

**Block**

# 2

**AMERICAN POETRY**

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# BLOCK INTRODUCTION

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## Block 2: American Poetry

Dear Student! This block introduces you to four important American poets — Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens and Langston Hughes. Each unit in this block is based on a single poet. In the units you will find a discussion of the poet's works, as also critical perspectives on them. This will help you understand the poems in your course, and also make you aware of the themes and concerns, literary and socio-political trends associated with the poets.

Unit 1 begins with an overview of American poetry to make you aware of the different phases of development and the poets discussed in it. With this, you will have a broad idea of the period concerned, and also know about the poems therein. Each phase is characterised by a unique style and set of themes. Next, this unit discusses two poems by Robert Frost—"A Boundless Moment" and "After Apple Picking". Analysing each poem, we might reach a few open-ended conclusions. Nature has a distinct presence in Frost's poems. Equally importantly, Frost's Humanist stance is captured in the analysis. Frost's engagement with the ordinariness of life sets him apart from other poets of the time. His poems bring into focus concrete values of hard work, struggle, and hope.

The second unit is about the twentieth century American poet William Carlos Williams. We have a view in it of the American Civil War in the nineteenth century. In Williams' period, the genre of the novel was dominant and poetry was not actively pursued. Later in the century, however, poets started responding to the changes in the scene. Williams is associated with the Imagist movement in Modern poetry. The movement had a particular aesthetic involving images and evocative words. Williams had his own brand of modernist experiment. His "A Widow's Lament in Springtime" and "The Dead Baby" have a morbid atmosphere, reminiscent of the modernist trend. His attention to everyday experience and concrete images is noticeable. He fashioned his own brand of Modernism distinct from that of others.

The third unit is based on another modernist poet, Wallace Stevens. The poems in your course are "The Snowman" and "The Emperor of Ice-cream". In the first poem you will note Imagist strains where language used is direct, and it also brings alive the scenes of winter. But there are portions that are abstract and philosophical. Stevens uses particular phrases in the poem which appeal at one level and describe the physical surroundings at another. There is also a delayed revelation of the central subject in Stevens' poems. This along with the eclectic mix of tones contributes to the experimental nature of his craft, making him a modernist poet. The poem "Emperor of Ice-cream" has a strange combination of spirited preparations and a suggestion of someone's death. In it, Stevens combines the abstract and the concrete references. This unit acquaints you with these and other features of Wallace Stevens' poetry.

The fourth unit carries a discussion on the African-American poet, Langston Hughes. The discussion begins with a comment on a few conceptual terms crucial to understanding African American poetry. Some of these terms are Black Arts Movement, Civil Rights Movement, Jazz poetry and the Harlem Renaissance. They define the literary and cultural movements that Hughes was associated

with. The ethnically marginalised position of this poet sets him apart from the other three poets in this block. In the poem “Negro Speaks of Rivers”, the individual’s selfhood and racial history are made to coalesce and self determination becomes a paramount concern. The language use gives one a sense is of a deeply felt experience. It is also symbolic in a lot of places. The poem “Young Gal’s Blues” is particularly unique as it is written in the blues form, a musical form involving expression of intense emotions, usually of sadness combined with alienation the slaves have to bear with. Use of this form is an effective expression of the unique cultural identity of the African American. We also notice the use of a particular dialect in these poems, one that belonged to the common folk. The popular, folk and mass appeal of the poems of Langston Hughes underlines the fact that the purpose of his artistic expression was expressly political.

This block is sure to make available to you values of commitment to a cause and an expression that links poets with the reality of their time. The poets discussed in this block are representative voices of American experience in the twentieth century.



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# UNIT 1 ROBERT FROST

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction: American Poetry
- 1.2 Robert Frost: Life and Works
- 1.3 “A Boundless Moment”: Introduction & Stanza-wise Discussion
- 1.4 “A Boundless Moment”: Thematic Analysis
- 1.5 “After Apple Picking”: Introduction and Stanza-wise Discussion
- 1.6 “After Apple Picking”: Thematic Analysis
- 1.7 Robert Frost: Critical Approaches
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.9 Questions
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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will acquaint you with one of the seminal poets of twentieth century America, Robert Frost. He belongs to the initial trend in American poetry whereby poets worked to concretize American voice in the poetic mode. Frost does this by evoking the rural setting and using colloquial language. Studying his two poems, “A Boundless Moment” and “After Apple Picking”, we shall note how he uses the natural setting to comment on essential aspects of life. Social and philosophical issues shine forth in his poetry, as he juxtaposes the natural world with human experience.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION: AMERICAN POETRY

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American Poetry has an interesting beginning. Some of the initial American poems are traced back to the English colonists who were based in America, a British colony until the United States’ Declaration of Independence in July 1776. In the seventeenth century, the English colonists expressed in poetry their impressions of different aspects of life in the country of their occupation. Anne Bradstreet and Thomas Morton are two such poets who wrote in the 1600s. In 1625, Rev. William Morel wrote the poem “New England” which is believed to be a rhymed catalogue of American weather, the native women, and various other American aspects noticed by the British colonists. This trend of the British colonists writing about America started in the fifteen century and continued well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Then came a shift in the Eighteenth century when native voices started to appear in America.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of a few notable poets who distinguished American voice from that of the British colonists. Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, H.W. Longfellow, Emerson, Thoreau, Edgar Allen Poe are some of the well known poets of the time. Nineteenth century American poetry aimed at exploring and establishing an idiom that was American in nature. Robert Frost, one of the first few poets of the twentieth century carried forward the nineteenth century trend of contributing to the authentic American voice and

experience. By means of an emphasis on descriptions of the rural landscape and use of American colloquial speech, Frost defines contours of New England life and stresses social and philosophical themes of his time.

Having found an American voice, poets in the second decade of the twentieth century veered towards modernism. Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, both of whom were expatriate American poets, are famously associated with this movement's early inroads into the American culture. Thus, Modernism as a part of the larger European phenomenon influenced American practitioners. Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Hilda Doolittle and E.E. Cummings are among American poets associated with High Modernism in the twentieth century. It is crucial to note that not all twentieth century poets in America subscribed to this literary movement. There were certain writers and poets who steered clear from it. Some of them are associated with the literary trend called New Criticism. They are Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, John Crow Ransom among others. Poets like Langston Hughes were associated with the Harlem Renaissance around the same time; it focussed on the social concerns of the African Americans.

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## 1.2 ROBERT FROST: LIFE AND WORKS

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(image source: wikimedia commons)

Robert Lee Frost, a twentieth century American poet, also known as a New England poet lived a life rich in associations. Born to educated parents and raised in San Francisco, Frost lost his father at the early age of eleven and had to move to his native town of New England to pursue his career. Dearth of money necessitated the mother and the son to settle down there. He dabbled with various employment options to earn a living—newspaper reporting, teaching at school, at times even working at a mill. Writing poetry was a leisurely past-time for him.

Around 1900, his persistent bad health raised a possible concern for Tuberculosis. This made him move with his family to live on a farm in New Hampshire. Around 1906, with a still worsening health, Frost engaged in composing verses with eagerness. In 1912, he moved out of the farm and settled in England. Buckinghamshire was the place he chose. His first poetry collection *A Boy's Will*

was published in 1913. *North of Boston* came out next in 1914. After his brief stay in England he moved to Vermont, United States in 1919 and bought a farm. From then on, he frequented between rural settlements and city dwellings. This connection with the countryside explains his preoccupation with nature. Frost received no recognition until he was forty years old. From 1930 onwards did acknowledgement come his way and in 1957 he received honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge and also became the poet to have won a Pulitzer four times.

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### 1.3 “A BOUNDLESS MOMENT”: INTRODUCTION & STANZA-WISE DISCUSSION

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Let us discuss the poem, “A Boundless Moment”, which is from Frost’s 1924 poetry collection, *New Hampshire* that won the Pulitzer Prize. This poem is in your course and is meant to be studied in detail. An important link of this poem is with a major event that shook the world, the First World War (1914-1918). It was marked by widespread destruction and a complete breakdown of all that had defined people’s lives until that moment—values, beliefs, associations, and ideas. All that had previously given meaning to the world, was called into question in those years. Imagine, this was the world handed over to the common people and artists alike by the rulers of resources in countries of Europe.

“A Boundless Moment” captures two individuals who happen to pass through a forest and come across a mysterious sight far-off in the distance. One of them tries to comprehend what the sight might be, but his guess is as good as that of his fellow traveller. The poem is written in the voice of the second traveller who revisits that moment in his imagination. There is a clear reference to ‘He’ and ‘I’ in the poem defining the two travellers. ‘He’ describes a version of the vision they observed in the distance. The attempt to interpret that vision highlights the writer’s state of mind. We are made to observe that what lies ahead is not a clearly defined figure, hence the act of interpretation. The poem presents meditations on nature that appears in the form of the forest. In it, the woods coalesce with the philosophical ruminations. Man’s interaction with nature is shown in it where the vision of the forest fuses with the mind of the observer. This is where the distinct poetic genius of Robert Frost gets manifested. The writer’s persona in the poem notices something at a distance but nothing is distinct. This sense of wonder is the crux.

#### **stanza-wise Discussion**

“A Boundless Moment” tickles the mind through the three short but extremely evocative stanzas. In it, we are face to face with two opposite states of mind, one ascribed to the ‘he’ in the poem and the other to ‘I’.

#### **Stanza 1**

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

This stanza introduces to the reader one of the two travellers in the poem. Passing through the woods, the first traveller notices something in the distance, but he is

unable to figure out what exactly it is. The speaker, who is the second traveller presents his companion's state of mind and his response to the curious sight that they see in the distance.

See in these lines a reference to the wind that is blowing. It immediately transports the reader to the realm of nature, the lush green woods that lie in front of the two travellers. 'He' (the first traveller) sees something at a distance amidst maples, but as said is unsure about what it is. He stops, looks at it, finds it pale but it is not as stark and horrifying as a ghost. To him the sight is enigmatic; it indicates an unrecognizable image. Why is the word "ghost" used in the context? Think about its significance. In it, there is a faint suggestion about ghostliness. As we dwell on the idea, we are struck by the aspect of imagination residing in the observer's mind. It is a state of mind, overcome by doubt and anxiety that makes the traveller imagine an unearthly being—"pale but not a ghost?" Could it possibly reflect the crisis overtaking the European world during the War years? Reflect on it to grasp whether the uncertainty of the scene in the forest was indeed an unsettling vision of the apprehension rampant at the time. At another level, reference to the ghost evokes mystery surrounding the image. That form might be termed a spirit.

Further in the stanza, while observing the unknown image the traveller wonders about the month of the year. After his initial response to the sight in the distance, the traveller thinks of the month of March. The speaker says, he brings "March against his thought/ And yet too ready to believe the most". Reference to March is a little challenging to grasp. It makes us stop and guess its meaning in the poem's context.

What does the month of March signify? The traveller, in an attempt to make sense of the distant vision, recalls changes that appear in nature in that month of March and correlating it with what he sees. He actively uses his faculty of reason to make sense of the confusing form. Immediately then, the speaker says, "And yet too ready to believe the most". Even as the traveller uses reason and tries to correlate the vision with changes witnessed in nature at the time, he is ready to believe that which is told to him. The words "And yet" tell that the speaker is talking of two contrasting attitudes. The first involves using his faculties to understand the given difficulty and the second is characterised by "belief" alone. Also, the month is associated with reason and imagination.

## Stanza 2

*Oh, that's the Paradise-in-bloom, 'I said;  
And truly it was fair enough for flowers  
had we but in us to assume in march  
Such white luxuriance of May for ours.*

This stanza tells us directly about the second traveller, who as we know is the speaker in the poem. The first traveller struggles to understand, whereas the second lets us know what could be made of the vision they confront. He interprets it as a "Paradise-in-bloom". The phrase "in bloom" indicates that the speaker is referring to flowers. The word "paradise" signifies an image that is idyllic, serene and extremely beautiful. The vision, according to the second traveller is that of a cluster of flowers whose beauty is ethereal and indeed appears to be very close to the perfection one associates with Paradise.



In the next set of lines, the speaker elaborates on his interpretation of the vision as a bunch of paradisiacal flowers. Commenting on the time of the year suitable for such flowers in bloom, the speaker says the conditions were “fair enough for flowers” “had we but in us to assume”. Clearly, he puts human agency at the centre. Flowers that he sees in distance are not as much a matter of season or month, but that of a state of mind. Human capacity is of significance here, the ability to visualise despite all conditions and challenges hindering one’s perception.

Here, the opinion of the speaker is in focus; it indicates optimism. His association of “Paradise” and “white luxuriance” is in sharp contrast to the description of the “pale” vision in the first stanza. Between paradise and the ghost-like appearance, which one of the options is preferable? This question is posed to the reader.

When the second traveller states, “Had we but in us to assume in March the white luxuriance of May”, he points to the human capability of turning the situation in one’s favour by means of appropriate perspective. We find that to be fixed on freshness and optimism. March and May indicate two contrasting situations in life—the former poses challenges, the latter is associated with optimism. A forward-looking approach is asserted in the process. For us, “white luxuriance” is a metaphor for the human ability to construct a positive circumstance.

### Stanza 3

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

Having demonstrated two possible responses in a moment, and siding with optimism, the speaker in these lines introduces a sudden shift in stance. He states that he and his fellow traveller stand “in a strange world”. It is strange because of the mystery pervading the woods and that elicits different responses. The same person who reinforces the human potential to imagine a paradise, now talks about his own ‘pretense’. See the dichotomy between pretense and truth. His assertion is that the unclear vision they saw could also be an example of pretense with no reference to reality. That is followed at this moment by: “And then I said the truth”.

The true description of the vision is that it is not a bunch of flowers that they see, but “A young beech clinging to its last year’s leaves”. It is actually a beech—a large tree with grey bark and glossy leaves. Strangely though, he realizes it has not shed its old leaves of the previous year. There is yet a catch. The first traveller sees it as something pale, almost verging on something similar to an apparition. However, the second traveller sees it as a bunch of flowers. At the same time, they agree it is a sight that has something unique about it, something that could be interpreted in a negative as well as a positive manner.

They also realize the uniqueness lies in that here was a tree that seemed to have defied the course of nature, keeping its old leaves intact. The words used are “clinging to its last year’s leaves”. From one perspective, it spells tradition, holding

on to the past and not having a forward-looking approach. Such a stasis is indicative of a lack of dynamism that is essential to any form of life.

Let us mark the three stages—the first involving a curious sight, difficult to make sense of and the traveller sharing his perplexity in taking it as something with a threat. The second traveller attempts to decode the image in the next stage and ascribes a positive meaning to it. In both cases, a crucial aspect of life is taken up. But in the third stage, the poet problematizes what he has established so far as acceptable. That is done through the use of “pretense.” While we may ascribe a particular meaning to a tentative situation in life, it is at the same time important for being real.

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## 1.4 “A BOUNDLESS MOMENT”: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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The poem “A Boundless Moment” engages with the processes of human cognition and the individual’s response to surroundings. In three short stanzas, the poem packs myriad ideas pertaining to conditions and individuals’ approach to them. All these ideas are delineated by means of experience the travellers underwent in the course of their journey. By means of a deep engagement with nature the poet has located through them the essential questions of fear, agency, and subservience.

At the centre of the poem is a conundrum, a challenge that the travellers confront in the woods. The situation involves uncertainty, making it difficult to understand what lies in front. Mystery and strangeness form the crux of the challenge. It comes in the form of a shapeless sight at some distance in the woods that the travellers try hard to interpret. In it we notice Robert Frost’s characteristic style, subtly establishing a connection between nature and phenomenon of human life—the strange natural sight that has a parallel in nature.

The poem brings out the idea that one’s state of mind determines the impact of circumstance on us. In the event of uncertainty, one might respond with fear and anxiety. That eventually colours one’s perspective. To the first traveller, the unknown sight appears “pale”, even suggesting the possibility of it being a “ghost”. But the second traveller views it as a “paradise in-bloom”. The same sight inspires different responses from the two individuals, demonstrating the possibility alive in every difficult situation.

Add to this the idea of reason and belief. In the face of a challenging circumstance, one might take recourse to reason and make sense of the situation on one’s own. Consider the first traveller bringing “March against his thoughts” and trying to reason out the nature of the sight in front. The ability to think for oneself is a laudable human characteristic. At the other end of this approach is belief, whereby the individual gives more importance to the knowledge gained through deployment of the senses. Thus, reason and independent thought are replaced by subservience to a different logic that entails unquestioning acceptance. These two contrasting approaches are seen coexisting in the first traveller.

Thereafter, the concept of human imagination is introduced by means of the second traveller. His active imagination makes him perceive the sight as one involving a bunch of flowers. The ability to dream about and envision that which

may not exist in reality already is an essential and a liberating aspect of human personality. This renders the person capable of imagining an alternative to the existing conditions that may be uncertain, hazy or unclear but worth trying for.

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## 1.5 “AFTER APPLE PICKING”: INTRODUCTION AND STANZA-WISE DISCUSSION

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“After Apple Picking” was published in 1914 in Robert Frost’s second poetry collection *North of Boston*. The poem is situated in an apple orchard. It involves thoughts of an individual who has been picking apples for a long time and is overcome with exhaustion. His involvement in his work is intense and so is the resultant association with it. This is a crucial element in Frost’s poetry; a deep organic connection between man and nature. Frost’s engagement with nature is not philosophical, but a deeply humanist one. By means of nature, he comments on human shortcomings, failings, accomplishments and potentialities alike.

### Stanza-wise Discussion

#### Lines 1-8

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

The speaker in the poem ruminates about apple picking. He is in the middle of the task when these thoughts appear. The ladder is still sticking through the tree and there is a barrel that is yet to be filled to the brim from the apples picked by the speaker. The ladder, the speaker says, is pointed towards heaven “still”. Use of the word still is interesting. It establishes a sense of time, which is crucial to the poem. It indicates how he has been picking apples for a long time now, but the task is not yet complete. The poem begins by giving us the impression that apple picking is a painstaking task. This thought immediately brings one to respect the worker, and the poet establishes a sense of dignity as a trait of labour. The half-full barrel (“there is a barrel I didn’t fill”) indicates how there is still work to be done, while the person is tired already. Tiredness is an essential part of the experience of a hardworking individual. The speaker is drowsy, while the fragrance of the apples lingers in the winter night’s air. “Essence of winter sleep” and “scent of apples” creates an atmosphere of cold lull witnessed during winter evenings, but not without the pleasant fragrance of the fruit. The image captures the quiescence of a cold evening in an apple orchard, as the speaker says, “I am drowsing off”.

#### Lines 9-17

*I cannot shake the shimmer from my sight  
I got from looking through a pane of glass*

*I skimmed this morning from the water-trough,  
 And held against the world of hoary grass.  
 It melted, and I let it fall and break.  
 But I was well  
 Upon my way to sleep before it fell,  
 And I could tell  
 What form my dreaming was about to take.*

In these lines, the speaker mentions an incident that had taken place earlier. He had looked through a broken piece of glass and observed his surroundings that he describes as “the world of hoary grass”. Here “hoary” indicates the colour greyish white. The green surroundings acquired that tinge when viewed through the broken glass. At another level “hoary” also indicates something old and familiar. The natural surroundings now no longer held a distinct charm for the worker. The piece of glass was acquired from a water trough that had broken upon falling. That is an important piece of information explaining the speaker’s words: “I let it fall and break”. This humanizes the worker busy doing his job in the orchard. Unmoved by the broken glass, and merely remembering the “shimmer” that he saw, the speaker adds, “I could tell what form my dreaming was to take”. Nothing else had the capacity to leave an impression on his mind long involved in apple picking.

**Lines 18- 25**

*Magnified apples appear and reappear,  
 Stem end and blossom end,  
 And every fleck of russet showing clear.  
 My instep arch not only keeps the ache,  
 It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.  
 And I keep hearing from the cellar-bin  
 That rumbling sound  
 Of load on load of apples coming in.*

These lines comprise a short dream sequence, detailing that which occupies the speaker’s dreams. Huge apples appear and disappear in his dream. The image evoked is surreal. The dream-like quality lies in the fact of how the regular size of the fruit is “magnified” and seen as distorted. Big size of the fruit indicates the grip it has on the dreamer’s mind that again brings in long hours of work. The magnified vision is such that every spot on the apple is visible clearly (“every fleck of russet showing clear”). This further establishes how deeply involved and connected he was with the work he was doing. Does he only have visual associations? No, his close connection with his work goes beyond it. He has a tactile memory of the sensation in his foot, from hours of standing on the ladder and taking steps to pick apples. He recalls the “pressure of a ladder round” at the sole of his feet. The “ache” and the “pressure” are distinctly felt even in sleep. After visual and tactile imagery, even the sense of sound is evoked. He consistently hears “the rumbling sound of load on load of apples coming in”. This, too, points towards the exhausting work and long-lasting impressions he has of it on his body and mind.

*For I have had too much  
 Of apple-picking; I am overtired  
 Of the great harvest I myself desired.  
 There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,  
 Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall,  
 For all  
 That struck the earth,  
 No matter if not bruised, or spiked with stubble,  
 Went surely to the cider-apple heap  
 As of no worth.*

This part of the poem tells us about the exact process involved in picking apples. The speaker talks of the reason for the state that he is in and also the processes of his work. He says it is “the great harvest I myself desired”. The instinct to be productive and work well is a sign of a sincere worker performing his job professionally. The mention “There were ten thousand fruit to touch” conveys the abundance of that year’s produce. We must also notice the way he talks about the fruit and establishes his passionate involvement in the process. He points to the delicate handling of the fruit, “touch, cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.” The process is elaborate. Such is the value apples have for him, and such is the extent of care he associates with them.

**Lines 37- 42**

*One can see what will trouble  
 This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.  
 Were he not gone,  
 The woodchuck could say whether it's like his  
 Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,  
 Or just some human sleep.*

The issue in these lines is the quality of sleep and what it does to the worker who says, “One can see what will trouble this sleep of mine.” The word ‘trouble’ does not have a negative connotation in the context, it implies instead that his long hours of work have had a healthy impact on him. Sleep is defamiliarized in these lines; they stress an experience the speaker is not aware of. The speaker compares his sleep with that of a woodchuck’s, of a rodent. The comparison of one’s sleep with that of the animal woodchuck, is intriguing. It brings out the state of mind of the individual who despite extreme toil is unable to get a sound refreshing sleep. Further, this analogy reflects the poet’s closeness with nature. His comprehension also is deeply embedded in the references rooted in nature. The state of mind of the worker in conjunction with the descriptions from nature widen the scope of this poem.

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## 1.6 “AFTER APPLE PICKING”: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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The poem is about reflections of an individual working in the orchard, picking apples. The most striking aspect of the poem is its humanist strain. The speaker's thoughts acquaint us with ideas of tiredness, hard work, and humility, all of which together construct an experience intensely genuine and authentic. The apple picker is exhausted from overwork but working hard is a choice he has made consciously. In a moment of intense motivation, he promises to himself a good harvest, establishing the worth of human desire to be productive. The speaker juxtaposes the expression of his tiredness, his inability to work any further with an expression of his goal of having a good harvest. The detailed reference to exhaustion and the urge to work more is an acceptance of his limitations. He does not glorify the act but expresses nonetheless his thoughts honestly.

In the poem the reader is made aware of intricate details of a worker's life and his thoughts. The central figure chosen by the poet is not a grand individual, but an ordinary person working in the orchard. The representation of his state of mind and the depth of his conviction familiarizes the reader with the vagaries of work of an apple picker. The apple picker has a candid tone in the poem as he talks about his pending work and the sleep that overpowers. However, it is not an expression of his resentment with the working conditions. The atmosphere is positive and the speaker is seen to be painstakingly involved in his work.

In Frost's poetry, human experience is depicted in conjunction with scenes from nature. We observe in it the thoughts, travails and challenges of an active individual pursuing his goals seriously. The impressionable mind of an individual is commented upon by means of images from nature. While acquainting us with the predicament of such an individual, Frost's poems highlight how at times, people put extra pressure on them with no compulsion from outside. Sleep is not what they choose, but something that visits them so that they carry on with their job with renewed vigour. It is a moot question though whether Frost remains unconcerned about the gains of labour workers; that may be appropriated those others who control society's resources. In the poems that we have discussed in this unit, there is little mention of groups of workers sitting and exchanging notes about their shared pursuits and social goals. Instead, Frost seems to be emphasising an abstract human productivity for its penchant of hard work and genuineness of purpose.

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## 1.7 ROBERT FROST: CRITICAL APPROACHES

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Robert Frost has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Critics have commented on his being a poet of nature, and about the decisive humanist strain in his poetry. While nature acquires a central position, Frost's engagement with the natural world is by means of a speaker in the poem. What we notice are not abstract descriptions but nature filtered through the experience of an individual. Nina Baym in “An Approach to Robert Frost's Nature Poetry” has said, “First, we have the pastoral dialogues, eclogues and monologues dealing with the mutability of human relations and human existence...Second we have the nature lyrics usually composed as tiny dramas of recognition, illumination, or resolution involving a lone speaker confronting the landscape.” The mention of dialogues

and monologues in Frost's poems establishes a decisive presence which is characteristic of his style. Baym highlights that his poems deal with "mutability of human existence". This implies that the poet often engages with the idea of change that is central to both human existence and processes of nature. We also notice this in the poem "A Boundless Moment" that mentions a tree with old leaves, evoking the idea of change central to both human life and nature. When these are violated, a strange sight that piques observers' curiosity gets created.

Critics have also commented upon Frost being different from other modernist poets. He does not engage with the idea of futility and aimlessness; instead, he makes meaningful observations about social experience and values associated with it. Hyatt Howe Waggoner in the essay "The Humanistic Idealism of Robert Frost", says, "Harvard had lost its attraction for him (Frost)...he returned to New Hampshire to write poetry of life, as he knew it, to keep close to common human experience...Robert Frost knew what he wanted and it was not the wasteland." This aspect is traceable in the poem "After Apple Picking" where Frost elaborates on human experience involved in hardwork and labour as well as the values of ambition and objective self-reflection.

Human presence in Frost's poetry also brings to light the dramatic mode which is significant. The dramatic element involves the presence of two or more perspectives that clash or interact in the poem. On this account, Robert S. Newdick in his essay "Robert Frost and the Dramatic" quotes Robert Frost has observed that, "The height of poetry is in the dramatic give and take...in a lyric the dramatic give and take is within oneself and not between two people." This 'dramatic give and take' mentioned by Frost is evident in the poem "After Apple Picking". The poem comprises internal dialogue of the worker who has been working for long in the apple orchard and finally contemplates the need for some rest. But he is unsure if he would be able to sleep well enough. That shows Frost's deep concern for issues that relate to society.

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## 1.8 LET US SUM UP

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Robert Frost, writing in the early twentieth century, exemplified a distinctive poetic voice in America, one very different from that of American modernist poets. His unique engagement with nature often carried with it a deep understanding and reflection on essential features of human life. Both poems "A Boundless Moment" and 'After Apple Picking' evoke vivid images from the world of nature, while raising important questions such as change, mutability, hard work, and reward among others.

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## 1.9 QUESTIONS

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- 1) What is the significance of nature in Robert Frost's poetry?
- 2) The poems "A Boundless Moment" and "After Apple Picking" put stress on specific issues central to human existence. Comment.
- 3) Discuss the use of language in Robert Frost's poems.
- 4) Robert Frost's poems are characterised by a "deceptive simplicity". Do you agree? Give an answer with references from poems in your course

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## 1.10 REFERENCES

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## **UNIT 2 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS**

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### **Structure**

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction: Twentieth Century American Literary Background
- 2.2 About the Poet
- 2.3 Modernism in America
- 2.4 “A Widow’s Lament in Springtime”: Stanza-wise Discussion
- 2.5 “A Widow’s Lament in Springtime”: Thematic Analysis
- 2.6 “The Dead Baby”: Stanza-wise Discussion
- 2.7 “The Dead Baby”: Thematic Analysis
- 2.8 William Carlos Williams: Critical Approaches
- 2.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.10 Questions
- 2.11 References

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### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

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In this unit we aim to discuss two poems by the Modern American poet William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). The poems are “A Widow’s Lament in Springtime” and “The Dead Baby.”

We will closely analyse these poems after grasping their surface meaning, following which we shall go into the ideas conveyed through them. Placing the poems in the American poetry tradition of the time, we shall evolve an understanding of the poet and his writing in general. Finally, we shall conclude the discussion by considering different scholarly perspectives on the poet William Carlos Williams. This unit will also include a critical commentary that will help us fine-tune our appreciation of the poet.

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### **2.1 INTRODUCTION: TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN LITERARY BACKGROUND**

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Following the great poetic craft of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Longfellow in the nineteenth century, American poetry saw a slump in the later years. From 1890 to 1910, one saw the rise in prominence of the novel form for reasons that relate to history. After the Civil War, America was building itself up with a powerfully expanding economy and a vision of development. This affected the masses on a big scale. The mood of the times was pragmatic, focussing on issues requiring immediate attention. There was little concerning imagination that poetry could engage with. As a result of this, the poetic form took a backseat and the novel form flourished. Thus, it was only in the second decade of the twentieth century that poets began to respond to existing social changes, as the urban character of American life emerged concretely.

We have touched upon some of these features in the previous unit. For instance, while Robert Frost focused on provincial America and expressed his intent in an

apparently simple style, most other poets of the time were heavily influenced by the European trend of Modernism. This new trend was witnessed across arts and architecture. Modernism had partially resulted from decisive changes the world over in the previous century.

We will discuss this literary trend in detail in a separate section here. One may, however, note that as a result of this influence, a number of twentieth century poets moved to London and Paris, the cultural centres at the time. While a few poets like Robert Frost came back, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot stayed there, and Gertrude Stein moved to Paris. Connecting the high modernists in contemporary writing, was the spirit of experimentation in both form and content. Poets, like other artists, broke away from traditional styles and invented new forms to express themselves in face of the new reality.

Interestingly, with the Second World War, the fifties and the sixties saw another shift in poetic idiom; this change manifested in a variety of forms. For instance, there were poets who adopted the confessional mode, and those who subscribed to the formal mode of New Criticism, in addition to the others, such as the Beat poets, who represented dissident cultural social voice.

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## 2.2 ABOUT THE POET

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(Image source: Wikisource)

William Carlos Williams was born in 1883, in Rutherford, New Jersey. His father was from the West Indies and mother from Puerto Rico. He studied at the University of Pennsylvania Medical school where he met Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle. After receiving his degree in 1906, Williams decided to practice medicine and write poetry; the two went hand in hand. His first collection of poems published around 1908 did not get a favourable response. His second volume *Tempers* (1913) was published with Pound's help in London. Till then, Williams had not found his distinct poetic voice. Even though *Tempers* was met with approval, Williams accepted he was working under the influence of English poets than reacting specifically to his times, with an American sensibility at the

back. He observed, “I should have written about things around me...but I just didn’t know...I knew nothing of language except what I’d heard in Keats and Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.” That was the moment when he turned to Imagism and adopted the Imagist logic. Simultaneously, he was in touch with the literary and artistic avant garde in New York.

Williams’ four seminal poetry volumes are *Al Que Quiere* (1917), *Sour Grapes* (1921) *Spring and All* (1923) *Kora: In Hell* had appeared in (1920). Keeping company in quality, with *Spring and All*, were the later ones that included *The Desert Music and Other Poems* (1954), *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962), and *Paterson* (1963, repr. 1992). Williams captures the lived reality of his time in these collections where the emotional and physical aspects have equal emphasis. He portrays individuals, scenes from society, as well as objects from urban spaces that would otherwise be considered ordinary. What also distinguishes his poetry from that of other modernists like Eliot and Pound is the spontaneity of the language he uses. This is at variance with use of a self-conscious literary style of the high modernists.

A good friend of Ezra Pound, Williams is often associated with the Imagist movement in Modernist poetry. Imagism is regarded ordinarily as a part of Modernism. In the latter, the poets adopted an aesthetic involving directness of expression. On his part, Williams only partially adopted the characteristics of the movement. He carried his own brand of Modernist experiment in poetry. He is known to have influenced the poetry of the fifties and sixties in general and the Beat movement in particular. He was a friend and mentor to the iconic beat poet, Allen Ginsberg and wrote the introduction to his poetry collection *Howl and Other Poems*.

Williams was influenced by the European avant garde movement that vouched for breaking away from tradition. But what distinguished him was the conviction to preserve American experience. He chose to capture ordinary individuals and the immediate surroundings in verse. He sought inspiration from painters and at times also painted. His association with the New York group of artists and writers called “The Others” is well known. The group included Wallace Stevens, Martin Duchamp, Man Ray, among others.

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## 2.3 MODERNISM IN AMERICA

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Modernism was an artistic movement that came into being in the early twentieth century Europe. Its American variant carried the essential features of the movement. Apart from writers and artists already mentioned, European painters such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Paul Cezanne also influenced American Modernists. T.S. Eliot has described the times as, “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” All structures, values and conventions that define human life are called into question by the proponents of Modernism. A boom in technological innovation led to a new urban landscape in America with the construction of skyscrapers, bridges, the subway and factories. Developments were also witnessed in the field of psychology and sciences which called into question conventions believed to be true until the nineteenth century.

In the period under consideration, the two Wars had unleashed mass destruction. Loss of life had caused general confusion and gloom. This ushered in an entirely

different era in arts. Ezra Pound's famous phrase "make it new" describes the phenomenon aptly. Poetry too caught up with this process of creating what came to be termed a new aesthetic.

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## 2.4 "A WIDOW'S LAMENT IN SPRINGTIME": STANZA-WISE DISCUSSION

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The previous part of this unit forms a meaningful background to the two poems we plan to study here. We might see that reflected in the comments about the poems. Let us straight away zero in on the first six lines of the poems "A Widow's Lament in Springtime." These go as follows:

### Line 1-6

*Sorrow is my own yard  
where the new grass  
flames as it has flamed  
often before but not  
with the cold fire  
that closes round me this year.*

In these lines, the poet uses the image of fire and the yard to bring out the idea of sorrow. The experience of sadness is described in terms of the poet's own personal space. It establishes a deep connection with the experience of gloom. Sorrow is likened to garden, a corner close to the speaker, hence establishing the immediacy of experience. The emotion is superimposed onto the garden which now appears so different, bogged down as the speaker is with absence of hope. The poet has inverted the conventional word-use. Mark that the grass in the line "flames" than merely "grows". Inversion is a part of the poetic licence. It highlights the emotional discomfort of the speaker. Consider how "a cold fire" surrounds the speaker. This image appears to be in continuation to the image evoked by the word "flames". Fire can also evoke a sense of burning desire. The poet clarifies that the fire the widow witnesses is "cold". The widow's sorrowful state evokes a picture of stasis caused by the dark emotion visiting her.

### Lines 7-10

*Thirty Five years  
I lived with my husband.  
The plumtree is white today  
with masses of flowers.*

The source of the widow's sorrow is now clarified; the speaker evokes memory of her husband. Here, use of the past tense ("lived") is crucial. The speaker has talked in the present tense but while referring to the husband, it becomes "lived". The "cold fire" surrounding the speaker then indicates sadness accompanying the end of a thirty-five year long companionship of the two. Talking about the direct reality, the speaker shifts back to the image of nature involving the "plum tree" with "masses of flowers". Her reflections on the garden bring forth her state of mind. Instead of talking of sadness in a confessional mode, the poet

evokes the image of the garden and its foliage which serve to underline the speaker's state of mind. One might say that the poem has a subtle mix of direct personal references and those of the yard, both of which stress her specific feeling.

In the lines above another distinctive feature is seen. The speaker's disturbed mind is evident in the abrupt shifts in her thought. She first thinks about the past, of having lived with her husband for thirty five years, then jumps to the present moment; it also manifests in her observation about the white flowers of the plum tree "today". We note an abrupt change from the thought of her own loss ("I lived with my husband") to the one of tree's abundance with "masses of flowers". These contrasting images establish her deep sense of gloom, as if she lacks what nature offers.

### Lines 11- 19

*Masses of flowers  
load the cherry branches  
and color some bushes  
yellow and some red  
but the grief in my heart  
is stronger than they  
for though they were my joy  
formerly, today I notice them  
and turn away forgetting.*

In these lines, the garden imagery continues. The speaker describes the masses of flowers in abundance on the cherry branches. The flowers also seem to colour the nearby bushes. They intertwine with the bushes or fall from the tree onto the bushes, thus adding another hint of colour to them. Colours bring a sense of vibrance and life, indicating joy. Such an imagery is contrasted with the speaker's gloom evoked right from the beginning. These colours in her garden, which used to be a source of joy, today are no match with the immense grief that burdens the woman's heart. One's perception of the surroundings is a mirror of one's mind. The same objects that were once a source of happiness, no longer appeal to the individual. The speaker does not find inspiration in nature, but turns away from it as her gloomy state of mind takes over and dominates the scene.

### Lines 20- 28

*Today my son told me  
that in the meadows,  
at the edge of the heavy woods  
in the distance, he saw  
trees of white flowers.  
I feel that I would like  
to go there  
and fall into those flowers  
and sink into the marsh near them.*

The personal element continues with a reference to the speaker's son. The boy notices trees with white flowers and tells his mother about them. The speaker wishes to go there, fall into those flowers and sink into a marsh nearby. Falling into flowers indicates the speaker's desire to escape her immediate reality. Those flowers are on the trees but she imagines herself falling amidst them. It is a surreal image and also one where nature is seen as an escape and not as a source of inspiration. Further, the reference to the speaker's wish to drown herself in the marsh indicates suicide. The hopelessness of the present and complete lack of redemption from deep sorrow is highlighted. The grief is too immense and the speaker contemplates ending her life by "sinking" into the marsh. Image of the marsh is also very powerful as it brings to mind a gradual death, by being pulled into something much against the individual's will. This can be a replica of the speaker's emotion; she feels bogged down by the pressures of having lost her husband and progressively gives in to the excruciating grief.

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## 2.5 "A WIDOW'S LAMENT IN SPRINGTIME": THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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A distinguishing feature of Williams' craft is astute observation of the surroundings. He represents minute details of the space where the poem is situated. In the given poem, that space is a garden. Interestingly, description of the yard resonates with the mood of the poem. It is grim and morose as the speaker expresses her sorrow and the vacuum she feels at the loss of her husband. The correlation between topography and the mood is noticed at the outset. The speaker says, "sorrow is my own yard". That establishes the sadness she feels is deeply personal. It colours her view of her own garden which even though in full bloom, appears dreary. We notice how the speaker's emotional state is then superimposed on the surroundings. Throughout the poem, the image of the garden coexists with the picture of her own sadness. There are a cluster of references to this space, such as "where the new grass flames", "The plum tree is white today", "Masses of flowers/Load cherry branches" and "colour of some bushes yellow and some red". The poet engages with the physical world at the level of both materiality and emotion; one does not overpower the other but complements it. The image of the yard is simple, picked up from everyday life in America, thus bringing alive a particularly American landscape. This emphasis on topography and directness of image expressed in simple language distinguishes Williams from other poets of his time.

The poem focuses on the individual's self and sense experience. This establishes the poem as a Modernist one. Liberal use of the personal pronoun "I" puts the self at the centre, expressing a unique experience. I mention those references in the poem that underline this fact. They are: "My own yard", "my son", "husband", "I lived", "I notice", "I feel". It is through the prism of the speaker's distinct personal experience that the reader is able to note such a reality. It is deeply felt and full of sorrow. The sadness depicted is personal, caused due to the husband's death, but the mood is also characteristic of the times. The poet's choice of the subject indicates this. Williams wrote this poem in 1921, a time when the world was recovering from a devastating World War. The poem's lingering sense of gloom is consonant with despair that had gripped humankind at the time. This is also an important theme of Modernism.

One of the features of Modernism is over-indulgence in the present as well as an uncritical acceptance of it. It implies that the individual takes current conditions as the only possible order, without attempting to actively work for changing them. It involves a sense of resignation and a fatalistic approach. One of the significant emotions noticed in writings from the early twentieth century Europe was sadness. It resulted in anxiety. This is evident in the given poem as well. In it, the speaker's son tries diverting the speaker's attention to a meadow nearby, to help uplift her spirits. But she chooses "to fall into the flowers and sink into the marsh near them". This end of the poem leaves no hope of recovery.

Williams also subscribes to the Imagist trend. Imagism was a sub-movement during Modernism. It was characterized by the use of clear images and direct language. Different elements from nature were evoked for the purpose: yard, grass, cold fire, plum tree, masses of flowers, cherry branches, meadows, heavy woods and white flowers. We have the references that create a picture of nature in all its bounty. An abundance of flowers sway on the plum tree. They colour the surroundings yellow and red. This is in contrast to the void that exists in the speaker's life. Nature's abundance is blotted out by the emptiness left behind after the sad demise of the speaker's beloved partner. Nature that was once a source of joy no longer has the same impact.

If the poem subscribes to the Modernist trend, there would be elements in it that depart from it. Williams does not radically re-work established literary conventions. His expression is direct and straightforward. The poem has a definite verse form and clearly avoids dismantling conventional structures of meaning.

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## 2.6 "THE DEAD BABY": STANZA-WISE DISCUSSION

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### Stanza 1

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

Here, the speaker asks someone to clean the house and prepares for the baby's dead body to arrive. He gives instructions about how and where to sweep; under the table and the bed and also under the feet of "the curious holiday seekers". We face the question: who are the curious holiday seekers? Clearly, people present in the house at the moment are not just immediate family. The speaker in that case would refer to them as "holiday seekers". The phrase is a sharp comment on the attitude of those present there. It is an occasion of mourning and the death of a young baby is unfortunate. Also, reference to the people as holiday seekers highlights their apathy and indifference. The word "curious" refers to something strange about the people gathered there. It is a comment on a section of society that is insensitive to others' pain. The setting is that of a house, with a bed, a table and a window. It is not a fancy dwelling, but a humble living space.

## Stanza 2

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

In this stanza, the speaker's gaze is on the grieving mother. Initially, the fixtures and guests in the room—the table, bed and holiday seekers were in view. In these lines though, the mother is at the centre. Her grief-stricken figure is represented. The grief of losing her child is so immense that no effort of consolation would help. At another level, she has remained unconsolated since there is none in the room who empathizes with her. She feels desolate and struggles with the emotion all by herself.

The mother's difficult position is further highlighted by a contrasting reference to the father who is "tall, well-spoken, pitiful" and "abler of these two". One may note that words used to describe the father are positive as compared to those used for the disconsolate mother. He is "well-spoken" while the mother is silent. He is also "abler of the two". What ability could the poet be hinting at? The reference here is to the ability of an individual to come to terms with a difficult circumstance. While the mother is distraught, the father appears composed. That in spite of the fact that he is described as "pitiful."

## Stanza 3

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

In this stanza, something still more telling is revealed. The child, the poet says, "has gone up/though problematically". What do we make of it? It is a significant phrase uncovering another dimension of the situation. There is something "problematic" about the death of the baby. It is not a natural death. The poet says that the baby "has gone up to heaven, blindly by force of facts". We might ask: What are the facts referred to here? It is evident that the death is due to external circumstances that proved compelling, hence the word "force". The manner of death is hinted upon when the poet says, "a clean sweep, is one way of expressing it". The word 'sweep' indicates that death was sudden, unexpected. The circumstances causing it were abrupt, making it yet more shocking. Also, the death is referred to as 'problematic'. Since no clear reason is cited, it renders the poem mysterious, a quintessential feature of Modernist writing.



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

Urgency in the speaker's tone has continued in this stanza. The sense of time hanging heavy predominates. While most Modernist writing would defy the logic of time altogether, Williams keeps it intact and lets it guide the sentiment of the speaker. The house needs to be readied for rituals before the dead baby is brought home. The baby is described as "a white model of our lives, a curiosity". A model refers to something central, around which another thing is formed. The baby is the centre of life in the household. But the word "curiosity" yet again brings back the sense that something was odd about the circumstance in which the baby died. And when it is brought home, it would be surrounded by fresh flowers, as per the ritual.

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## 2.7 "THE DEAD BABY": THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Ordinariness is a significant aspect of Williams' poetry. He bases "The Dead Baby" on everyday experience of the common people. The situation indicates a sad event in the life of a couple. The woman and the man talked of in the poem are ordinary, not the ones socially important. The engagement with the simple and the ordinary distinguishes Williams poetry from that of others. Yet, we do not call it simplistic. It may be said that the poet has used regular situations and people for depiction. Even as the idea of death is an essential truth of life, it is to be seen as a part of human experience, not a subject of philosophical comment. Williams describes the occasion of a young death in the context of the last rites the family would perform.

Time has a palpable presence in the poem. There is a sense of urgency to finish the task and ready the house before the body is brought home. Time hangs heavy and there is a task to be completed. That is in sharp contrast to the idea of time in high modernism. For modernists, time disintegrates and is not noted in its linearity. Under their notion of the stream of consciousness, past, present and future become fluid and do not appear in progression. For Williams though, a departure from the popular notion is necessary in view of the situation he is faced with.

Examining aspects of the form further reinforces the unique character of Williams' poems. On the one hand it can be said that the speaker's tone is matter-of-fact. The speaker in the poem is focused on the fact that the house must be swept clean in time to prepare for the arrival of the dead baby. This is in line with William's characteristic attention to detail. Despite the dispassionate tone adopted in the poem, there is a shift in the last stanza. The baby is referred to as "a white model of our lives". The word "our" establishes a sense of belongingness between the baby and the speaker, while in the rest of the poem, there is a dispassionate stance. We also have a two-pronged engagement with the issue. One is of providing a number of details about the scene and the other of holding back vital information

about how the baby died and what may have been the motive of the person who killed the baby. These gaps exist and seem to be under a creative plan. That gives the poem its body, its aesthetic form. The more we grapple with the issue, the better would be the purpose of the poem served. We observe that abstractions associated with this form are the core of the poem.

Along with the binaries, we also note that the sentences are short and terse. That's a feature common to most of his poems. There is no rhyme and images are from the immediate surroundings. All this is put together in an atmosphere that is full of sadness.

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## 2.8 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: CRITICAL APPROACHES

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Williams' engagement with the surroundings has been commented upon widely. Bringing alive his contemporary setting, Williams constructs American character in poems. This was particularly a crucial concern at the time when the genre was coming into its own in the country. Talking of what poetry in America means, Williams himself states, "Its forms are the form of empire. The first thing we must do as poets (poor things!) is to throw it out, body and soul. Why? To build, if we are men, something better. To invent, then a prosody of our own, has been our first objective in our approach toward reality in our place and day." In this statement, Williams first establishes that the poem's form carries within it form of the empire—that is the British aesthetic. Hence the need to invent their own style of writing verses, that foregrounds distinct American sensibility and locale. This is emphasized further in the assertion that they must recreate a reality "in our place and day". This makes Williams culturally, geographically and historically specific. This specificity is seen in his observation of the things and people around.

Discussing Williams' poetry, Linda Welshimer Wagner in her essay "William Carlos Williams: Giant" says, "The poem was to re-create significant elements of contemporary life as found in the poet's immediate surroundings—his local...what Williams championed was the use of familiar materials as the means to general truth, not an emphasis on local culture for its own sake." Wagner points out how his poetry brings alive the flavour of his surroundings. "Familiar materials" were those that everyone would see daily, but perhaps not pay attention to it. Williams uses the same materials and through them evokes certain ideas of relevance. In the two poems in our course, we have seen him engage with a garden and a house with some fixtures. In another famous poem, he talks about the red wheelbarrow. Christopher Beach reiterates, "Williams sought to capture a sense of lived reality, particularly of the physical world."

Williams' creative engagement with the ordinary people was one of the aspects that the high modernists misunderstood about his craft. They interpreted it as a lack of artistic grace. In the context, Wallace Stevens remarks, "Williams is not philosophical". Infact, Stevens refers to this ordinariness as "anti-poetic" (Wallace Stevens). But an answer to this charge is clearly evident in "Paterson", a famous epic poems by Williams, where he says there are "No ideas but in things". For Williams, poetic inspiration lay in ordinary objects of the surroundings.

In a speech titled, “Experimental & Formal Verse: Some Hints Toward the Enjoyment of Modern Verse”, Williams presents his view of the place of poetry in society. He says, “Our dreams are escapes from an oppressive reality — But dreams may be dominated and put to great service for the individual and the race by the poet, by structural imagination and skill”. Here Williams’ take on the role of the poet is significant. One has a purpose of bringing benefit to the common people. Imagination and dreams help them deal better with reality and understand it. The poet’s imagination and skill renders an apparently disconnected circumstance integrated. Here, Williams also strikes a balance between craft and fancy, both of which make a poem. We understand that his poems are structurally thought out and at the same time have a role to play in a world that at times gets too difficult for the people.

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## 2.9 LET US SUM UP

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We have observed that Williams Carlos Williams combines the poetic style of both early twentieth century American poetry and that of the high modernists in America. The first involves a poetic spirit that contributed to the development of a distinct American idiom. The second is characterized by experimentation and reworking of literary convention that had existed until the nineteenth century. Williams’ poems have features of both these poetic trends. In the process, he evolves an aesthetic of his own comprising sharp observation of the surroundings, use of simple imagery and a language that carries the flavour of everyday living.

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## 2.10 QUESTIONS

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- 1) William Carlos Williams devises his own aesthetic, which at times appears to coincide with modernism and sometimes seems to depart from it. Comment.
- 2) What is the significance of the physical world in Williams’ poetry?
- 3) Discuss the structural elements in the poems “A Dead Baby” and “A Widow’s Lament in Springtime”.
- 4) Comment on William Carlos Williams as a twentieth century American poet.

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## UNIT 3 WALLACE STEVENS

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 About the Poet
- 3.3 Wallace Stevens: The Poetic Craft
- 3.4 “The Snow Man”: Stanza-wise Analysis
- 3.5 “The Snow Man”: Thematic Analysis
- 3.6 “The Emperor of Ice Cream”: Stanza-wise Analysis
- 3.7 “The Emperor of Ice Cream”: Thematic Analysis
- 3.8 Critical Perspectives on Wallace Stevens
- 3.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.10 Questions
- 3.11 Suggested Readings and References

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- talk about Wallace Stevens the poet, his life and work;
- appreciate two significant poems of Wallace Stevens;
- analyse the thematic aspects of the two poems.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit will acquaint you with another American modernist poet, Wallace Stevens (1879-1955). We shall study the two famous poems composed by him, “The Snow Man” and “The Emperor of Ice Cream”, both are included in his first poetry collection *Harmonium* published in 1923. Even though Stevens’ poetic style underwent change in his later collections, it had a strong base in his initial experiments in *Harmonium*. Studying the two poems in the course we will realize Stevens’ place in American modernism and see how his works interact with the literary trend in question. In this unit, we shall discuss his manner of expression and grasp the ideas his poems deal with.

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### 3.2 ABOUT THE POET

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Wallace Stevens was born in 1879, at Reading in Pennsylvania. A lawyer by education, Stevens had moved to New York soon after graduating from Harvard. He attended New York Law School and worked for a number of years in a few law firms. Eventually, he moved to the insurance sector and occupied a high position in a company where he worked until the end of his life. Adopting these ways of earning livelihood, Stevens wrote poems at night. His *Harmonium* was published in 1923. Following this, he published a number of collections until the 1950s, when he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and his health deteriorated. Some of his collections include, *Ideas of Order*, *The Man with the Blue Guitar*

(1937), *Parts of a World*, along with *Transport to Summer*. In 1950 he wrote *The Auroras of Autumn* and in 1954 he published his last collection of *Collected Poems* (1954), for which he also won the Pulitzer Prize in 1955, shortly before his death.



(Image Source: Wikimedia Commons)

He loved travelling to Florida and used to live at a hotel close to the sea. This experience is believed to have influenced his poetry, too. While at Harvard, he was under the tutelage of philosopher George Santayana whom he immensely admired. During his visits to Florida, he also met Robert Frost and Ernest Hemingway, both great poets of his time. But he is known to have entered into a serious disagreement with both. On his death in 1954, the other major poet of the day, William Carlos Williams, wrote the obituary for Stevens.

Stevens is known for his long as well as short poems. One undeniable characteristic of his verses is that they are steeped in philosophy, to the extent of appearing too abstract to comprehend. A number of twenty-first century critics observed it. Simon Critchley, has remarked that “Stevens’ poetry fails”. In it, failure could be interpreted as the inability of words to adequately represent reality. But the validity of this remark might be ascertained in the course of reading his poems.

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### 3.3 WALLACE STEVENS: THE POETIC CRAFT

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Poems of Wallace Stevens belong to the American modernist trend. However, we must understand that while different writers or poets are associated with one literary trend or the other, each of them interacts with its conventions in a manner of one’s own. Such is also the case with Stevens. Unlike Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, language in Stevens’ poems is direct and straightforward. The syntax is such that there is no break in the meaning to be conveyed or the flow of the idea. This is in sharp contrast to classic modernist poems that strongly experiment with form as well as content to the extent that they become abstract in an extreme sense. Breaking away from the established trends was a hallmark of modernist aesthetics. However, Stevens is not experimental to the point that meaning might collapse in the pursuit.

One traces characteristics of the imagist movement in his poems, a movement that flourished in the twenties. This movement was one of the important trends falling under the broader category of modernism. Imagism was characterised by the poet using sharp images in his verses, each with an elaborate method. Imagist poems have word pictures that make the reader visualize the exact object being described. Ezra Pound pioneered this movement. William Carlos Williams is also known to have subscribed to this trend. In a number of his early poems Stevens does create such vivid word pictures. One example is the poem in our course “The Snow Man”. Also, in “A Sunday Morning”, Stevens resorts to the use of distinct imagery. The difference is that in the process, he also innovates and combines abstract words with concrete images. That saves him from obscurity. Consider the following stanza from “A Sunday Morning”.

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late  
 Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,  
 And the green freedom of a cockatoo  
 Upon a rug mingle to dissipate  
 The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.

In the above stanza Stevens creates the comfortable domestic atmosphere with images of a “peignoir”, a woman’s light night gown working in association with “coffee and oranges in a sunny chair” and the “rug”. Here, mark the abstract words he uses with these images. “Complacencies” denotes comfort with oneself. The poet talks about complacencies of the nightgown, and indicates through it the laid-back mood of a participant in the scene. “Green freedom” tells of the sense of openness felt by a bird as it flies in the greens and “late coffee” brings to mind the hot drinks one sips at leisure. We notice, thus, how abstractions mingle with clearly defined images in Stevens poems. Even in “The Snow Man”, the poet creates images of a harsh winter “bough of pine trees crusted with snow”, and “junipers shagged with ice” but he combines them with philosophical questions of logical links. For him, “One must have a winter’s mind” to regard such coldness. The idea conveyed to us is of the mind of winter to be deciphered in the larger universe of the poem. This melange of distinct images and philosophical reflections creates Stevens’ own brand of Imagism that is difficult to comprehend but engages the reader’s attention.

In the poem “A High Toned Old Christian Woman”, we read: “Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.” For Stevens, the poetic mode is characterised by imagination. It is this fiction or creative flight that becomes the carrier for ruminations about the questions of being, death, and life. In the “Snow Man”, we observe further read: “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” or in “The Emperor of Ice cream” to the effect: “Let be be finale of seem.” These two poems are in our course. We shall interpret these statements later in our discussion. Here, let us take up “The Snow Man” at length.

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### 3.4 “THE SNOW MAN”: STANZA-WISE ANALYSIS

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

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

In these lines, the poet talks about the attitude of an individual in the period of extreme winters. He evokes sharp images to create the atmosphere of winter. “Frost”, “pine trees crusted with snow”, “junipers shagged with ice” are the words and phrases he uses to bring out a sense of the ice-cold weather. We may note that the trees mentioned are all conifers and they have borne the effect of cold for a long time. Conifers are trees that grow in cold climates, hence their nature to survive in extreme weather conditions. The poet points out there is something particularly harsh about winter that has damaged the junipers. Even the spruces appear “rough”. The poet refers to a prolonged spell of cold weather that has adversely impacted the trees.

We are made to observe that in order for one to appreciate such a winter, “one must have a mind of winter/ to regard the frost”. The word employed to suggest this is “regard.” There is a kind of particularity about this use. In the opinion of poet, the individual should interpret the winter for what it is, instead of having a judgemental view of the phenomenon. The trees are described as bearing the brunt of the cold weather and appearing damaged. Yet, the individual is not shown to associate winter with severity and rejection. The poet wishes that the reader saw it objectively, indeed “regard the frost” as given. For driving the point home, he says, “One must have a mind of winter”. We note that the word “winter” describes the mind that is capable of observing the scene dispassionately.

At another level, Stevens wishes to indicate that objectivity might call for maturity enabling one to be closer to the scene and yet maintain distance. There is a difference between dispassionate observation and cold indifference. The individual does not pay sufficient attention to the cold weather. The response in the poem is complex, hence the poet’s conclusion: “one must have a mind of winter.” In such a case, there is no place for emotional biases in favour of or against the surroundings. Following this, let us consider the following lines:

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

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

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

The train of thought continues here from the previous lines. Mark that there are no full stops in the lines. We spot only a solitary semicolon separating the two major strands of the idea. In the beginning, the importance of a clinical attitude

of the observer who is in the midst of extreme winter is noted. Later, it is stressed that one should not associate sadness with the harsh winter wind. The landscape is bleak, with no hope of newness. We observe that the leaves are “few” and the land is “bare”. The atmosphere does not warrant the individual to associate the emotion of sorrow with the dreary wind. One has to further refrain from imagining situations that are away from the scene. The poet states that “the listener...nothing himself beholds”. Next come the lines that play on the word “nothing”—the observer does not assume that which is not there “and the nothing that is” draws our attention to it. The landscape characterised by nothingness is the reality he confronts while he assumes nothing, only focusing attention on the nothingness that the place signifies. Why is “nothing” emphasized so specifically? Perhaps, the poet finds the world around him to be meaningless, with no aspect in it inspiring enough to sustain him. The absence of belonging between the spectacle in front and the person looking at it is a comment on the society itself that the poet inhabits. In that sense, nature is a metaphor of the dullness of situation the poet is forced to bear. In the beginning, we talked about death, life, and the poet’s being as inter-related. That is truly signified by these lines. Without allowing the tedium of life to enter the description, the poet has evoked an image of stillness, cold, and desolation. But the very absence of actual happenings and episodes that may have filled the picture call out for a comment. The heaviness of the details gathered in the lines begin telling the story of “what is not there and the nothing that is.”

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### 3.5 “THE SNOW MAN”: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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The poem represents objectivity of perspective that shows blankness and a dreary world. In it, the speaker gives a voice to the mental state that has stopped to comment on the happenings of the time the poem aimed to capture. Alert individuals were needed to comprehend a certain question of being in the given surroundings. Ironically though, the accusing finger pointed towards the individuals themselves. As a result of this, viewing the cold winter became an issue. For this viewing, no emotion was required, nor was it therefore expressed. Undeniably, emotion would have underlined the truth of the circumstance. But truth was elusive. It could not be formulated in clear terms. Describing a mental state would have created the background of an argument, but in turn the argument might have reduced the scope of envisioning the situation in depth. That is the conundrum the modern individual faces. Words and phrases do not suffice. When vacancy and emptiness are the issues, images would do a better job than statements. Thus, trees covered in snow and standing quiet become better carriers of the veracity of the scene. The land may be an apt reference, with roads, pathways and streets as its pointers. But the social scene has problems of quiet suffering and helpless existence than of clashing interests and priorities. The episode of struggle has shifted from the given society to far off places where different patterns exist. There is no visible warmth or comfort to be seen. A place that is bare, with sharp winds blowing through it, is to be considered for making sense of. The speaker is given the situation “one must have a mind of winter/ to regard the winter/ to regards the frost.” Interestingly, mind has shifted from the citizen to the winter season. “Mind of winter” makes sense under the perspective of modernist expression. Consider that the place of the poet has more of snow than human exchange. The same is denoted by the “sound of the wind...which is the sound of the land.” Such an approach of saying and unsaying gives precedence to



rationality over sentimentality. This also puts in perspective the title of the poem, “The Snowman”. Snow, that indicates coldness could be a parallel for rationality. The individual observer witnessing the winter in a detached manner brings to mind the image of the snowman.

The language used is direct for most part of “The Snow man.” It is descriptive, bringing alive the scene of extreme winter. The cluster of images evoking the frost, the snow, the cold trees, few leaves and a bare land, make the poem very close to an imagist one. The poem comprises direct expression of well-constructed word-pictures. The poem also displays economy in the use of words. One may note that the first two stanzas have a mix of visual and tactical images that extend to the feeling of close contact— “pine trees crusted with snow”, “junipers shagged with ice”, “spruces rough”, “distant glitter”. In the following stanzas, the poet shifts to auditory images, representing the winter season by means of sound. The wind blowing across trees, leaves conveying messages through movement, and the sound emanating from the land are examples. These evoke a sense of desolation that is characteristic of places related to climate. We notice that the distinct imagery brings out a consolidated sense of coldness, detachment, objectivity and reason. One can say that it is reminiscent of the time when the poem was composed. That was in 1921, four years after the First World War ended. The atmosphere was such that everything was called into question in the face of widespread violence and destruction. In such an atmosphere, while some artists gave in to despair, Stevens vouched for distance and detachment. That indicated the coping mechanism whereby the individual regards the surroundings for what they actually are. This reminds us of what T.S Eliot remarked in his famous essay “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1921) saying, Poetry “is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality.” In the act of escaping, the poet creates a distance from his expression because of which the writing assumes a detached character. We can see it happening in the case of Stevens.

Another significant feature of “The Snowman” is its beginning and the end, both of which contain philosophical suggestions. The phrase “mind of winter” does not carry a direct meaning, unless one interprets the word ‘winter’ as suggesting an approach. Likewise, the poem ends with an equally abstract assertion that reads more like a conundrum—”Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is,” as stated above. The speaker says in the poem that the individual beholds or sees nothing that is not present before his eyes. Instead, “the nothing that is” stands for the the winter landscape that is characterised by bareness.

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### 3.6 “THE EMPEROR OF ICE CREAM”: STANZA-WISE ANALYSIS

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*Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.  
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.*

*Let be be finale of seem.*

*The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.*

These lines have a speaker giving instructions to people for doing various chores. “Call the...muscular one”, “bid him”, “let the boys bring flowers” are the phrases that establish it is an occasion and the speaker wants a few things done in the case. The foremost among them is that he wants the ice cream vendor to come and whip the ice-cream. This is done through calling it “concupiscent”. It is a strange use of the word that means something driven by the sexual desire. Using this word for the ice cream brings out the mood of the speaker; there is an over-indulgence in sense experience of the things around. The speaker is either in a philosophical state or the occasion is such that it involves heightened sexual desire. Next, he gives instruction for the children; girls can wear ordinary clothes and “dawdle”, that means to move idly and slowly. The fact that girls’ movement is not brisk or full of joy gives us a hint that the occasion is not a joyous one. And the ice cream being prepared can be part of the ‘treats’ for the funeral. In some Western cultures, funeral is a big event involving elaborate preparations and arrangements. It is not a sober affair, unlike in the Indian context. Hence the boys are asked to bring flowers, “in last month’s newspapers”. This phrase further puts the mood in perspective. Flowers are not for gifting, nor are they to spell a happy occasion. That is why they are being brought in old newspapers. The occasion is not celebratory and joyous.

The last two lines of the stanza are philosophical. That is denoted by “Let be be finale of seem”. The first “be” in the sentence refers to the reality of existence and “seem” points towards a different realm of existence, that, too, of appearance than reality. The speaker reiterates that material existence is the culmination (“finale”) of everything that is in the realm of ideas alone. All that is manifest in reality is the truth meant to be accepted. All that we conceptualise in terms of abstract existence holds meaning till the time it exists in the form of a material reality. Mark the words, “The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream”. Maker of the Ice cream, a dish being made on the occasion, is Death, the one who has ultimate authority. Death is the only sovereign whom nobody can defeat or deny.

*Take from the dresser of deal,*

*Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet*

*On which she embroidered fantails once*

*And spread it so as to cover her face.*

*If her horny feet protrude, they come*

*To show how cold she is, and dumb.*

*Let the lamp affix its beam.*

*The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.*

Consider that in these lines, the speaker’s instructions have continued further from the previous stanza. This is the moment when someone would “take from the dresser...that sheet”. Flowers, the sheet, and pudding—are all needed for a funeral. The speaker asks the individual to take out the same sheet from the drawer on which the woman had embroidered birds (“fantails”). It is stressed that the same sheet should be used to cover the woman’s dead face. There is a

strong irony here—the sheet the woman happily embroidered is the one being used to cover her dead body. This brings out the stark reality death is, something none can deny nor defy. The morbid description of the corpse continues as the poet delves deep into details. In case, he suggests, the sheet proves insufficient for covering her up completely, it shall show the icy coldness associated with death and a complete absence and movement (“to show how cold she is, and dumb”).

It is clearly stated in the stanza that the lamp, ritualistically lit near the head of the dead body, should affix its beam. The lamplight should be fixed, without flickering or fading out. Having described in detail, and instructed meticulously about preparations for the funeral, the poet reverts to the refrain that, for him, establishes death’s sovereignty.

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### 3.7 “THE EMPEROR OF ICE CREAM”: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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The poem is an eclectic mix of a tone which is instructional, at times philosophical and on occasions involving words which are abstract. We may note that these seemingly different elements coexist in the same imaginative universe, contributing to the poem’s unique style. Let us first understand the instructional tone and the discordant words used. The speaker gives instructions for carrying out various tasks, as if in preparation of an occasion. “Call”, “bid him”, “let the boys” are the phrases which establish this. The instructions are cascading, appearing one after the other. This brings out a tone of urgency, pointing to the need to be meticulous in the tasks that need to be done. One notes a somewhat discordant sense evoked by the words “muscular” and “concupiscent”, used to describe the ice cream man and ice cream respectively. We call them discordant because these words bring out a sense of physical detail and pleasure, which oddly coexists with the otherwise matter of fact instructive tone of the speaker.

Next, the tone is also philosophical, though sparingly. The first stanza has the statement, “Let be be finale of seem”. This statement comes as an abrupt shift after the instructions given by the speaker for the occasion. It introduces the important duality of appearance and reality. The word “be” takes us to the material world and “seem” points to that which we ‘perceive’, adding our own objective understanding to what we see. Hence the appearance of subjective and tentative while conversely the verifiability of material reality. The phrase indicates that existence is the culmination of that which is perceived or visualised. Thereafter, the refrain “The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream” is not without its share of abstraction, too. The foremost thing we note here is that the word ‘emperor’ appears someone with absolute power and as such used as ice cream. The two words of completely opposite kind gets proximity to each other, further contributing to the discordant word-usage indicated above. When read together, the two assertions give us a hint of the meaning expressed in the poem. Talking of existence, appearance, and sovereignty, the poet pre-empts what is to come in the poem next, that being the reference to death and the dead body. The ice cream is one of the puddings made on the occasion of funeral and is the only sovereign truth in such a case. It affirms death as the only absolute power in the overall context of material reality.

In a significant sense, the delayed revelation of the central subject or idea in the poem is brought into focus. This, along with the eclectic mix of tones used in the poem contributes to its experimental nature, making it a modernist one. The occasion, which is actually a funeral, is not made clear in the beginning. It is only towards the end of the poem that the reader makes sense of the details and understands the exact occasion for which instructions are given. This is a unique feature of the poem— even though the central subject is death, yet the atmosphere of the poem remains distant from the pale of the subject. Nowhere is present a sense of sadness or despair. The speaker’s state of mind has remained uninfluenced by the occasion. This is clear from the way instructions for the funeral preparations are not given. The sentiment is further highlighted when we notice the speaker referring to the woman’s dead body specifically. He asks for it to be covered, “if her horny feet protrude, they come to show how cold she is and dumb”. The words “cold” signifies the lack of warmth which further indicates absence of life. The word “dumb” signifies absence of sound. And the feet are “horny”, which is a word used to suggest her excitable nature when she was alive. See how the words are used to describe the corpse—they are direct and visual, to the point of being nasty and crude. Rather than being devoid of sadness, the poem becomes literal and crass in the descriptions of the dead body.

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### 3.8 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON WALLACE STEVENS

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Peter Schjeldhal has observed: “[Stevens] is certainly the quintessential American poet of the twentieth century, a doubting idealist who invested slight subjects (the weather, often) with oracular gravitas, and grand ones (death, frequently) with capering humour.” This is a comment on both the poems included in our course, “The Snow Man” and “The Emperor of Ice Cream”. If Stevens is a doubting idealist, it would be incumbent on us to recognize in the two poems a sense of detached interest. The poet could be accused of not taking a position where the position was due.

We may keep in mind that Stevens was closer to the First World War, and also apart of radical break from traditional modes of expression. In that context, artists invented new means of articulating a reality that had lost positive appeal in the face of mass destruction. Radical changes were seen in the aesthetic approach, too. Stevens avoids experimentation. William Carlos Williams in *Wallace Stevens*. Poetry, Vol. 87, Jan. 1956 has said: “Technically, Stevens was not, as were many of his contemporaries, an experimentalist.” Indeed, one might observe selective emphases and an abstract philosophical strain coexisting in his poems.

We note also that Stevens was not as much of an Imagist as his contemporaries William Carlos Williams or Mariane Moore were. “[His] early poetry is clearly marked by the influence of Imagism, yet at the same time the poems depart from the Imagist practice in their far greater tendency to abstraction and philosophical argument” (Critchley), We recognize in it the modernist imagist influence informed by ruminations about death and philosophical concerns such as reality, appearance, and existence. Reiterating it, Simon Critchley has stated that Stevens’ poetry “contains deep, consequent and instructive philosophical insight...and that this insight is best expressed poetically.”

In these perspectives we note the recognition Stevens received from the criticism of the time. He was appreciative of it but did hint at limitations regarding position. Ambivalence in position was the factor that drew notice.

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### 3.9 LET US SUM UP

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In the poem “The Snow Man,” we understand how Wallace Stevens used cold weather as a means of making significant observations about human attitude to surroundings, and the broader idea of dispassionate observation. In it, he is able to combine the reference to nature with what he noticed in the destinies the people around him confronted. He also evoked the idea of “nothingness” linked to the bare land in the midst of cold winters. Nothingness is a philosophical concept central to most of the modernist writings. The sheer destruction caused by the War and a complete lack of hope was visualised as ‘nothingness’ by a great number of European writers of the twentieth century. While Stevens touched upon modernist themes, he did not fully subscribe to the movement’s penchant for aesthetic experimentation. He had a selfhood and a sense of identity that set him apart from the usual run of the modernist minds. In the poem “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”, we notice the imagist influence as in the previous poem, and also the poet’s departure from it at a few places elsewhere. He departed from the conventions of imagism by introducing abstract words, along with concrete word pictures. In this poem, he used the subject of death but ironically the poem’s atmosphere was far from morbid and dreary, an intuitive expectation while dealing with the subject. Instead, Stevens dealt with death with rational detachment evident in the instructive, clinical tone of the poem and in his detailed description of the dead body focusing on its being cold and silent. Thereafter, he chose the image of ice cream to indicate funeral preparations and indicated through it the poet’s attitude towards this truth. It did reflect the elaborate ceremony particular to funerals in western societies, but its emphasis exhibited by the poem’s refrain “the only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream” brought into open the poet’s preoccupation with the subject. Even this subject is reminiscent of the post First World War climate fraught with ideas of death, destruction, and meaninglessness.

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### 3.10 QUESTIONS

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- 1) Comment on the speaker’s tone in the poem “The Emperor of Ice Cream”.
- 2) What is the significance of the phrase “one needs a mind of winter” in the poem “The SnowMan”? Explain.
- 3) ‘Wallace Stevens is an Imagist poet with a difference’. Comment on the statement with reference to the two poems in your course
- 4) Stevens’ poems are significantly philosophical. Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer with references from “The SnowMan” and “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”.

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### 3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## UNIT 4 LANGSTON HUGHES

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 About the Poet
- 4.3 Some Literary Terms Relevant to Discussion on Hughes
- 4.4 “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”: Stanza-wise Analysis
- 4.5 “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”: Thematic Analysis
- 4.6 “Young Gal’s Blues”: Stanza-wise Analysis
- 4.7 “Young Gal’s Blues”: Thematic Analysis
- 4.8 Critical Approaches to Langston Hughes
- 4.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.10 Questions
- 4.11 References

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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After you have read this unit you will get to know about the poet Longston Hughes. You will be able, to critically analyse his poems, ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’ and Young Gal’s Blues’.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit aims to acquaint you with a seminal voice in African American literature, Langston Hughes. The discussion focuses on two of his poems, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “Young Gal’s Blues”. The two poems involve the unique aesthetic evolved by African American writers and it raises issues central to their experience. With the American Civil War (1861-65), the Civil Rights Movement (1954-68), the Harlem Renaissance (1920-1930s) and the Black Arts Movement forming the backdrop of African American Literature, we understand Langston Hughes’ contribution to the political and cultural questions of the time.

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### 4.2 ABOUT THE POET

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(Image source: Wikimedia Commons)

Langston Hughes (1901-1967) was a pioneering figure in African American Literature. He wrote poetry, novels, short stories, newspaper columns and composed operas as well. Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri. He spent most of his childhood with his maternal grandmother, who after being widowed had married a man actively supporting the abolitionist cause, and had been part of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society in 1858. She, too, supported the cause. With these values defining Hughes' grandmother, we understand how Hughes grew up on stories about racial pride. This was the solid foundation on which his secular sensibilities developed as a young man.

Studying at Columbia University in New York, Hughes lived in Harlem. He faced discrimination at the university that was dominated by the whites. He soon dropped out and finished his education at Lincoln University, Philadelphia. He started writing poems very early and composed his first poem as a high school student while living with his grandmother. His convictions also seem to have appeared from his own father's stance, who divorced his mother and went away to escape highly restrictive conditions of slavery. He did not accept his black identity and tried to evade it. This lack of pride in one's own cultural background is later addressed by Hughes in his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers". Completing his graduation from Lincoln University in 1929, Hughes returned to Harlem in New York and lived there for the rest of his life.

His first poem, which also came to be one of his most famous ones, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was published in 1921, in the magazine *The Crisis*. His first book of poems "The Weary Blues" was published in 1926. Hughes' work contributed to the movement called the Harlem Renaissance. We shall discuss it in detail later in this unit. His work depicted life of the working class and at times lower sections of the African American community. He encouraged racial pride and treated racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for black writers. He confronted stereotypes and discriminatory social conditions, working to create a distinct sense of self for the Black Americans to take pride in. Some of his poems have folk and Jazz rhythms which are a significant feature of African American poetry.

In the mid 1950s and 1960s, Hughes' popularity became worldwide and he influenced numerous young Black writers as well. But he had an issue with a particular distortion in some of their writings when they either over-intellectualized or seemed to veer into racial chauvinism, hating the whites for the sake of it. This happened overriding other factors that define an individual's place in society. Hughes also discovered writers like Alice Walker and James Baldwin, who eventually became well-known names in African American writing. A sympathizer of Soviet Russia, Hughes made a few trips to Moscow in his early career. This political inclination is evident in his emphasis on the experience of the working class and lower sections of the Blacks.

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### 4.3 SOME LITERARY TERMS RELEVANT TO DISCUSSION ON HUGHES

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**The Harlem Renaissance:** It was a social, intellectual, and artistic movement in Harlem, New York City, between 1920-1930s. As a result of the Great Migration of the African Americans from southern states to the northern parts of the country, Harlem became the base for a number of social struggles after the American



Civil War (1861-1865). As the war ended between the northern states and the slave-owning southern states, slavery was abolished and a Reconstruction Era (1863-77) began; in it the emancipated Black Americans rallied for political rights, equality and social status. But the remnants of racial prejudice made this move difficult, with white supremacists exerting control in the southern states. They denied civil rights and basic advancement to the Black community. This caused the African Americans to move towards north of the country, in search of better living conditions, and an environment conducive to growth and advancement. This spirit informed a number of writings and cultural expressions that were based on racial pride. It also led to a revival of writings by African American writers, that had been obscured in the wake of new developments. Alan Locke's anthology *The New Negro*, a cornerstone of the Harlem Renaissance, carried works of numerous black writers and poets including those of Langston Hughes. The unique feature of these writings was that they represented African American culture, gave voice to their identity, and forged a strong sense of community.

Themes of these writings included a sense of pride, embodied in the idea of the "New Negro", a term popularised during the Harlem Renaissance. It signified the African American who by means of creativity and intellect subverted racial stereotypes and created an alternate discourse. That brought back Black experience to the American culture.

**Black Arts Movement:** This was a movement in the 1960s and 70s that is often referred to as the Second Renaissance, the first being the Harlem Renaissance. The two movements are seminal in consolidation of Black Arts aesthetic. While the intent of forging racial pride was common to both, Harlem Renaissance involved a re-introduction of African American experience into the American culture, popularising it and making it visible. The Black Arts Movement resisted Western conventions in arts and established new ways to articulate Black experience and establish a distinct Black American voice. Further, writings of this phase were more politically engaged as compared to those of the Harlem Renaissance. Artists resisted any attempts to regulate their art, stressing the need to embrace and express their Blackness. They achieved this aim of self-determination by engaging with historical and cultural African American experience. A somewhat radical flavour associated with the movement was missing during the Harlem Renaissance.

The phrase 'Black Aesthetic' is also associated with the movement and was coined by Larry Neal in 1968. Even as a concrete definition of the term does not exist, broadly it involves the view that art should be used to mobilize the Black masses. It focuses on the Black perspective and ideology, centering on their culture and life. Amiri Baraka is a vocal proponent of the term, as he emphasised the political facet of the Black art. The term is at times critiqued for limiting its engagement with a cultural history, emphasising Blackness over other identities that need equal consideration. But any artistic movement that is distinctly political, is always at the centre of debate. We as students of literature, need to understand its aims, and observe the emancipatory role it plays for a section of society. Langston Hughes' major works are associated with the Harlem Renaissance, with a few appearing during the Black Arts Movement in the fifties and sixties.

**Jazz Poetry:** It is a kind of poetry inaugurated by the African Americans in the 1920s. It is rhythmic and rooted in orality, meant to be performed, and seeking a

public ear. Its aim is different from that of poetry printed on the page. Jazz poetry was meant to be performed. It had an urgent and popular appeal made the African American experience reach the masses. Hence the acquisition of improvisation, repetition, rhythm and everyday speech. This was a potent tool for people with a long history of enslavement. By means of such a poetry. The blues poetry of Langston Hughes exerts for this style of writing. The poem in our course “A Young Gal’s Blues” belongs to this genre.

**Civil Rights Movement:** It was a mass movement that took place between 1954-1968. The Civil War culminating in abolition of slavery in 1865 conferred citizenship on all African Americans, and gave them voting rights. The era after these reforms focussed on their implementation while also rallying for civil rights for the Black Americans. This period continued well into the twentieth century as the deep-rooted social prejudice against the Blacks was a difficult reality to contend with. Giving momentum to this objective was the Civil Rights Movement. It involved a vocal denunciation of discriminatory practices that had gone on well after the Civil War and the Reconstructions Era. Racial segregation, and violence at the hands of people in general and white supremacists like Jim Crow in particular are examples. The movement involved non-violent mass protests and civil disobedience. This social movement coincided with the Black Arts movement in culture.

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#### 4.4 “THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS”: STANZA-WISE ANALYSIS

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I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

In this poem, the speaker uses the symbol of rivers to express his thoughts about the history of racial prejudice against African Americans. Rivers evoke the idea of civilizations that flourished on their banks. And in the context, such are the civilizations with a history of slavery. In the given stanza, we may note the repeated use of the word “known”. We gather that knowledge is one of the foremost tools of an empowered self. The repeated use of “I” helps to reinforce selfhood and a sense of pride in African American culture. The culture is old and troubled. It goes far back in time, hence the use of the word “ancient”. We get a glimpse of this troubled past when the speaker asserts that the rivers are “older than the flow of human blood in human veins”. The word “human” is used twice within the same sentence to have an impact. It makes us think of all that makes us human, giving us the sense that before a certain point in history, humanity was non-existent and brute practices reigned supreme. By mention of ancient rivers, the speaker evokes the troubled past of slavery.

The lines reiterate the issue that goes way back to the past. The speaker likens the depth of his soul to that of the rivers implying that he has an understanding of the old practices. He sympathises with his ancestors who were wronged. Additionally, the speaker’s stance on the issue of racial segregation is noticeable. It comprises the cerebral aspect of being aware of the history whereby his soul

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.*

*I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.*

*I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.*

*I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

In the above section, the speaker moves to particular references, the groundwork for which is laid in the initial lines of the poem. His mention of multiple rivers has the purpose of showing how widespread the slavery was. Both ancient and modern times witnessed slave trading societies. The rivers Nile, Congo, Mississippi and Euphrates cover a vast area of the globe. Euphrates is an important river of West Asia, originating in Eastern Turkey and flowing through Syria and Iraq to join the river Tigris. Congo flows in Africa, while the Nile moves through Africa to ultimately join Egypt. Civilizations that flourished on these rivers have a history of slavery and we note that the Black speaker is aware of it.

The poet associates the rivers with personal experience, attempting to make them his own. In the Euphrates, he “bathed” at early dawn, “built my hut near the Congo”, and as for the Nile, he “raised pyramids above it”. Bathing in the river is an image that gives a sense of immersive experience. Also, the activity of bathing is a personal metaphor conveying deep identification and belonging. The suggested close contact does not evoke one’s homeland, but the long history of slavery connecting slaves all over the world. And this very sense of cohesion, community that Hughes aimed to inculcate in his people by means of poetry. The identity is not national but racial here. The speaker, by means of mentioning rivers and consequently reminding the reader of civilisations in different parts of the world, evokes awareness of a particular kind of past sadly associated with subjugation and bondage.

Following this, the poet stresses the idea of ownership of one’s history. It is sweet, and cherished, no matter how tough the circumstances may have been. The speaker built a place of dwelling near the Congo river and the memory of it lulls him to sleep. The Congo in Africa speaks to Hughes’ racial roots more than the Euphrates does. The place has a soothing impact on him. One is put to sleep in a moment of immense comfort. That calming sense of ease and succour further re-establishes the speaker’s special bond with his race and a sense of pride in the particular experience. On the Nile as well, raising pyramids evokes a sense of ownership. We must note that he is raising “pyramids” not any regular concrete structure. Pyramids bring a sense of something significant and momentous into view.

In the lines, the personal and the historical are beautifully blended. One is difficult to separate from the other. Racial history is not a distant, disconnected entity for the poet, but is a part of the Black American’s sense of being.

The speaker also refers to a factual reference. It is of the Mississippi river that brings to life the historic moment when Abraham Lincoln sailed down the Mississippi river to New Orleans that brought about Lincoln’s knowledge of the slave markets flourishing in the area. That was in the nineteenth century before Lincoln became the American President in 1821. He is known to have significantly contributed to the abolitionist cause. Hence the appearance of the river “singing.” The visit made teenage Lincoln notice the gruesome reality. It contributed to his

strong stand against slavery during the American Civil War. Here, the river does not merely sing, its “muddy bosom” or the dirty insides begin to glow golden in the sunset. The glow could be a reference to the fact that Lincoln’s awareness of slavery gave the social cause its most important leader rallying against the adversaries.

*I’ve known rivers:*

*Ancient, dusky rivers.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

In this last part of the poem, the speaker reiterates his position on these rivers, the consequent civilizations and the history associated with them. They are ancient and dusky, that is the breadth of the speaker’s awareness. He is referring to the rivers with a sense of pride. The refrain “my soul has grown deep like the rivers” brings home the point that he is not just involved cerebrally and culturally but is also emotionally joined to the reality of his race.

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#### 4.5 “THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS”: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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As we noted above, the poet has used in the poem the symbol of ‘rivers’ to talk about racial history. Euphrates, Congo, Nile and Mississippi are the rivers along which vast civilisations flourished. The common thing among them is that the civilizations witnessed the practice of slavery. Euphrates originates in Turkey joining Syria. Iraq, Congo in Africa, Nile in West Africa, Egypt, and Mississippi in the US— this vast network of rivers in various parts of the world indicates how the practice of slavery has a long history and is not concentrated in one place alone. Highlighting this awareness of the African American, the speaker aims to reinstate racial pride and a feeling of belongingness. For him, African Americans should associate deeply with their roots, and contribute to connect these with people of similar experience. It unites them in common experience, strengthening their faith in themselves and building a stronger will to fight the biases they confront.

The individual’s selfhood and racial history are made to coalesce which becomes a primary concern in the poem. It underlines an awareness of self. On its part, poetic expression is a means of reinstating that confidence amongst the people. We particularly see self-determination projected in this poem in a multiplicity of ways—consider first the assertion of knowledge of their past touched upon here. The sense of inferiority that may have been perpetuated due to years of subjugation is countered with this emphasis on the aware self. That is related with the first but has a distinctness of its own. References from history contribute to the strengthening of the fight against slavery in America. Further we notice a deep sense of belonging in the poetic voice. The speaker talks of having bathed, having built houses on the rivers. Hence, the refrain in the poem about his soul running deep as the rivers. This depth of the soul is reminiscent of a sensitive response to reality.

Structurally, we notice that the first and the last stanzas carry the refrain of the poem, which is well distinguished from the preceding lines with a gap. The language use gives one a sense that the issue is deeply felt. It is also symbolic in a lot of places. Lincoln sided with the cause which led to a whole movement,

climaxing in a civil war but which ultimately led to the abolition of this crazy social practice.

Langston Hughes

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## 4.6 “YOUNG GAL’S BLUES”: STANZA-WISE ANALYSIS

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*I’m gonna walk to the graveyard*

*‘Hind ma friend Miss Cora Lee.*

*Gonna walk to the graveyard*

*‘Hind ma dear friend Cora Lee*

*Cause when I’m dead some*

*Body’ll have to walk behind me.*

This poem is written in the blues form. Blues is actually a music form involving expression of deeply felt experience, usually one of sadness, by a race that has known slavery. Compositions in this form are meant to be sung, hence repetition and straightforward expression are significant features of such a poem or song. The given stanza represents the speaker’s preoccupation with death, as she expresses the desire to join her friend’s cortege or funeral procession to the graveyard. Cora Lee is a dear friend of the speaker who has died. As she takes part in the procession, the speaker thinks of her own death—that one day there will be people walking behind her coffin, too, carrying her to the graveyard. The title indicates that the speaker is a young girl, and for her to harbour such thoughts, it speaks volumes about her past experience of her surroundings. Young people, impressionable as they are, easily pick-up the sentiment of their context. The sadness of this young girl is representative of her conditions and racial memory.

Another thing to be noticed is that the dead girl is a dear friend of the speaker, which means that even she was young and died before time. The death of a young girl is an extremely unfortunate circumstance. The reason is not known but the sentiment of sadness is clearly expressed. Those belonging to the racial minority suffer not just social ostracism but also reel under poverty with hardly any access to good healthcare. The possible reasons of death could be multiple, but the reasons are not the focus of the poem. The emotion and the moment evoked bring to mind the conditions of people whose voice is represented here.

This incident triggers within the young girl a fear of her own death. She begins to visualise the day she would die, then there will be people accompanying her cortege as well. The tragic sentiment is heightened as the young girl is seen thinking these thoughts. It brings out her state of mind which also reflects upon the circumstance around. It is not a happy, positive circumstance but one fraught with challenges. Thus, the poet brings us close to the emotions and the lived reality of the African Americans. The choice of the speaker is significant. It is a common girl. The poet wishes to articulate the experiences of common people among the community of Black Americans, those who directly face the brunt of a biased social reality.

I’m goin’ to the po’ house

To see ma old Aunt Clew.

Goin’ to the po’ house

To see ma old Aunt Clew.  
 When I'm old an' ugly  
 I'll want to see somebody, too.

The phrase “po’ house” could be a shortened version of the acronym POC, which means person of colour. Anyone who is non-white in the American society is referred to with this word. So, the speaker points out that she is going to the house of another person of colour, who happens to be her aunt. These lines clarify that the young girl, the speaker, is an African American. Aunt Clew is old. After ruminating on death, the young girl thinks about old age and the lack of beauty associated with it. The sympathetic, humanist tone is undeniable in the speaker’s words. She is able to empathise with her old aunt. Her sensitivity towards the lonely old age is much more than one would expect from a young girl. She is able to feel the exact challenges of her aunt and wishes to be there for her and give her company. We notice that others’ difficult predicament triggers a parallel visualisation of that reality in her own life—first it was death and now it is old age. She is able to sympathise with their struggles and connects with them at a human level. The poet underlines the value of fraternity amongst African Americans. The young girl empathises with those who suffer. At another level it also makes her insecure about the time when she will have to confront the same reality. Hence, the reiteration that when she is in difficult times, she too will need people to help her.

*The po’ house is lonely  
 An’ the grave is cold.  
 O, the po’ house is lonely,  
 The graveyard grave is cold.  
 But I’d rather be dead than  
 To be ugly an’ old.*

In this stanza, the speaker combines the two experiences—of the sadness at the graveyard and at the house of her aunt, a person of colour. Ideas of loneliness and the loss of life evoke a deep sense of gloom in her. Old age, death and the physical signs of aging are evolved thoughts for a young girl to contemplate on. After her initial response of fear, insecurity and anxiety, she naively makes a choice between the two experiences. She elects death than a disintegrating body. Instead of facing the trials of life, she chooses the serenity of death. One notices a refusal on the speaker’s part to go through any circumstance that is torturous. In the phrase “the grave is cold”, coldness indicates the denial of life.

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

After old age and death, she contemplates the circumstance of loss of love—when love is gone, “O/ What can a young girl do?”. It is the lack of love she felt

at the death of her close friend and the approaching end of her aunt whom she is related to.

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## 4.7 “YOUNG GAL’S BLUES”: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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This poem is written in the blues form adopted, as opposed to the lyric style in the previous one. The blues is primarily a genre of folk music associated with the expression of melancholy that people go through in a difficult circumstance. The sadness does not take the form of hopelessness and stasis. Instead, it is a way of coming to terms with the difficult reality of the Black Americans. Engagement with these emotions contributes to Hughes’ humanist stance whereby he highlights their potentialities as well as difficulties. The blues form is closely associated with Jazz poetry. The typical stanza structure involves a three-line stanza where the first two lines are a repeat followed by a third different line. With the aab structure, the second line which is a repetition of the first has an addition of a word or a twist that is an impromptu choice of the composer. In Hughes blues poems, we notice six-line stanzas—he breaks one sentence into two parts which appear as two separate lines. However, the repetition and the overall aab structure remains intact.

Such a poem is an expression of the tragedy as well as resilience of the African Americans. In the poem Hughes engages with the ideas of death, old age, loneliness in a matter of fact way, the way in which it actually hits the individual hard. There is no poetic treatment of these issues which further contributes to the form adopted by the poet here. The language is direct, hard hitting, ordinary, that which is meant to convey the sentiment foremost than paying attention to the way it is conveyed. In blues songs, much of the content is improvised. Stanzas there are connected with a consistent logic of mood and theme than any other literary device. Improvisation and the use of dialect are the distinctive features adding to the folk element of the poem. We notice an African American slang being used here. The phrases “I’m gonna walk... ‘Hind ma friend” “Cause when” “old an’ ugly” indicate the particular slang deployed here.

The use of this form is an expression of their unique cultural identity. The poem makes us aware of the particular dialect and the form that was popularly used by the African Americans for self-expression. With a history of being silenced and discriminated against, composing poems and songs and making them heard by various artistic means is a political act.

In the time of Hughes, the assertion of self in poetry meant to consolidate one’s voice while contending with forces of oppression. Hughes has done that effectively in the given poem. He also brings out the crucial sense of bonding, cooperation and fraternity amongst the African Americans. This is evident in the young girl’s ability to empathise with the others’ predicament. The poet reposes faith in people’s ability to coexist with strength, supporting one another through tough times. This is a message that needed to be rekindled amongst people, many of whom had begun doubting themselves and their roots because of a long history of subjugation and mistreatment.

The themes of death, old age, loss of beauty, and lack of love are evoked in this poem. The speaker expresses her thoughts, and lays bare her anxieties. In

comparison with the previous poem where the voice was confident and self-assured, this poem brings out the speaker's anxieties and fears. Further, by means of bonding between the daughter and the father, the poet indicates the commonness of experience between the African Americans as well as others. This poem indicates how Hughes does not romanticise or deify the race, but presents them realistically, making the audience aware about the predicament of common people. Articulated in human terms, African American perspective is brought back in vogue, a voice that is seldom heard, without either stereotyping or unrealistic glorification. Thus, he lets us know an entire spectrum of emotions of the African American people, creating a space for them in the country's cultural landscape.

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## 4.8 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LANGSTON HUGHES

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"The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" is a seminal essay by Hughes that helps us understand the poet's purpose. One of his primary motivations was to create art that was to instil a sense of pride into his own people, to undo the years of shame and low self-confidence. The target audience for his works involved both oppressed and oppressors among the African Americans as well as the white population. The intention was to correct the self-image of the African Americans and also others' opinion of them, both of which stood majorly compromised through years of slavery. In the essay, Hughes articulated the challenge confronting African Americans in particular and added, "But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mould of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible."

Black artists by means of their art, sought to reverse the self-deprecatory view current at the time, particularly evident in the middle class. It is the common people who retain their unique racial identity without obsessing over the standardized white ways. And it is in these very people that Hughes and other Black artists seek their cultural base. Middle class is fine, yet Hughes has the wish to widen the base. He says, "But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority...They furnish a wealth of colourful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations." The phrase "American standardisations" conveys the idea of white culture that had a lure for the African Americans.

The cultural identity that the Black artists sought to create was by the means of both theme and form. In his blues poems in particular, the language use and the rhythmic quality, set apart African American experience in their own terms. In a preface titled "A Note on the Blues" to one of his poetry collections Hughes observed, "The Blues are songs about being in the midst of trouble, friendless, hungry, disappointed in love, right here on earth." The form itself conveyed a lot about the Black Americans, their history, context and the struggles that define them.

In the essay, "The Elusive Langston Hughes", Hilton Als quotes another popular Black writer James Baldwin's observations saying, "Hughes, in his sermons, blues and prayers, has working for him the power and the beat of Negro speech and Negro music. Negro speech is vivid largely because it is private. It is a kind of emotional short hand—or sleight of hand—by means of which Negroes express



not only their relationship to each other but their judgment of the white world.” Here Baldwin draws our attention to the connection between the formal quality of Hughes’ poems and their politics. The speech and rhythm are peculiar to the African Americans.

Edward Waldron in the essay “The Blues Poetry of Langston Hughes” has stated, “While Langston Hughes certainly did not limit himself to any one form or subject, his concern with the common man...makes his use of the blues form especially “right.” The fact that he centred his poems around common people does justice to the politics evident in his verse.

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## 4.9 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we got a view of the two styles of poems Hughes wrote—the lyric and the blues or jazz poetry. Through these genres, he established a unique aesthetic to articulate distinct experiences of the African Americans. Different elements included the use of everyday language, at times using the African American dialect in a conversational tone, which also had a rhythmic quality to it. Hughes used the medium of poetry to reinstate racial pride amongst the Blacks, some of whom were predisposed to preferring the white conventions and ways. By bringing their history to the fore, he embraced the difficult past, accepted it instead of letting it inculcate a sense of inferiority. Further, the unabashed articulation of sorrow in the blues, was another step by the poet in gracefully owning the past characterised by racist discrimination. Articulating their felt experience indicated their resilience and refusal to accept discriminatory conditions any further. Hughes engaged with common people from the community, giving voice to their emotions and making space for them in the American culture.

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## 4.10 QUESTIONS

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- 1) What is the significance of rivers in the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”?
- 2) The sense of self is intertwined with history. Comment on the statement with reference to the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”.
- 3) Hughes does not romanticise African Americans but presents them in human terms. Apply this to the poem “Young Gal’s Blues”.
- 4) Comment on the melancholic strain in the poem “Young Gal’s Blues”.
- 5) Discuss Langston Hughes as an African American poet.

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