adam. She is Ishtar, Circe—goddesses of destruction and death. She lies, manipulates, and kills, all of which she carries out under the (initial) guise of seduction. Grace is not so much a seductress, but she is still a temptation to Walker. It is clear he still has some feelings for her, which contribute to the difficulties he faces. These two women are evil (Grace less so than Lula), and they are responsible for the male main characters' death or despair. While Jones intends Lula specifically to be more universal than just a specific woman, he still chooses to portray women in archetypal, offensive fashions.

Power of Art

In Clay's monologue, he articulates a view that is close to Jones' own: that art is a powerful way to purge one's deepest emotions. Clay speaks of the anger of Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker, for example, and says that they wouldn't have needed to make music if they'd just killed some white people. Since they cannot really do that, they sing and they play. They channel their rage, despair, and cry for change into their art, just as Jones himself did as the founder of the Black Arts Movement.

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Address: N.H.-9, Delhi Road, Moradabad - 244001, Uttar Pradesh

Admission Helpline No. : 1800-270-1490

Contact No. :+ 91 9520 942111

Email : university@tmu.ac.in