SELF LEARNING MATERIAL

Master of English

4th Semester

ENGLISH

COURSE : ENG - 404

AMERICAN LITERATURE-II

BLOCK : I

DRAMA

- *Fences*
- *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Centre for Distance and Online Education
Dibrugarh University
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ENGLISH

COURSE : ENG - 404

AMERICAN LITERATURE- II

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ENGLISH

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CONTENTS

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

This Block takes you to a study and analysis of August Wilson's most renowned work, *Fences.* In your previous block you ' have got a very good introduction to the background and development of American theatre from eighteenth century to the twentieth century. With such an introduction to American theatre and also your knowledge of an American drama, *A Streetcar Named Desire,* you should be better prepared to read this second pray, *Fences.*

Fences is is a moving drama written in lgg3. It earned Wilson his first Pulitzer Prize (1987) and also the Tony Award for Best play (1987). The Play explores the life and relationships of the Moxson family. The protagonist Troy Maxson is a restless hash-collector and former baseball athlete. Though deeply flawed, he represents the struggle for justice and fair treatment during the 1950s. Troy also represents human natures reluctance to recognize and accept social change. The events of the play is unfolded through various symbols and techniques used by Wilson with dexterity. This Block has been designed so as to provide you a hold on the play's plot its character, its structure as well as themes, motifs and symbols.

This Block has been structured into three units. The first unit gives you a short introduction to August Wilson, the playwright. Unit two situates the play in its historical and social context. It also elaborates on the play's plot and its development. And the last unit, goes a step further by focusing on the major characters and themes and techniques of the play.

The Block, thus, should suffice to your easy grasping of the text and motivate you to explore various aspects of play - thematic or structural for yourself.

Wish you enjoy reading the play !

UNIT - I

AUGUST WILSON : INTRODUCTION

Contents

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to introduce you to one of the most important American playwrights of the late twentieth century, August Wilson (1945-2005). You have already learnt about Tennessee Williams in the previous unit. In this unit you will study about a playwright who chronicled the African-American experience through his plays. After going through this unit, you will get a clear idea of

- the childhood and career of Wilson
- the plays of Wilson
- major influences on his career and works
- the themes of his play; and
- awards and honours bestowed upon him.

1.1 LIFE

1.1.1 Childhood

August Wilson was born as Frederick August Kittel, Jr. to a German immigrant father and an African-American mother in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvannia. The fourth of six children, he was raised by his mother alone in a small apartment located in a largely black neighbourhood; his father being mostly absent from home when he was growing up. His mother soon got separated from his father to marry a man named David Bedford. The family then moved out from the Hill District to the then predominantly white working-class neighborhood of Hazelwood. It was here that Wilson got acquainted with racial discrimination for the first time.

Wilson had a difficult time in the schools he attended. In one of the schools he was the only African-American student while in another he found the curriculum uninspiring. When he was at tenth grade, Wilson was accused of plagiarism in writing a paper on Napoleon. Unable to

convince the principal of his innocence, he droped out of school and engaged himself in various odd jobs. He finally found his solace in a local library named Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh where he spent a great dear of time reading works of Black writers like Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and others. The library later awarded an honorary degree to Wilson for his contribution to literature.

Wilson married three times. His first marriage was to Brenda Burton from lg6g to rg72 with whom he had a daughter. In 1981 he was married to Judy Oliver, a social worker, and divorced in 1990. He married the well-known costume designer Constanza Romero in 1994, whom he met on the sets of his play *The Piano Lesson.* Early in 2005 he was diagnosed with liver cancer and died shortly thereafter.

1.1.2 CAREER

From a very young age Wilson wanted to become a writer although his mother wanted him to become a lawyer. After serving in the united states Army for a short stint, he took various odd jobs. Around this time he also started writing poetry and submitted his poems to magazines like Harpers. During the 1g60s he became involved with the Black Arts Movement (see Key words), and in 1968, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizons on the Hill, a Pittsburgh theatre company, along with his friend Rob Penny.

Wilson also attempted to bring together African-American writers of the time together and assist them in matters of publication and production. Towards this end he started the Kuntu Writers Workshop with penny and the poet Maisha Baton.

In the late 1970s Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota and got associated with The Playwrights' Center and the Penumbra Theatre Company. He also had a job writing educational scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota. After his second marriage fell apart in 1990, Wilson

left St. Paul and shifted to Seattle where he established a relationship with the Seattle Repertory Theatre. It is here that all his plays of *The Pittsburgh Cycle* were produced.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Name the places where Wilson grew up.

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2. Why did he drop out of school?

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3. Where did Wilson complete his studies? Which black writers did he study?

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4. With whom did Wilson start the Black Horizons Theatre?

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5. Where were all the plays of *The Pittsburgh Cycle* produced?

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1.2 WORKS

August Wilson is best known for ten plays. Known as *The Pittsburgh Cycle,* each play is set in a different decade of the twentieth century, chronicling the African-American experience. The idea to write one play for each decade of the twentieth century came to Wilson after he finished *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.* In an interview to Sandra Shannon, Wilson said that after his first three plays were set in three different decades, he decided to continue doing just that. Nine of the ten plays are set in Pittsburgh's Hill District' near Wilson's childhood home. The only exception is *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,* which is located in Chicago.

Here is a list of Wilson's plays (in written order):

- 1979 - Jitney
- 1982 - Ma Rainey's Black Bottom
- 1983 - Fences
- 1984 - Joe Turner's Come and Gone
- 1986 - The Piano Lesson
- 1990 - Two Trains Running
- 1995 - Seven Guitars
- 2001 - King Hedley II
- 2003 - Gem of the Ocean
- 2005 - Radio Golf

1.3 KEY INFLUENCES AND THEMES

1.3.1 Influences

Wilson was influenced by various writers and artists, some of whom he read during his growing-up years. The Argentine poet and novelist Jorge Luis Borges, the playwright Amiri Baraka and writers Ed

Bullins and James Baldwin were prominent among them. It is to these writers that he owes the inspiration for his employment of themes of universal love, honour, duty and betrayal as well as his representations of everyday life. But his greatest inspiration was the painter Romare Bearden. Some of Wilson's plays and characters were inspired by the paintings of Bearden. Moreover, both of them included imagery associated with blues music in their works. Like Bearden, Wilson also depicted ordinary African-American in everyday chored in his plays.

1.3.2 Themes of His Plays

The central theme in Wilson's plays, obviously, is the representation of the African-American experience. He takes upon himself the responsibility to write a play about black experiences in the United States for every decade of the 20th century. The deep racial divide that once existed in that country between the slave states and the free states as well as the impoverished south and the urbanized north finds expression in his plays. An oft-repeated theme of his plays is, thus, the way his various characters experience and perceive American history through their own, often conflicted eyes. Besides, Wilson strives to convert the usual stereotypes associated with blacks into what can be termed as archetypes. In his plays, Wilson develops a new mythology for people of African descent living in America. Civil Rights Movements, Black Nationalism, sports discrimination, city politics and the Underground Railroad are other key elements of Wilson's dramaturgy.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Which is Wilson's last play?

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2. Name the writers who inspired Wilson. How did they influence him?

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3. How was Wilson indebted to the painter Romare Bearden?

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4. What did Wilson want to represent through his plays?

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5. What are themes that you will find in Wilson's plays?

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1.4 AWARDS AND HONOURS

Over the years Wilson has won may awards and honours for his plays, including the prestigious Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award. The first award that he won was the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1985. *Fences* won both the Pulitzer as well as the Tony award in 1987. Wilson won his second Pulitzer Prize for *The Piano Lesson* in 1990.

The complete list of awards and honours bestowed on Wilson is given here :

1985: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.*

1985: Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.*

1987: Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, *Fences.*

1987: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Fences.*

1987: Pulitzer Prize for Drama, *Fences.*

1987: Tony Award for Best play, *Fences.*

1988: Literary Lion Award from the New York Public Library

1988: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone.*

1988: Tony Award nomination for Best play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone.*

1990: Drama Desk Award for outstanding New Play, *The Piano Lesson.*

1990: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *The Piano Lesson.*

1990: Tony Award nomination for Best play, *The Piano Lesson.*

1990: Pulitzer Prize for Drama *The Piano Lesson.*

1992: American Theatre Critics' Association Award, *Two Trains Running.*

1992: New York Drama Critics Circle Citation for Best American Play, *Two Trains Running.*

1992: Tony Award nomination for Best play, *Two Trains Running.*

1996: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Seven Guitars.*

1996: Tony Award nomination for Best Play, *Seven Guitars.*

1999: National Humanities Medal

2000: New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, *Jitney.*

2000: Outer Critics Circle Award for outstanding off-Broadway Play, *Jitney.*

2001: Tony Award nomination for Best play, *King Hedley II.*

(Source: Dr. Mike Downing)

1.5 SUMMING-UP

August Wilson was undoubtedly one of the most important American playwrights of the late twentieth century. He was raised by his mother alone in a small apartment located in a largely black neighbourhood where he got acquainted with racial discrimination for the first time. He could not complete his formal school education, and largely educated himself in the local library.

He started writing poetry at an early age which he submitted to magazines like *Harpers.* During the 1960s he became involved with the Black Arts Movement, and in 1968, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizons Theatre with his friend Rob Penny. In the late 1970s Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota and got associated with The Playwrights' center and the Penumbra Theatre company. In 1990, Wilson left St. Paul to shift to Seattle where he came in contact with the Seattle Repertory Theatre.

August Wilson is best known for The Pinsburgh Cycle, a cycle of ten plays with each pray set in a different decade of the twentieth century, chronicling the African-American experience. Wilson was influenced by writers and artists like Jorge Luis Borges, Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins and James Baldwin. His greatest inspiration was the painter Romare

Bearden as many of his plays and characters were inspired by the paintings of Bearden. Over the years Wilson won many awards and honours for his plays, including the prestigious Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award for plays like Ma Rainy's Black Bottom, Fences and The Piano Lesson. History of America as seen through the eyes of the Blacks, racial discriminations and social changes usually form the focal points of his plays.

1.6 KEY WORDS

Black Arts Movement : Sometimes called the 'second black renaissance' (the Harlem Renaissance being the first), the Black Arts Movement (BAM) began in the mid-1960s and flourished untill the mid-1970s. As well as stimulating much powerful writing, it has had a lasting influence on subsequent African-American art, critism and politics. The BAM emphasized the racial distinction of the Blacks, and fostered writing that was specifically black, speech-based, radical, confrontational, anti-assimilationist and dedicated to revolutionary social change. Writers most associated with BAM include Imamu Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Malcolm X, Nikki Giovanni and Ntozake Shange.

1.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

1. How do Wilson's experiences as a child influence his work as a playwright?
2. What are the major themes Wilson deals with in his plays?
3. Discuss August Wilson as a playwright.

UNIT - II

FENCES : INTRODUCTION

Contents

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will be introduced to one of August Wilson's most well-known work, Fences. The objective is to acquaint you with some of the fundamental aspects of the play before delving into other issues in the next unit. After reading this unit you should be able to

- situate the context of the play
- get an overview of the main characters in the play
- understand the plot of the play; and
- analyse the different scenes of the play.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

August Wilson wrote Fences in 1983. The play was the sixth of his ten-part *The Pittsburgh Cycle.* Wilson wanted to explore the African-American experience and the theme of race relations in all his plays. He has a penchant for storytelling, and takes the responsibility of narrating what Lloyd Richards calls "the encounter of the released black slaves with a vigorous and ruthless growing America decade by decade." *Fences* is no differrent as it deals with the condition of the Blacks in the 1950s. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1987 and also the Tony Award for Best Play the same year.

Fences centres around a tragic character, Troy Maxson, who epitomizes the conditions under which the Blacks had to struggle historically. A baseball player in the Negro League, Troy claims he could not achieve greater things in life despite being very talented because of racial discrimination. Wilson sets the play at a time when Blacks like Hank Aaron were making their mark in the professional league against the white players. The 1950s opened up new opportunities for the Blacks

but for people like Troy, who did not experience such conditions before, it red to tragic consequences.

Fences left no doubt that Wilson was a major writer, and the play a major American play.

2.2 CHARACTERS

Troy Maxson : The main protagonist. A fifty-three year-old Afrian American man, Troy works for the sanitation department as a garbage man. He was also a former baseball star in the Negro Leagues.

Cory Maxson : The teenaged son of Troy and Rose Maxson. A talented boy, he is expected to be picked up by college recuiters to play football.

Rose Maxson: Troy's wife and mother of cory, Rose is a forty-three year-old African American housewife who is a devout churchgoer.

Her insistence to build a fence in their yard represents her desire to keep the family together.

Gabriel Maxson: Troy's brother. Gabriel was a soldier in the Second World War, during which he received a head injury which damaged his brain. He often thinks of himself as an anger at the gates of St. Peter.

Jim Bono: Troy's best friend of over thirty years. He is a devoted husband and friend. Bono and Troy had met in jail, and he is the only character who remembers Troy's glory days as a baseball player.

Lyons Maxson: Troy's son from previous marriage. Lyons is an ambitious and talented jazz musician who does not rive with the family but comes by the Maxson house frequently on Troy's payday to ask for money.

Raynell Maxson: Troy's illegitimate child mothered by Alberta his lover.

Alberta: An off-stage character who is Troy's buxom lover from Tallahassee and Raynell's mother. Alberta dies while giving birth.

2.3 PLOT

The plot of *Fences* centres around a fifty-three year old African-American man Troy Maxson and his struggle to understand the race relations prevalent during the time. The setting appears to be Pittsburgh because of the many references made to its notable institutions although it is not directly specified.

The action opens on Troy's payday with his friend Bono coming over to his house for their weekend session of drinking and talking. Troy informs him that he had asked his boss Mr. Rand why coloured people like him who collect trash are not allowed to drive the garbage trucks themselves. As you read on you will come to know from his speeches that Troy was once a well-known baseball player but due to the race barrier in America during that time he could not make it to the Major League-a fact that left a feeling of bitterness in him. He goes on to narrate a long story about his struggle with Death in 1943. His son from a previous marriage Lyons comes over knowing that it is Troy's payday and requests for a loan of ten dollars. Troy comes down hard on his son and refuses to give him any money but finally relents after Rose manages to persuade him.

Rose reminds Troy about the fence she had asked him to build. Later on as Troy is working on the fence with Cory he gets to know that his son has given away his job in the local grocery store to play football during the season. He hopes to impress a football coach t6

who is coming over from Pittsburgh to see him play. But Troy gets angry with Cory for giving up his job and demands him to get back his job. A few days later as Troy tells Bono that he has been promoted to drive the garbage truck, Cory comes home enraged after finding out that Troy had told the coach that he may not pray in the team.

Midway through the pray you will come to know that Troy has been having an affair with a woman named Alberta and who is now pregnant with his child. When he tells Rose about this she accuses him of only taking and not giving. Troy grabs Rose's arm. Cory grabs Troy from behind and in the ensuring struggle Troy wins. Six months later Troy goes to the hospital in which Alberta is admitted. She gives birth to a daughter but dies during childbirth. Troy brings home his daughter Raynell who is accepted by Rose as her own child. Meanwhile, Gabriel is taken away to an asylum.

Another argument takes place between Troy and Cory. Cory accuses his father of cheating his mother and also grabbing Gabriel's money. Troy asks him to leave his house and swings a baseball bat at him. He also taunts Death.

The action now takes place eight years later. Rayne, young is a girl now. Troy has died of heart attack while swinging his baseball bat. The family prepares for Troy's funeral. Cory has come home from the Mariens but refuses to attend the funeral. Rose tells him that not attending his father's funeral will not make him a man. Ultimately he agrees to go as he and Raynell sing one of his father's songs. Gabriel also comes home from the mental hospital and tries to blow his trumpet. The fence referred to by the play's tittle is revealed to be finished in the final act of the pray, and Bono has bought his wife a refrigerator as he promised Troy he would do if he finished building it.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. When was *Fences* written? Of which cycle of prays is this a part?

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2. Which decade does Wilson deal with in this play?

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3. Which two major awards for drama did *Fences* win?

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4. Who is the main protagonist of the play? What is his profession?

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5. Who insists on building a fence around the yard of Troy's house?

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6. What is the time-span of the play?

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2.4 DETAILED SCENE-WISE SUMMARY AND ANALYSN

2.4.1 Act I

Scene One

Summary

The play opens on a Friday night in 1957. Troy and Bono are engaged in their weekly ritual of talk and drink. The two men talk about a co-worker named Brownie who they felt was stupid enough to try to hide from their boss Mr. Rand a watermelon under his coat. They also discuss about Troy's complaint about not allowing the Blacks to drive the garbage trucks. Troy who has lodged the complaint at the union is not afraid of being fired from his job. Their talk then shifts towards a girl called Alberta whom Troy is accused to be eyeing by Bono. Troy refutes Bono's claim and makes some vulgar remarks about the affair.

Troy's wife Rose comes in and joins in the conversation. They tell Bono in a somewhat joking manner about the way their marriage came about. Rose also tells Troy that their son Cory has been recruited by the college football team. He does not quite like the idea of Cory spending his time playing ball rather than making a living. Bono and Rose try to make him understand that times have changed since his

own time. Troy who was an exceptional baseball player in the Negro Leagues could not make to the Major League Baseball because the colour barrier had not been broken during his day. He starts drinking out of frustration. Rose warns him not to drink himself to death. This sets him off to narrate a fanciful story about his battle with Death in July 1941. Rose gives the real story that Troy was actually down with pneumonia in Mercy Hospital.

Lyons, Troy's son from a previous marriage, comes calling. He is thirty-four years old and a budding musician. Troy is not particularly happy to see him as he knows why he has come. Lyons asks Troy ten dollers which he promises to pay back since his girlfriend Bonnie is working. Troy goes on to narrate another fanciful story replacing Death with Devil. Rose tells that it was only a furniture dealer. Troy ridicules Lyons for his lifestyle which leads to an argument between the two. Finally Rose convinces her husband to pay Lyons the ten dollars who leaves the house after getting the money. The scene ends with Troy sharing a slightly vulgar comment.

Analysis

The first scene of the play is also its longest. The scene serves several purposes. Wilson intends this scene to get his audience get familiar with the play's environs. Moreover, the initial exchanges between Troy and Bono reveal the close friendship they share. In fact, their two families are presented to be quite close.

The scene is also important in foreshadowing many important elements of the plot. The casual reference to Alberta will have deeper implications rater in the play. The seeds of a conflict between Troy and Cory seem to be planted in the first scene itself. Troy's estimate of Lyons

as a worthless and unreliable boy is established. It also becomes apparent that Troy, because of the frustrations he has gone through, has created a world of illusion for himself and likes telling fanciful stories to his family and friends, particularly about his struggle with Death. On the other hand, Rose comes across as much more pragmatic in her approach. Wilson also seems to be making some kind of an effort to reverse some of the stereotypes associated with the Blacks by his watermelon reference.

Scene Two

Summary

The next scene opens the following morning as Rose is seen hanging up clothes while singing a song asking Jesus to be protective fence around her family. Troy comes and chides her for wasting her money and time by praying a lottery game called numbers. He tells Rose that he is not at all worried if he is going to be fired job' from his Rather he is angry that Cory has gone out to practice football instead of working on the fence. Just then Troy's brother Gabriel enters singing a song about selling fruits and vegetables. Gabriel was a soldier in the Second World War when he was seriously injured that left his brain partially damaged. He thinks himself to be the angel Gabriel' He often refers to St. peter as if he knows him personally and tells Troy that he has seen St. Peter's book for Judgement Day and Troy's name appeared inside. He saw Rose's name too, but not the way Troy's name appeared. As Gabriel leaves thinking he sees hellhounds around Troy's feet, he sings a song warning Troy to get ready for Judgement Day.

Troy and Rose discuss about the condition of Gabriel. Troy feels a little guilty about managing the money that Gabriel got from

the government for the injury he suffered. Rose comforts him by telling him that he has done no wrong. Troy goes to Taylor's to listen to the baseball game and promises to work on the fence after getting back home.

Analysis

Wilson shows a different side of Troy in the second scene. He displays greater concern for his wife and brother than in the opening scene. However, Troy also appers to be slightly selfish in that he becomes easily outraged whenever his opinions differ from others. That is why he fails to understand the simple pleasure that Rose derives by playing a harmless lottery game.

Like his brother, Gabriel portrays another aspect of the African-American experience. Whereas Troy was supposedly not allowed to play in the Major League Baseball because of the colour of his skin, the same country demanded sacrifice of Gabriel in the war. Somewhat in the line of Shakespearean fools, Gabriel while singing his nonsensical songs also seems to utter prophetic messages. His reference to Judgement Day hints at the sins that Troy might have committed.

Scene Three

Summary

Cory comes home from football practice in the afternoon. Rose tells him that his father was upset with him for not doing the household chores. As he goes inside to have something to eat Troy returns home and starts flirting with Rose. Knowing that Cory was at home, he calls him out and reprimands him for not doing his work and playing football.

Later when Cory asks him if they could buy a television he again gets angry with him and says that at that point they rather need to repair their roof than buy a television set. As they continue to argue, Troy makes a deal with Cory that if Cory comes up with one hundred dollars, he will match him with the other half to buy the TV. Then they have a friendly argument about the status of black players in the Major Leagues. Troy feels that the Black prayers still are not getting a fair chance to prove themselves.

Troy gets further upset to know that Cory has given away his job at the supermarket, A&P, to play football. He refuses to sign any paper giving him permission and instead demands Cory gets his job back.

Cory asks Troy why he never liked him. Troy responds by saying that his role as a father is to provide shelter and food to his son and nothing more. He has only to fulfill his responsibility as a father and is not bound to like him.

Rose cannot understand why Troy will not ret Cory play football when the boy is trying to follow in his father's footsteps. Troy explains that he would anot allow Cory to pursue sports in order to spare him from a fate like his own. Rose tries to get Troy to admit that he was too old to play for the Major Leagues and that times have changed but Troy does not agree with her.

Analysis

Troy's character gets further developed in this scene. Father-son relationship is also emphasized by the playwright. An irreconcilable difference seems to be creeping into their lives. Despite all his flaws, his advice to his son about the importance of repairing their roof than

buying a television set and his lesson on the responsibility of a father seem pragmatic and convincing enough. Moreover, he offers Cory a fair deal by agreeing to pay half the amount if he can earn the other half and in doing so, he is truely admirable.

But there is also a flip side to Troy. He again appears to be very self concerned and adamant as he refuses to see the positives of his wife and son's arguments. His latent frustration at being unable to fulfill his dream as a player has to be borne by his son.

Scene Four

Summary

This scene like the first is set on Troy's payday. Cory leaves home after attending a phone call, leaving his room in a mess. Troy comes home with Bono in a cheerful mood because he has won his case against the Commissioner's office making him the first coloured garbage truck driver in the city. Interestingly, Troy does not even know how to drive and is yet to get his driver's license.

Lyons comes home and Troy thinks that he has come again to ask for money but Lyons surprises him by paying back the ten dollars he borrowed two Fridays ago which Troy is reluctant to accept. Gabriel also shows up at the house and continues to talk about how he will be responsible for opening the gates to heaven on Judgement Day.

Troy gets upset that Cory lied to him about still working in A&P on weekends. His disobedience reminds him of his own childhood. He narrates a long account of the difficulties he faced during his childhood and the circumstances that forced him to leave home when he was only fourteen years old to move north. He had to steal things initially to

survive. Then he met Lyons, mother and Lyons was born. One day a man gets accidentally killed by him and for that he was jailed for fifteen years. It was in the prison that he met Bono and also learnt to play baseball. He married Rose after coming out of prison.

Towards the end of the scene Cory comes home enraged because Troy had told the football, coach that Cory may not play football anymore. Cory accuses his father of being jealous of him.

Analysis

By setting this scene on another Friday, Wilson established a familiar pattern in the lives of Troy and Bono. Troy's excitement in being promoted and the enthusiasm with which the family receives happy news reveals the infrequency with which such happy occurrences come in their lives. That these moments of happiness may not last long is hinted by the playwright by suggesting an intending conflict between Troy and Cory. The reference to a woman named Alberta with whom Troy supposedly had an affair and Gabriel's absurd but prophetic forebonding rends belief that the story may not end happily for Troy.

The playwright also provides a rather long back story of Troy's childhood which offers a glance into the history of America, particularly of the Blacks. The reference to Troy and Bono's fathers brings into focus the differences in circumstances and attitude in different generation - Troy's father, Troy himself and his son.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Give two reasons why the first scene is important of this play?

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2. Which aspect of Troy's character gets highlighted in the second scene?

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3. What is the crux of Troy's conflict with his son, Cory?

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4. Can you find some positive in Troy's character upto this point ?

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5. What is the significance of Gabriel's prophetic foreboding ?

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6. Do you find any change in the attitudes of the Blacks in different generations ?

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Scene One

Summary

The next morning Cory is seen hitting the ball with the baseball bat. He tells Rose that despite what his father says he is not going to quit playing football. Rose sends him to do some cleaning in the house' Meanwhile, Troy returns home and tells Rose that to pay fifty he had dollars to release Gabriel who was arrested ealier for disturbing peace in the area. He begins working on the fence and cars out Cory to help him. Bono says that the wood they are using for building the fence is too hard. Troy does not agree and asks Cory to saw the wood' He says he does not understand why Rose wants a fence in the yard. Bono replies that Rose wants a fence because she loves her family and wants to keep them together.

When Cory goes inside Bono confronts Troy about his affair with Alberta. Troy Finally admits to Bono that he is indeed having a affair with the woman. Bono asks him to remain loyal to Rose and not hurt her in any manner. Even Troy admits that he is trying to work a way out of the likely mess. Bono bets Troy that if he finishes building the fence for Rose, Bono will buy his wife, Lucille the refrigerator he has promised her for a long time.

Rose asks Troy about what happened with Gabriel at the station. They argue over whether or not Gabriel needs more supervision. At this point he tells Rose that he has got something to tell her. With hesitation he tells her that he is going to be a father of a child by another woman. Rose is taken aback by this sudden disclosure. She tries to confront Troy but Gabriel appears and interrupts the important conversation. She cannot believe that after eighteen years of marriage Troy could do this to her. Somewhat selfishly Troy says that he got involved with the woman because he wanted to escape from the pressures and problems of his life. Their argument takes a turn for the worse when Rose says that he only takes and never gives anything. Troy gets angry and grabs her arm. Cory comes outside and grabs Troy from behind. He punches Troy in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Troy lunges at Cory but Rose holds him back. Troy yells at Cory and asks him to stay away from him.

Analysis

The significance of the play's title becomes clear in this scene. Bono spells it out to Troy and Cory why Rose wants a fence to be built around their yard. While the practical reason for it is not stated by Rose,

metaphorically the fence stands for her efforts to keep her family together as she fears that there is a danger of her family falling apart due to the deteriorating nature of Troy's relationship with Cory.

Bono's concern for the well-being of troy and his family also becomes evident in the course of his conversation with Troy. That conversation, however, disturbs the outward harmony between Troy and Rose. The admission of his extramarital affair breacks down Rose, who feels cheated after eighteen years of marriage, and leads to another conflict in the play. His confession that he jumped into an adulterous affair in order to escape from the pressures and frustrations of his life reeks of hypocrisy on his part. The simmering tension between Troy and Cory comes to a boil in the climactic moments of the scene which will change the family dynamics forever.

Scene Two

Summary

The next scene opens six months later. Rose and Troy have not been on talking terms all this while. But now Rose wants to talk to Troy ehich surprises him. She wants to know whether he will return straight home after work the next day. He answers her by saying that he must have some time on his own to enjoy life. But when Rose asks him about her own time to enjoy, Troy discloses that he intends to go to the hospital to see Rose who went into labour early. Rose also tells him that Gabriel has been taken to the asylum because Troy signed papers granting permission for half of Gabriel's money from the government to go to Troy and half to the hospital. Troy denies signing any such paper but later realizes that he must have signed them thinking them to be rather the release form.

A phone call comes at this moment which is answered by Rose. The call was from the hospital informing that Alberta had died after giving birth to a girl. Troy confronts the imaginary Death. Troy dares Death to come to him and confront him "man to man".

Analysis

Much has changed in the Maxson household since the disclosure of Troy's affair with another woman. The cold and unemotional manner in which Rose talks to him, that too after months of not talking to each other, reveals the divide that has come between them. Troy, surprisingly, still tries to avoid the reality of the situation by pretending to Rose that he spends his time at Taylor's. Rose obviously knows better and finally Troy had to admit that he intends to go to see Alberta in the hospital. However, there are also instances when we feel sympathetic towards Troy. His inability, to read documents results in his brother being shifted to the asylum. During the climax of the play, Troy's illusionary world bursts when the phone call from the hospital discloses that Alberta died in childbirth, and Troy is now responsible for a baby girl. Ironically, Troy's attempts to escape from responsibility produced a huge responsibility in the shape of his baby.

Scene Three

Summary

This short scene is set three days after the previous scene. Troy has come home with an infant in his arms. There is moment of silence as he and Rose comes face to face. Rose turns her back on them. Troy sits on the porch with his baby and sings a lullaby. When Rose finally

comes out Troy makes a moving plea to her to accept the baby who as much his own as she and his sons. Rose accepts to take care of the baby saying that she must not suffer for the sins of her father.

Analysis

The picture of Troy in this scene is that of a helpless man with a burden on his shoulders. Troy sitting on the porch with the baby in his arms and singing a blues song about begging a train engineer to allow them a free ride is touching as well as symbolic. Troy is now homeless unless Rose takes pity on him and takes him in which would also be an act of granting a free ride to a man who has more than spent his chances for forgiveness.

Rose also makes a religious reference with her justification for accepting Troy's baby as her own child saying that the baby is innocent even though she was born out of a sinful partnership.

Scene Four

Summary

It is two months later. Lyons comes to return the twenty dollars he borrowed from Troy. Finding him not at home, he Keeps the money on a table and is about to leave when Cory enters. He apologizes for missing Cory's graduation ceremony and asks him to seek Troy's help to get a job.

Cory practices with the baseball, bat as Troy comes back. Cory leaves the yard and soon Rose too goes out with Troy's baby, Raynell. Troy gets upset that everybody goes out as he comes home. Rose says that she is going to the church for a bakesale and asks him not to wait for her.

Troy begins to sing to himself about an old dog named Blue. Bono comes to his house after a long time. Since Troy's promotion as a driver, they no longer work together. Troy is not very happy with his new job and is thinking about retiring. Troy invites Bono to stay and drink like old times, but Bono says that he plays dominoes every Friday with other men at Skinner's house. They both acknowledge how each man made good on his bet; Troy finished the fence for Rose and Bono bought Lucille the refrigerator. They part company promising to meet again soon.

Cory comes back and finds Troy sitting in the middle of the steps and singing to himself. He tries to go inside stepping over Troy who gets offended that Cory does not say "excuse ne". They pick up an argument with Troy demanding Cory to be more respectful towards him. Cory accuses Troy of doing nothing for him except create fear in his mind for him. He also reminds him of the wrong that he had done to Rose. Their argument takes a turn for the worse with each on the verge of attacking one another. Troy asks Cory to leave his house but the latter says that the house actually belonged to Uncle Gabriel. In the subsequent fight between the two, Troy pushes aside Cory and stands over him ready to swing his bat but stops himself. Cory walks out of the yard.

Troy again swings the baseball bat, taunting Death to try to face him. He is ready for death but he will fight hard when death comes.

Analysis

There is a perceptible change in Troy's relationship with Bono. Wilson highlights this change by contrasting the joyful camaraderie of the opening scene with the distance that has come between them in the

present. Bono now has new friends to pass time with than spending time drinking and talking to Troy. Troy has become lonelier with the passing of time. The promotion that he was seeking, and got, did not bring him much happiness' Instead he is now seen contemplating early retirement. Even at home Troy has not had much to cheer. His relationship with his wife and son had gone awry. Rose is largely indifferent. The simmering tension between him and Cory reaches a frightening crescendo with each bent on hiuing one another. In this argument and grappling with Cory, Troy displays a childish immaturity. It is ironic, yet understandable that Cory and Troy fail, to see eye-to-eye. It is ironic that both of them leave home under similar circumstances. They share hated for their respective fathers for taking away something from each of them that they treasured. Cory lost his college football opportunities, trust in his father and home, Troy lost his girlfriend in a traumatic beating and rape by his father, his trust in his father and his home.

Scene Five

Summary

The final scene of the play is set seven years later. This is the day of troy's funeral who has died of heart attack while swinging his baseball bat. His daughter, Raynell, is now seven years old, poking is the ground of her newly planted garden. Rose asks her to get dressed to go to the funeral.

Cory returns home dressed in his Marines uniform. Everyone at home is pleasantly surprised to see him. He is introduced to Ral'nell. Lyons who has also come for the funeral talks to him about his future plans. Lyons himself had broken up with Bonnie and was forced to

work in the workhouse after being caught, illegally cashing other people's checks. He remembers that troy always used to say to "take the crookeds with the straights".

Cory tells Rose that he does not want to attend Troy's funeral because he no longer wish to be associated with his father. Rose explains that not going to the funeral would not make him a man. She asks him to get over all the hard feelings he might be nurturing against Troy. She tells him that Troy always wanted the best for him even if some of his actions or thoughts may be wrong. Rose tells that she herself had compromised a lot in her life after marrying Troy. She even took someone else's daughter as her own.

Cory and Raynell compare their memories of troy as a father and sing Troy's blues song about the old dog named Blue. Meanwhile, Gabriel too comes from the asylum. He has his trumpet in his hand. He tells them that it is now time for St. Peter to open the gates of heaven. He tries to blow on his trumpet but no sound comes from it. Disappointed and hurt, Gabriel has a painful realization in his mind. He walks around, turning his frustration into a strange and eerie dance.

Analysis

Wilson presents the final scene of the play without its central character. Instead, all the other charcters like Rose, Bono and Lyons come together and share his memories. The most significant representation of Troy's legacy is the conversation between Cory and Raynell. When they sing Troy's father's song about the dog named Blue together, Cory forgives Troy because he witnesses the love and the lessons that Troy passed on to his children. Cory experiences the song as evidence that Troy's deeds were derived from what Troy knew in life.

The play ends in a somewhat unrealistic manner. The supposedly insane Gabriel pleads Heaven to open its gates for Troy. For all the taunting that Troy had with Death earlier in the play, it appears that Death had the final say.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Why, do you think, Rose wants a fence to be built around their yard?

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2. What is the new responsibility upon Troy's shoulder after the death of Alberta?

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3. Why does Rose agree to accept Troy's daughter from another woman?

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4. Can you find any significance of Troy's song about beggaing the train engineer for a free ride?

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5. Do you feel that is a change in Bono's relationship with Troy at this point in the play?

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6. What is the cause of Cory's falling apart with his father? Is there anything similar to what happened to Troy himself in his relationship with his father?

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7. Does Cory forgive Troy at the end? Why?

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2.5 SUMMING UP

Fences (1983) is the sixth of Wilson's ten-part *The Pittsburgh Cycle.* In his attempt to represent the African-American experience in America decade by decade, Wilson deals with the condition of the Blacks in the 1950s in this award winning play.

The central character of this play is a fifty-three year old African-American man named Troy Maxson. In his youth he was a talented baseball player but who could not make it to the Major League Baseball because the colour barrier was not yet broken. This is the grudge lifter. The play brings into focus his relationship with different people in his lives, particularly his wife Rose and his son Cory.

Wilson develops the character of Troy in the first half of the play. He comes across as a man who has a bitter past and lets that affect his present often rude with his wife and sons, Troy measures everything with discrimination that he had to suffer in life. However, behind that exterior there is also a touching side to his nature as is apparent in his responsibility towards his family and in his concern for his new born baby. The revelation of his affair with another woman changes the family dynamics. He becomes lonelier than before. After his death, however, people wh mattered to him share their memories about him.

The significance of the play's title becomes clear much later. Rose wants a fence around her yard because she wants to hold on to her family and prevent it from falling apart. Ironically, however, by the time the fence is built the family has already fallen apart. Rose is hardly on talking terms with him whereas Cory has walked a out on him.

2.6 MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss critically Wilson's plot construction in *Fences.*

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2. How do the two acts in Fences relate to each other?

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3. What role, do you think, other people play in Troy's life?

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UNIT - III

FENCES : TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

Contents

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous two units you were introduced to August Wilson and his most popular play, Fences. The present unit should help you to understand, and discuss, the various nuances of the play. With the aid of the information provided in this unit, you will be able to analyse Wilson's art of characterization with reference to the major characters in *Fences* read the play in relation to its themes study Wilson's use of motifs and symbols in the play.

3.1 MAJOR CHARACTERS

3.1.1 Troy Maxson

In Troy Maxson, Wilson has created a tragic protagonist whose bitter experiences of the past starts to affect the lives of those around him. Fences revolves around the relationships Troy shares with other people in his life Rose, Cory, Lyons, Raynell, Gabriel and Bono. His roles as husband, father, brother and friend from the crux of the play. Besides, Troy can also be seen as a representative of a generation of Blacks who faced some sort of racial discrimination in life.

Wilson, through an interesting back story, informs us about Troy's childhood. He was born to a poor sharecropper father who into further debt with every failure of his crop. The father took out his frustration on everyone at hand, perticularly his young son, Troy, and his wives. The violent streak that Troy demonstrates later in life can also be attributed to his uneasy relationship with his father. An ugly turn of events fractured this already torturous relationship. Troy who was beaten up by his father for trying to make out with a girl left devastated when he witnessed his father sexually assaulting the same girl. His torturous relations with his father, however, taught him one

thing- the value of work and the fact that a man must take responsibility for his family. He learns, as Lloyd Richards says, "respect for a home, the importance of owing land, and the value of an education because he doesn't have one".

Troy's thwarted dream of making it big in baseball makes him live in a self-created world of illusions. The conflict in the play is largely due to troy's inability to accept other people's choices when they differ from his own philosophy. He is opposed to Cory's decision to be a football prayer as well as Lyons, to be jazz musician. He fails to see, despite Rose's desperate efforts, that circumstances have changed since his own time. He even makes fun of Rose's seemingly harmless past time of playing a lottery game. Another example of Troy's reluctance to come out from the fictitious world in which he lives is his denial of his extramarital affair with Alberta. It is only the imminent crisis at home that forces him to reveal about his affair, first to Bono and later to his wife, to tragic consequences.

Despite the many shortcomings that one may find in his character, it can also be safety concluded that Troy really loves his family' His affection for Rose, though vulgar sometimes in its expression, is genuine. His lesson to Cory on the importance of taking responsibility for one's loved ones is admirable.

In a sense Troy provides a bridge to the Maxson family history in the south from which he has moved and to the effects slavery had and continues to have on generations of black rives. The south and the north define Troy's history and this duality drives a dividing line between him and his sons, Lyons and Cory, who grew up believing that they could achieve their dreams without any racial prejudice' Through his songs and story-telling, including the oft-repeated accounts of his struggle with Death and the Devil, Troy's character

serves as the family grit, a traditional role in African cultures as a paternal oral historian whose stories provide an unserstanding of the context of their loved ones' lives.

3.1.2 Rose Maxson

Rose is the perfect counterfoil to Troy's violent temper. Unlike Troy, she is a realist whose feet are firmly planted on ground. She not only fulfils her nomemaking role but also displays her religious side by going to the church regularly. Troy is not an easy man to live with, and yet she remain by his side for eighteen years. However, though she has to bear much of Troy's rude and, at times, vulgar behaviour, she does not come across as a feeble or weak woman. Instead, Rose makes her stand perfectly clear when the truth of Troy's infidelity comes out in the open. She stops talking to him for months and remains largely indifferent to him.

However, in accepting the innocent child as her own she displays great compassion. Her compassionate nature is also evident in her concern for Troy's mentally unstable brother, Gabriel. Even at the time of Troy's funeral she convinces Cory to forget about their earlier conflict and move on. Apparently she too has forgiven Troy for whatever wrong he has done to her.

The tittle of the play also comes from Rose's desire to have a fence built around her yard. While the immediate purpose of the fence is not directly stated, metaphorically it stands for her desire to hold on to her loved ones in moments of family crisis. The fence, she hopes, will keep her dear ones in while proventing outsiders from upsetting her domestic life.

Her unflinching support for Cory's decidion to play football

shows her understanding of the present day social situation, something that Troy fails to acknowledge. No doubt, it is Troy that the play is primarily about, but the role of Rose is hardly any lesser.

3.1.3 Cory Maxson

The teenage son of Troy and Rose, Cory plays an important part in the actio of the play. It is basically his struggles and conflicts with his father the focal point of the play. Like his father, Cory too excels in sports. He has great dreams for himself as recruiters are coming all the way to see him play.

His disagreements with Troy become apparent from the beginning itself. Despite Troy's repeated warnings, he continues with his football practice. He seems to be caught between his father's demands and his own dreams. His dilemma as presented by Wilson perhaps echoes the fate of many people of his generation. In his preference for a television to a proper roof over their heads, he does show some immaturity.

There are also instances in the play that reveal another side to his nature. His determination to fulfil his dream forces him to challenge and confront Troy. He almost comes to blows with his father when matters become serious. He comes of age the moment he leaves home. He returns home many months later as a US marine.

That Cory is otherwise a compassionate man becomes clear inhis concern for the mentally unstable Gabriel and by his acceptance of Raynell as his sister. In fact, the scene when Cory sits on the porch with Raynell and sings one of his father's songs is one of the most touching in the play.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What was the profession of Troy's father?

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2. Why did Troy leave his father's house?

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3. Why could Troy not make it to the Major League Baseball?

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4. With whom was Troy having an extra-marital affair? What its consequence?

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5. How did Rose react when she came to know of Troy's infidelity?

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6. What was Rose's attitude towards Gabriel and Troy's baby?

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7. What does it reveal about her character?

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8. Which sport did Cory play?

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9. What happens to him after he leaves home?

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3.2 THEMES AND TECHNIQUES

3.2.1 Major Themes

From your reading of the pray, you will gather that one of the themes Wilson employs here is the conflict in father-son relationship. The play presents four generations of African American people. Both Troy and Bono give accounts of their childhood in the south and their relationships with their fathers. Their often-painful memories provide a context for understanding the similarities and differences of the generations separating Troy and Bono from Lyons and Cory. Troy's father was an unsuccessful sharecropper who was responsible to look after eleven children and many wives. Troy grew up in awe of his disciplinarian father. But after the miserable incident in which Troy's father rapes the very girl that Troy himself was pursuing, his opinion about his father changes and he decides to leave home. This is the moment that he comes of age. However, the one attribute Troy respected and proudly inherited from his father was a sense of responsibility. Troy's father provided for eleven children, and Troy too became the sole breadwinner for his family.

Bono's father, on the other hand, never provided a providing role to Bono and his family. Bono describes his father as having "the walking Blues," a condition that prevented his father from staying in one place for long and moving frequently from one women to the next. Bono says his father, like many other African-Americans of his father's generation, was "searching out the New Land." Because of Bono's father's unreliable personality, Bono chose bot to father children himself for he did not want to abandon a child like his father.

Lyons and Cory, who belong to another feneration and grew up in a different social environment had, very different upbringings. Lyons grew up mostly without a father as troy was in jail during his

childhood. Therefore, he feels himself to be independent enough is make his own career choice as a musician. Troy's trait of being a responsible man does not rub on him as he feels no shame in borrowing money from Troy every week although he does return the money as promised.

Cory ends up leaving home in a similar conflict with Troy that Troy had with his father. He, too, lived under what he himself termed as his father's shadow who wanted to inculcate the sense of responsibility in his son. The long simmering tension between them finally results in a violent conflict following which Cory is forced to leave home. This is his coming of age. Theirs is the central conflict in the play and is resolved only after Troy's death.

Thus, the theme of father-son conflict occupies a central place in Fences, and is dealt with considerable finesse by Wilson. Another theme that Wilson applies in Fences is the burden of history. It is due to the conflicting nations of history that Troy and Cory engage in bitter disagreement over his future. Troy's potential as a baseball player was not allowed to fulfill, because the colour barrier was not broken in Major League Baseball during his time. Troy does not want Troy to experience the same hardship and disappointment that Troy felt trying to become a professional sports player, so he demands that Cory work after scholar instead of practicing with the football team. Troy's potential because it would mean accepting his own misfortune. Troy's perception of what is right and what is wrong for Cory, based on Troy's refusal to perceive a historical change in the acceptance of Blacks, tragically causes Cory to experience a disappointing fate. Similar to Troy's. Wilson's stated aim in writing the pray was to relate the African-American experience of the 1950s. Therefore, the historical perspective is another major theme that the play deals with.

In addition, by pitting Troy's illusory world against Rose's pragmatism, Wilson also shows the theme of survival in times of crisis. Rose and Troy handle their frustration and disappointment with their interwined lives differently. For instance, Troy proves through his story about his battle with Death that he is a dreamer and a believer in self-created illusions. To Troy, his struggle with Death was a actual wrestling match with a physical being. Rose, on the other hand, is more practical and swiftly attempts to bring Troy back to reality, explaining that Troy's story is based on an episode of pneumonia he had in July, 1941. Troy's failure to come to terms with reality ends tragically.

3.2.2 Motifs

Eilson employs many motifs in his play which lends a particular charm to the play. One of the oft-repeated motifs in the play is that of baseball and death. In fact, these two motifs are often used together by Wilson through his central protagonist Troy. In one of the early scenes of the play, Troy compares death to "a fastball on the outside comer." To Troy, a fastball on the outside comer was easy material for a home run. He feels that just as he has conquered baseball he has also overcome death many times. He knows he overcame pneumonia ten years ago, survived an abusive father and treacherous conditions in his adaptation to surviving in an urban environment. Troy's attitude toward death is proud and nonchalant as he says :

> Ain't nothing wrong with talking about death.
> That's part of life. Everybody gonna die. You gonna die, I'm gonna die. Bono's gonna die. Hell, we all gonna die. (Act One, Scene One)

Troy compares Death to an army that marched towards him in July, 1941, when he had pneumonia. Troy thinks he constantly has to be on guard

against Death's army. In his perception of Death, Troy mutates the form of Death many times, from a fastball to a sickle-carrying, devil-like figure. As the play progresses, Troy repeatedly merges his baseball metaphors with his Death rhetoric.

Characters in *Fences,* particularly Rose, frequently employ the motif of seeds, flowers, plants, and related actions like growing, taking root, planting, and gestation- in both their language and actions. In Act Two, Scene Five, Rose description of her life is a metaphor of planting :

> I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams... and I buried them inside you. I planted a seed and watched and prayed over it. I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom. And it didn't take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn't never gonna bloom. But I held on to you, Troy.

Yet another motif that Wilson uses is the language and atitude of the blues. *Fences* is structured somewhat like a blues song similar to the role of, repeated lyrics and melody of a blues song, Wilson's characters display changes in their life and a changed attitude towards life by repeating scenarios in which they act. For instance, Friday, Troy's payday, is the setting of three scenes. By mirroring the situation in which events in the pray take place, we can observe the change that occurs from one instance to the next. Wilson's plays are extensions of the history of blues in African American culture. Troy sings two blues songs, one, in Act Two, Scene Three, "Please Mr. Engineer let a man ride the line", and in Act Two, Scene Four, "Hear it Ring! Hear it Ring!" Rose also sings a song in Act one, Scene Two, "Jesus be a fence all around me every day." Wilson invented

these lyrics but based them on themes and symboles in African American traditional, spiritual, gospel, and blues songs.

3.2.3 Symbols

Wilson makes use of various symbols in contributes to the overall beauty of it. The most the play which pertinent of all symbols is obviously fences, from which the play also derives its title. It is a figurative device which represents the relationships that are formed and break in Troy's backyard. Rose wants a fence built around her yard. The meaning of this initially escapes Troy and Cory until Bono explains to them the symbolic significance of fences:

> Some people build fences to keep people out... and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you.
> (Act Two, Scene One)

Fences, for Rose, stand for her love and desire to hold on to her family at a challenging moment in their lives. Troy and Cory are increasingly drifting apart, and she wants to keep them together. Troy, however, works on the fence only half-heartedly. The fence appears finished only in the final scene of the play, when Troy dies and the family reunites.

The Devil is another symbol that is used by Wilson in the play more than once. Troy puts the Devil, or Death, as the main character of his exaggerated stories that he tells his family and friends. His association of the Devil as a harbinger of death represents his struggle to survive the trials of his life. Many scenes in the play end with Troy's soliloquies to Death and the Devil.

Throughout the play Wilson puts many songs of the blues variety.

The blues have over the years expressed the pain and anguish of the Blacks. One such song that Troy sings in the play while sitting in the porch of his home with his newborn child is about begging a train engineer to let him have a free ride. By singing this particular song. Troy acknowledges that his actions have caused upheaval in the lives of his loved ones. Troy sings, "Please Mr. Engineer let a man ride the line," but in other words he is crying out to his wife, Rose to let him back into her home.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Why did the young Troy leave his father's home?

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2. What, according to Bono, is "the walking blues"?

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3. What historical change took place in American sports since Troy's time?

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4. Give one instance of Wilson's use of the baseball motif.

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5. What do fences symbolize?

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3.3 SUMMING-UP

In this unit you have studied a few critical topics relating to *Fences*. One of the most important issues is Wilson's art of characterization. The play revolves around the actions of its central protagonist, a fifty-three year old African-American man called Troy Maxson. Born to a failed sharecropping farmer, Troy had a difficult childhood in his relations with his father which ultimately culminated in his leaving his father's home. Later he encounters disappointment in fulfilling his dream of playing baseball in the Major League because of racial prejudices. His frustrations result in him living in a self created world of illusions that eventually disturbs his domestic life. His wife, Rose, is another important character. She is the foil to Troy as she fulfuils not only her role as a housewife but also appears a strong minded woman herself. Another important character in the play, and one who contributes to the conflict, is Cory. An otherwise compassionate young man, Cory also shows that he can be quite aggressive in his behaviour as Troy found out. You have also gone through the technical aspects of the pray in this unit. Wilson deals with the themes of father-son relationship, burden of history and survival in times of crisis. Besides, he also uses different motifs and symbols that enhance the effect of the pray. Death, baseball, seeds, planting and the blues are some of the motifs in the play. Similarly, a fence is the symbol that rends the pray its title.

3.4 MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss, critically, Wilson's art of characterization.

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2. Write a note on the major themes employed by Wilson in this play.

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3. What are the various motifs and symbols used by the playwright in *Fence*?

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

This block on Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Names Desire will introduce you to the background and development of American theatre from eighteenth century to twentieth century. After reading the first part of the block you will be familiarized with the way American theatre has developed down the ages and you will also be introduced to some American dramatists of renown of the past who laid the foundation of American Drama. Your would notice that theatre was not the most popular form of writing during the 18th and 19th centuries in America, it became a dominant form only in the twentieth century when playwrights like Eugene O'Neil, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, August Wilson, and Tennessee Williams contributed substantially to the development of American theatre with their great plays. These dramatists gave American theatre the glory it enjoys now. There is a discussion on Tennessee Williams, the playwright in question, which would give you some information on his life and the other works he has written. This will help you in understanding the playwright and his style of writing in a better way.

Modern American drama was born out of a sense of an all pervasive change that affected almost every spheres of American life. This change began in the last part of the 19th century and continued all through the 20th century. Industrial Revolution, invasion of immigrants, two World Wars impacted the American society and culture in a very profound manner. All these brought about a gradual change in American society from a primarily agrarian society to a predominantly urban one. Twentieth century American dramatists made an honest attempt to portray this traumatic socio-cultural metamorphosis in their plays. American plays of twentieth century are replete with the themes of socio-cultural change and its effect on life. American playwrights write about the increasingly isolated individual from his/her traditional moor because of a socio-political realignment. Writers like Eugene O' Neil, Arthur Miller, August Wilson and Tennessee Williams forcefully presented issues affecting the American society like – self deception, spiritual displacement and sexual promiscuity. Plays dealing with such themes

demanded a new form of innovative visual presentation. The techniques of stream of consciousness was used to present simultaneous experience, and new ideas of expressionism, impressionism, surrealism came in handy for the playwrights in presenting these themes. Stage crafts like lighting, music, visual props, and set design became an integral part of dramatic scripts. Dramatists became more focused on characterization, punctuating dramatic tensions, reinforcing theme to exert a more profound intensity in presentation. Tennessee Williams, one of the most gifted and innovative modern American playwrights, showcases many of the influences and trends that characterize modern American drama. Williams' themes usually revolve around the old South's lost aristocracy in conflict with invading materialism of the reconstructed South.

A Streetcar Named Desire was published in 1947 and it depicted two contrasting American societies and two culturally opposing individuals. On one hand there was the old southern aristocratic world of the lost past and the other the new emerging liberal America. The two individuals are Blanche DuBois, and Stanley Kowalski, one represents the old south's lost aristocracy and the other a polish immigrant belonging to the new liberal America. Blanche refuses to come out of the cocoon of falsity she had built around her. She lives in a shell of illusion. These two opposing characters face each other and a palpable tension gradually builds up. The gossamer of lies of Blanche gets burst when cruel past revisits her present driving her to destitution.

The second part of the block discusses the textual issues related to A Streetcar named Desire. An attempt is made to familiarize you with various issues of the play through discussions on the plot, characters, scene wise summary and analysis of the scenes. The second part of the block will also acquaint you with symbols, themes, and motif of the play. While reading this block you are expected to focus on the questions that are asked to you in the 'Stop to consider' part. At the end of the block you will find some general questions which need to be answered by after a through reading of the block. Hope this block would acquaint you to the American theatre at large and Tennessee Williams" A Streetcar Named Desire in particular.

UNIT – IV
History of American Theatre

Structure

1.0 OBJECTIVE

After reading the unit on fiction now you are going to be introduced to American drama. This unit will help you to :

- Outline the background of American theatre
- Trace the development of American drama
- Enlist the American playwrights down the ages
- Give on overview of the twentieth century American drama
- Name of the twentieth century major American dramatists, Tennessee Williams in particular

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Let us introduce you to a brief history of the theatre tradition in America. Theatre in America started quite late and inadequately because of puritan prejudice on religious grounds. Whatever plays appeared in American stages were either adaptations of famous novels or improvisation of foreign plays especially Shakespearian. However, Theatre in America can be traced back to the latter half of the 17th Century, when attempts were being made to stage plays in some of the less Puritanical colonies of America. The first actual theatres were built at Williamsburg in 1716, and in New York in 1732. But they were closed down in short span of time. By 1750, Philadelphia and New York turned out to be two main centres of American theatrical tradition. In these two cities there were companies which commercially produced and staged plays. But in the rest of the American colonies strict Puritanical public code restricted the development of theatre. The arrival of professional English players in Philadelphia in 1749 and the staging of Cato in 1749, and Colly Cibbers' version of Richard III at New York in 1750 somewhat changed the public perception about theatre. The arrival of the English actor/manager William Hallam who formed a joint stock company with his brother, Lewis Hallam further gave a much needed

boost to the development of theatre in America. Lewis Hallam built a theatre in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1752. He built another theatre in New York City in 1754 and he also travelled to all the thirteen colonies with his troupe staging plays. At Williamsburg he had staged the first play The Merchant of Venice in 1752. Later he faced stiff opposition from puritan fanatics and left America for Jamaica, West Indies. He is credited with the birth of professional American theatre. After the death of Lewis Hallam his son Lewis Hallam Jr. opened a theatre in New York and staged the play The Prince of Parthia by Thomas Godfrey in 1767, the first professionally produced play in America.

Let us now study the development of American theatre in each century up to the twentieth century.

Check your Progress :

1. Give a brief background to the beginning of theatre in America.

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2. Why did America lag behind in the development of drama than rest of Europe?

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1.2 18th century American Theatre

Most of the colonies in 18 th century adopted laws forbidding performance of plays and banning plays. Despite such draconian laws some playwrights tried to write plays for the stage. Robert Hunter wrote *Androboros* in 1714 which is regarded as the first play printed in America. However the first play to deal with an American theme was *Ponteach or the Savages of America* by Robert Rogers. During the Revolutionary Period (1775-1781) the American dramatists got a much needed boost. Dramatists like Mercy Otis Warren and Colonel Robert Munford both of them wrote satirical plays and Hugh Henry Brackenridge wrote plays on heroism. The post-war period (after 1783) saw the birth of the American social comedy which found its way in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast.*

During the war years, professional theatre was suspended as most of the theatres were taken over by the British Military and used to present shows for the garrisons. After the war years when America attained freedom from British colonialism in 1776, George Washington led government adopted a liberal attitude toward theatres and repealed many restrictive laws thereby facilitating staging of plays. As peace prevailed in America many talented British actors too migrated to America in search of better career options and settled there which went a long way in further developing the theatre in America. However, during all these years, theatres in America mostly staged popular Shakespearian plays or the Restoration Comedies. By the end of the 18th century growth in population brought in more companies into this theatre business. In 1794, Thomas Wignell built the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, modeled after the Theatre Royal at Bath (in England) which could accommodate two thousand spectators and was considered a most modern theatre.

Some of the major playwrights of the period were:

1.2.1 Mercy Otis Warren (1728–1814) was a diehard revolutionary and a political writer and propagandist of the American Revolution. In the eighteenth century America, there were very few women to write about subjects such as politics and war as they were considered to be in the domain of men. Warren published poems and plays in support of liberty, democracy and independence for the American colonies during the years of revolution. She actively participated in the debate over drafting of the constitution of the U.S exceptional for a woman at that time. She, in 1805, authored the three volumes History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution. This was also the first history of the Revolution authored by a woman. She married James Warren in 1757 who was a distinguished politician of that period and was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives. He encouraged his wife Mercy to write. Her play The Adulateur (1772) was a satire on the then Governor of Massachusetts Thomas Hutchinson. She was one of the most influential revolutionary writers of that period. Her two plays The Sack of Rome and The Ladies of Castille deal with her pet themes like liberty, social and moral values.

1.2.2 Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748 – 1816) was a multi-talented person who apart from being a Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court was also an American writer. He was a Scottish migrant and actively participated in Revolutionary War as a chaplain delivering sermons to the soldiers. He started the *United States Magazine* in Philadelphia in 1778. He founded the *Pittsburg Gazette* in 1786. He was elected to the Pennsylvania state assembly and there he fought for the adoption of the federal constitution. His satirical novel *Modern Chivalry* published in 1815 was compared with Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. His two well known plays were *The Battle of Bunker Hill* (1776) and *The Death of General Montogomery at the Seige of Quebec* (1777).

1.2.3 Royall Tyler (1757–1826) was born in Boston, Massachusetts. He was a dramatist and Jurists. He well known in the stage circle as the author of the American play *The Contrast* (1787) and published *The Algerine Captive* (1797). He wrote several legal tracts, six plays, a musical drama, two long poems, a semi fictional travel narrative, *The Yankee in London* (1809), and a few essays.

1.2.4 William Dunlap (1766–1839) was considered by most as the 'Father of American Theatre'. He was a producer, playwright, and actor, as well as a historian. Two of the most famous theatres of New York were managed by him. He produced more than sixty plays mostly adopted or translated from French or German works. But some of his plays were also original and were based on American themes and characters. His three volumes *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (1834) is considered as a treasure trove of information about artistic life in the colonial and federal periods. Some of his most well-known plays are *The Father* (1789), *Andre* (1798), *The Stranger* (1799), *False Shame* (1799), *The Virgin of the Sun* (1800), *Memoirs of George Frederick Cooke* (1813), *A Trip to Niagara* (1828), and *History of American Theater* (1832).

Cheek Your Progress :

1. What were the obstructions American dramatists of 18th century faced while promoting drama?

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1.3 19th Century American Theatre

In 1861 the outbreak of The American Civil War proved a temporary setback to the theatre. As due to security problem mobility among people in North and South America was curtailed. However, this setback quickly turned into an opportunity as the American people sought distraction from the hostilities in theatre. The 1880s in America saw the rise of the powerful theatrical companies, and this resulted in the slow death of small town based theatre groups. With the rapid development and expansion of the road and railway networks across America it became considerably easier for the theatre companies to tour places with the entire production, including its cast. This proved to be more economical and now even small towns could afford a theatre house. The use of electric lighting brought about revolutionary changes to scenery styles and theatre interiors. At this point American theatre technique reached a much developed stage. In the beginning of the 19th century as the population spread to the West so did the theatre. Since surface transportation was troublesome the theatre companies used the waterways of the rivers. Showboats started plying the Mississippi river frequently. They set up stages on boats and barges and travelled to towns staging their plays. However, subsequently playhouses were constructed in western towns too. The first playhouse was built in St. Louis in 1837 and Chicago in 1847.

Mid-nineteenth century saw an unprecedented boom in population in America, especially in the cities of the East Coast. It acted as a boon for the theatres as more population meant more spectators. Even during Civil War the American theatre remained mostly unaffected or moderately affected by disturbances. At this point one of the most popular plays was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel in the same name by George Aiken. This play singularly moulded public opinion against slavery in North America. Apart from

this there was no standard quality plays written or staged in America though quantitatively theatre houses had multiplied under the pressure of population boom. During the 19th century American theatre presented vulgar plays full of violence and presentation of women as sex symbols and African-Americans and other minorities as racially inferior beings and the theatres came to be known as places of 'evil repute', writes Jessie Bond, an actress of that era in her memoirs. The assassination of Abraham Lincoln by a popular theatre actor John Wilkes Booth bears testimony to this.

However, during this period majority of plays were either imitations or adaptations of European melodrama and romantic tragedies but native in content. Some of these plays presented American heroism to appeal to the popular sense of nationalism. In the post war phase came to hold a position of respect than was available in the pre-war period. Mostly farces and melodramas remained popular among theatre-goers. A new emphasis on realism was found which was adopted in melodrama as well as comedy. The American realism was not similar to the European realism of Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekov, Leo Tolstoy and others. It was rather a combination of scenic realism with a less romantic view of life that conveyed the cultural turmoil of the time.

Realism was introduced twenty years later in America than the rest of Europe. In American drama realism began as a revolt against the excessive dose of melodramatic and romantic style. The problem was that realistic playwrights required a realistic stage, realistic direction, a style of realistic acting, and last but not the least, an audience ready to receive realistic plays. None of it was present in 19th century America. All through the 19th century minstrels, burlesque, farce and melodramatic plays remained popular. There was no change in public taste and when the rest of Europe was preparing for the new realism in drama introduced by playwrights like Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekov, Leo Tolstoy and others,

America remained a country still obsessed with its melodramatic plays in which white actors whose faces were smeared with burnt cork sang and danced to banjos. The other type of plays popular in America during the 19th century was the plays of Shakespeare and adaptations of famous novels. But they were poorly presented, poorly directed and poorly acted, qualitatively of poor standard. The growth of theatre houses was quantitative only. In this background the following playwrights operated.

Now let us discuss some of the prominent playwrights, theatre producers and directors of this period who contributed to the growth of American drama in the 19th century.

1.3.1 George Washington Parke Custis (1781–1857) was the step-grandson of United States first President George Washington. He was a nineteenth-century American writer, orator, and agricultural reformer. Two of Custis's plays, *The Indian Prophecy; or Visions of Glory* (1827) and *Pocahontas;* or, *The Settlers of Virginia* (1830), were published. Other plays include *The Rail Road* (1828), *The Eighth of January, or, Hurra for the Boys of the West!* (1830), *North Point,* or, *Baltimore Defended* (1833), and *Montgomerie*, or, *The Orphan of a Wreck* (1836).

1.3.2 James Nelson Barker (1784–1858) was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and was a soldier in the American army and a playwright of substantial repute. When peace returned in 1814 he entered civil life. He wrote ten plays five of which are now available in print. After getting elected as the Mayor of Philadelphia he stopped writing. He returned to theatre in 1824 with is last play *Superstition or The Fanatic Father.* Some of his well known plays are— *Tears and Smiles* (1807), *The Embargo or What News?* (1808), *The Indian Princess or La Belle Sauvage* (1808). It was the first play by an American about American

Indians; *How to Try a Lover* (1817) which was an adaptation of the French picaresque novel *La folie espagnole.*

1.3.3 John Howard Payne (1791–1852) was born in New York City and was an actor, poet, playwright, and author who had most of his theatrical career and success in London. From is early childhood he showed great interest in theatre and at the age of 14 published a journal of theatre criticism *The Thespian Mirror.* He wrote his first play, *Julia: or the Wanderer, a comedy in five acts.*

1.3.4 John Brougham (1814–1880) was born at Dublin and was an Irish-American actor and dramatist. He was sent to Dublin University and there he obtained classical learning. While in Dublin University he showed interest in theatre and acting. Subsequently he became acquainted with Madame Vestris, a renowned actress of that time pushed him into the world of theatre. In 1831 he became a member of Madame Vestris's company and started writing plays and also he played small roles in plays. He migrated to the United States in 1842. There he joined a theatre company and wrote several comedies like *Met-a-mora; or the Last of the Pollywogs,* a parody. Two of his well-known plays are— *Better Late Than Never, Much Ado About a Merchant of Venice.*

1.3.5 James A. Herne (1839 –1901), was born in New York and was an American actor and playwright. Herne was considered the first to incorporate realism into American drama. He was the first to deviate from the 19th century dramatic trend of romantic and melodramatic drama. But his plays did not find favour with the audience of that time and faded into oblivion. But he deeply influenced American drama so far as depicting complex social realities. His play *Margaret Fleming* (1890) is considered to have begun the modern American drama. His first successful play *Heart*

of Oak (1879) was not a great financial success. His other plays are— *The Minute Man* (1886), *Drifting Apart* (1888), *Shore Acres* (1893), *Sag Harbor* (1900). Kenneth MacGowan and William Melnitz, in their book, *The Living Stage,* tell us that James A. Herne "went further than MacKaye in simplicity and naturalness. In 1890 and 1892 he wrote two plays that were ahead of their time," *Margaret Fleming,* which "dealt seriously and psychologically with a cultured American woman, and about a Southerner who opposed slavery. His comedies, *Shore Acres* and *Sag Harbor* were also better characterized than the run-of-the mill farcical comedy-dramas of the times.

1.3.6 James Morrison Steele MacKaye (1842 –1894) was a playwright, actor and theatre manager. He wrote about thirty plays and was considered, like Herne, as a representative of the changing trends in American drama. He too incorporated the realism and naturalistic portrayals in his plays. His first play was *Hazel Kirke* (1880). He was credited with many inventions which brought about great technological changes into the stagecraft of that period. Some of his better known plays are— *The Twins* (1876), *Won at last* (1877), *Through the Dark* (1878), *A Fool's Errand.* Steele MacKaye's *Hazel Kirke,* ran for a record 486 performances in New York in 1880.

1.3.7 David Belasco (1853–1931) was a producer of plays, a playwright and stage director. He was born in San Francisco, California to Jewish parents. He got an opportunity to act and serve as a stage manager in New York in 1882 and by 1895 established himself as a successful theatre producer. He was closely associated with the American theatre world from 1884 to 1930 during which period he wrote, directed and produced more than one hundred Broadway plays including *Heart of Oak, The Heart of Maryland.* With the staging of these successful plays Belasco

was regarded as the 'Bishop of Broadway', one of the most powerful theatre personalities of the era. Belasco was credited with bringing in naturalism to the American stage. He was also known for introducing advance lighting techniques and use of colour on stage to set the right mood.

1.3.8 Clyde Fitch (1865 –1909) was born in New York. He wrote over 60 plays ranging from social comedies and farces to melodrama and historical dramas. His first work to be noticed was *Beau Brummell* (1890). His other play *Masked Ball,* an adaption of Alexander Bisson's *Le Veglione,* was a great success in 1900. His plays like *Nathan Hale* (1898), *The Climbers* (1901), *The Girl with the Green Eyes* (1902), *The Woman in the Cases* (1905) were popular in America as well as in England.

Check Your Progress :

1. Why no great drama was produced during the 19th century?

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2. Who were the two dramatists who attempted to introduce realism into American drama?

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1.4 TWENTIETH CENTURY DRAMA

Twentieth century American drama cannot be discussed independent of the earlier centuries and their influences. 19th century

drama chiefly dealt with two dominant themes— evils of alcoholism and evils of slavery. Harriet Becheer Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ran for record performances and it was considered the single most cause of moulding public opinion against slavery in 19th century. Other than a few imitations and adaptations there was no play worth mentioning published or staged in America during the 19th century. Barring, of course, the plays of MacKaye and J. Herne, who had tried hard to inject realism into American drama, the overwhelming wave of romantic and melodramatic plays sunk at their attempts. When realism was already introduced in Europe in the last two decades of 19th century, America remained oblivious of this literary development. Individual characters were reduced to types; everything of the stage was made to look like fairy- tale world rather than resembling the world of the common people. Realist plays found it very difficult to find audiences when all around them was loud music of romantic convention. Twentieth century American drama found itself in this situation which needed a complete change of attitude of the audience to realist plays. One theatrical group, the Provincetown Players with their Playwright's Theatre promoted the works of Eugene O'Neill, who is aptly termed as the father of serious twentieth century drama. O'Neill was the main catalyst between European influences and American stage. His powerful plays later became learning grounds for playwrights like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and August Wilson. As a result of the splendid contribution by Eugene O'Neill during the interim period between the two World Wars American drama gained its much needed maturation. Influenced by O'Neill, Susan Glaspell used the technique of expanding realism in her *Trifles,* Elmer Rice borrowed more heavily from German Expressionism as in *The Adding Machine.* Other distinct movements during this period include folk drama and regionalism as Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* and the return of the poetic drama as

in Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset.* Along with import of European concept of realism and naturalism into American drama, it was also important to reform stagecraft which was so important to the presentation of the play. Thus, stagecraft went through a sea change and plays were staged where many scenes could be shown simultaneously.

The 1940s brought in to focus the African-American theatre in the form of the American Negro Theatre (ANT) founded by Abram Hill based in Harlem. Some of the better known plays staged by this group were—Theodore Brown's *Natural Man* (1941), Abram Hills *Walk Hard* (1944), Owen Dodson's *Garden of Time* (1945).

At the same time the economic crisis of the Great Depression led to the growth of protest drama as seen in Clifford Odets *Waiting for Lefty.* The Great Depression brought about massive social change and it had a profound influence on the theatre of that time especially Arthur Miller. The American drama of that time took up a social role identifying with immigrants and the unemployed. During this period many controversial plays such as *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis and *The Cradle will Rock* by Marc Blitzstein were staged and appreciated. In contrast to the stark and grim reality of the period there were also some comic plays like *Personal Appearance* (1934) which was also successfully performed.

The high stature American drama achieved between the War years continued into the post World War-II period as towering figures like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller emerged as bright stars in the dramatic firmament of America. The musical theatre form too matured. The other key dramatist of the age are— William Inge, Arthur Laurent and Paddy Chayefsky in the 50s, Arthur Kopit, Jack Gelber and Edward Albee of the 60s and the maturation of the black drama through Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka was also achieved during this phase.

In the 1960s many playwrights continued to produce new works. The growth of ethnic pride movements led to more success by dramatists from racial minorities, such as black playwrights Doughlas Turner Ward, Charles Fuller, George C. Wolfe and August Wilson. After going through this study of twentieth century background of American drama let us now study the individual playwrights who produced great plays and were considered as iconic personalities so far as modern American drama is concerned.

Check Your Progress :

1. Present a brief survey of 20th century background of American drama.

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1.5 MAJOR 20TH CENTURY PLAYWRIGHTS

1.5.1 Eugene Gladstone O'Neill (October 16, 1888 – November 27, 1953) was born in Times Square in a room in Barret Hotel to Irish immigrant parents. He was the first to introduce techniques of realism into American drama His plays were among the first to use vernacular American speech as dialogues and delineate marginalized characters of the society. His protagonists usually struggle to keep their hopes and aspirations alive in an adverse surrounding, but ultimately slip into disillusionment and despair. His plays present a substantial degree of tragedy and personal pessimism. O'Neill was sent to Princeton University for one year but he left the university without completing

his course. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis and later admitted into a sanatorium where he devoted himself to play writing. He got involved with Provincetown Players in mid- 1916 and in 1920 his first play *Beyond the Horizon* got published. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama. In the same year his second play *The Emperor Jones* ran successfully on Broadway. His other plays *Anna Christie* (1922), *Desire under the Elms* (1924), *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), and his only comedy *Ah, Wilderness* got published. In 1936 he received the Nobel Prize for literature. In 1946 after a long pause *The Iceman Cometh* was published. Towards the end of his life, during severe bouts of Parkinson disease he wrote three autobiographical plays— *The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey Into Night,* and *Moon for the Misbegotten.*

1.5.2 Arthur Asher Miller (October 17, 1915 – February 10, 2005) was born in Harlem of Polish-Jewish immigrants and was a prominent modern playwright and essayist. His most well known plays include *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1947), *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge* (1955-56). Miller's father was a rich and respected cloth manufacturer. But during the Great Depression, the family lost everything. As a teenager Miller had to do a variety of menial jobs to earn money. He graduated from University of Michigan in journalism and worked as a journalist. It was at this time that he wrote his first play *No Villain*. Miller took admission in a play writing seminar to learn the intricacies of play writing. In 1937 Miller wrote *Honors Dawn* for which he received the Avery Hopwood Award. In 1940 Miller wrote *The Man Who Had All the Luck* which won for him the Theatre Guilds National Award. In 1948 Miller started writing *Death of a Salesman* and completed it within six weeks. This play till today is considered a classic of Miller and won him the coveted Pulitzers Prize. He was suspected to

have links with the Communist Party which was at that time considered as un-American activity; he had to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committees. In 1953 he completed *The Crucible,* his most frequently produced work. In 1956 Miller's verse drama *A View from the Bridge* opened on Broadway along with another play of his *A Memory of Two Mondays.* The next year Miller added one more Act to *A View from the Bridge.*

In 1964 Miller produced his next play *After the Fall* which was based on his experiences during his marriage to Marylyn Monroe, his second wife. The same year Miller produced another play *Incident at Vichy.* He was elected the first American President of PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists). During this period Miller wrote the family drama *The Price.* Much of his time in 1970 Miller spent experimenting with the theatre and wrote many one Act plays like *Fame* and *The Reason Why.* In 1978 he published his *Collected Essays.* In the introduction to this book he has articulated his views on the theory of tragedy. During 1990s Miller wrote three new plays— *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991), *The Last Yankee* (1992), and *Broken Glass* (1994). Miller's last play was *Finishing the Picture* (2004) and in 2005 he died of multiple organ failure in Roxbury, Connecticut. Arthur Miller is regarded as one of the greatest playwrights of twentieth century America. As a dramatist Miller has indelibly carved his name in the American psyche.

1.5.3 Edward Franklin Albee (March 12, 1928) is the adopted son of Reed A. Albee, the wealthy son of vaudeville magnate Edward Franklin Albee-II. He owned several theatres. This brought young Albee intimately close to theatre. He was sent to various schools but he did not continue in any and he was admitted into Trinity College but from there also he was expelled in 1947 on the charge of not attending classes and refusing to attend compulsory Chapel. He first won recognition

with his one-act play *The Zoo Story* which was staged in Berlin along with Samuel Beckett's *Krappe's Last Tape*. This won him much acclaim and he began to be counted along with the other playwrights of the movement called the Theatre of the Absurd. He, through his plays, forcefully brought into focus the pointlessness, sense of alienation and absurdity of human life in the American context. Albee is best known for his plays *The Zoo Story* (1958), *The Sandbox* (1958) *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). Albee makes a scathing attack on the foundation of American values by remaining outside the society as an impartial observer. More than any other American artist Albee has repeatedly forced us to look into the gap between man's environment and inner self.

1.5.4 August Wilson (April 27, 1945 – October 2, 2005) was born in Hill District of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania to Frederick August Kittel,(father) a Sudeten-German immigrant, and Daisy Wilson (mother), an African-American cleaning woman. He has passed childhood in which his father remained mostly absent. He wrote under his mother's surname. As an African-American he frequently encountered atrocities and discrimination on many occasions during his period of struggle. He dropped out of school and later decided to become a writer. He studied many African – American writers like Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and others before starting writing plays.

August Wilson's best known plays are— *Fences* (1985) which won Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award. *The Piano Lesson* (1990), Pulitzer Prize, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone.*

The Pittsburg Cycle, also referred to as the 'Century Cycle', consists of ten plays, nine of which are set in Pittsburg Hill District an African-American neighborhood. Wilson wrote one play corresponding to one decade of twentieth century. The plays that belonged to this Cycle are—

1900- *Gems of the Ocean* (2003)

1910- *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988)

1920- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984)

1930- *The Piano Lesson* (1990)

1940- *Seven Guitars* (1995)

1950- *Fences* (1987)

1960- *Two Trains Running* (1991)

1970- *Jitney* (1982)

1980- *King Hedley II* (1999)

1990- *Radio Gulf* (2005)

1.5.5 Thomas Lanier "Tennessee" Williams III (March 26, 1911–February 25, 1983) was in Columbus, Mississippi, the second child of Edwina and Cornelius Coffin Williams. His father was a hard drinking, travelling shoe salesman who most of the time remained away from home. His mother Edwina was a typical 'southern belle'. Her behavior was most of the time hysterical. Tennessee William's early childhood passed in a parsonage in Mississippi. From 1929 to 1931 he studied in University of Missouri in Columbia where he enrolled himself in journalism. He remained as aloof type of a boy all through these years. His father took him out of the school and put him in a job in a shoe company. Williams did not like that job and within three years left the job. In 1936 Williams took admission in Washington University in St. Louis. He graduated with a B.A. degree in English from University of Iowa.

The young playwright struggled in late 1930s as most of his initial plays were not well received. In the winter of 1944–45, his play *The Glass Menagerie* was staged in Chicago and received good reviews. This play became instant hit even in New York during its Broadway run. The play tells the story of a young man, Tom, hisdisabled sister, Laura, and their controlling mother Amanda, who

tries to make a match between Laura and a gentleman caller. His next play *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947) established Williams' reputation as a great playwright. During the eleven years between 1948 to 1959 seven of his plays were staged on Broadway— *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Orpheus Descending* (1957), *Garden District* (1958), and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959).

He reigned over the American theatrical world for over four decades from the 40s to the 70s in the twentieth century and virtually received all the top theatrical awards for his works of drama. His The Rose Tattoo received Tony Award for best play in 1951. *A Street Car Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* received Pulitzer awards for drama in 1980 and he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The decade of seventies brought turmoil and theatrical failure for Williams. He suffered various ailments due to his alcoholism and had to be frequently admitted to hospitals. Finally on 25th February 1983 he was found dead in a room in 'Elysee Hotel' in New York at the age of 71.

Tennessee Williams always attempted to portray the struggle of his characters who are idealists trapped in an adverse brutal world. In his later works he developed variations on this theme with varying success.

Let us now get familiar with some of his other plays before going to study *A Street Car Named Desire* which would give us some idea about his theatrical presentations of other themes.

1.6 MAJOR PLAYS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

1.6.1 The Glass Menagerie

The Glass Menagerie was Williams' first successful play and with its performance he went on to become one of America's most highly regarded playwrights.

This is a play about the Wingfield family in which Williams

traces the effect of illusion upon the individual in adverse situations by exploring the physical and psychological state of the character. The play has four main characters— Amanda, Laura, Jim, and Tom. The play is based on one of Williams' short stories "Portrait of a Girl in Glass".

The play begins with an introduction by Tom, the narrator protagonist, to the audience that it is a memory play based on his recollections of his mother Amanda and sister Laura.

Amanda is deserted by her husband long time back and now she has to bring up her two children Tom, the son and Laura, the elder daughter. In her destitute like condition, Amanda ironically craves for the illusions and comforts she remembers as a southern belle of the past. She is concerned for her daughter Laura, who has a crippled foot and is sunk in a feeling of insecurity about the outside world. Tom supports the family financially by working in a warehouse. He is thoroughly fed up with the monotony of his boring life and finds an escape in watching movies in cheap cinemas at all hours during night. Amanda, as a concerned mother, is obsessed with finding a suitor for Laura, who spends most of her time with her collection of little glass animals. One day Tom brings home a colleague of his home named Jim. Seeing this man, Amanda's hope of finding a suitable suitor for Laura is enkindled. Laura recognizes Jim as the man she loved in her High School days and has been thinking about him ever since. Jim and Laura are left alone by candlelight in the living room after a long evening. Since there was a power cut they waited for electricity to be restored. During this meeting Jim reveals that he is already engaged to be married, and he leaves. During their long scene together, Jim and Laura have shared a quiet dance, and he accidentally brushes against the glass menagerie, knocking the glass unicorn to the floor and breaking its horn off. After Amanda comes to know of Jim's engagement to another girl, she bursts out at Tom blaming him for the arrangement, wastage and

expenditure on another girl's fiancé. She presumed that Tom knew of Jim's engagement and played a cruel joke on the mother and the daughter. She lashes out at Tom saying that he is never bothered about his unmarried, crippled sister and abandoned mother; rather he is always obsessed with his movies and own selfish entertainment. She shouts at Tom "Just go, go, go — to the movies!". At the end of the play, as Tom narrates, it becomes clear that he leaves his home soon afterwards and never returns. The play ends on an intense note of sadness with the final speech of Tom, in which he bids farewell, as he watches his mother comforting Laura long ago:

> "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger — anything that can blow your candles out! [Laura bends over the candles.]- for nowadays the world is lit by lightning ! Blow out your candles, Laura — and so good-bye."

1.6.2 Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is the story of Brick and Margaret, the husband and wife and their interaction with Brick's family. Brick and Maggie attend a party over the course of one evening gathering at the family estate in Mississippi. They interact with Brick's family in that birthday party of Big Daddy Pollitt, the Delta's biggest cotton planter. The Party has been celebrated on the occasion of the return of Big Daddy from Ochsner Clinic with what he has been told is a clean bill of health. All the family members, except Big Daddy and his wife Big Mama are aware of the fact that Big Daddy is dying of cancer. His family has concealed the truth from them because they did not want to cause an enormous pain to them on the occasion of Big Daddy's birthday. But

throughout the course of the play it becomes clear that the Pollitt family has erected a web of deceit for itself.

Maggie, determined and beautiful, has married into the wealthy Pollitt family by escaping childhood poverty. But she finds her marriage an unfulfilling experience as Brick has failed to fulfill her sexually. This has caused irreparable strain on their marriage. Brick, on the other hand, is an aging football hero who takes to drinking because of the recent death of his friend Skipper. Maggie is furious at Brick because he is not doing anything to thwart the attempts of his brother Gooper to gain control of the family fortune. Maggie is genuinely apprehensive that Brick's alcoholism and indifference will definitely one day deprive him of inheriting his family fortune and his brother Gooper and his Mae would take away everything which now belongs to Big daddy.

The birthday party of Big Daddy becomes a meeting point of people with pent up emotions. The family members must now face the issues that confront them. Big Daddy attempts reconciliation with Brick and Maggie separately and encounters Brick to understand the true nature of his relationship with his pro football friend Skipper which appears to be the cause of Brick's sorrow and alcoholism. Brick explains to Big Daddy that Maggie was jealous of the close friendship between Brick and Skipper because she believed their relationship had some sort of a romantic undercurrent to it. He reveals the startling fact that Skipper slept with Maggie to prove her wrong. Brick believes that when Skipper found wanting in completing the act, his self-questioning about his sexuality and his friendship with Brick made him "snap". Brick also reveals that, shortly before he committed suicide, Skipper confessed his feelings to him, but Brick rejected him.

Brick reveals to Big Daddy about the truth of the medical report from the clinic. He tells him that the report about his health condition was falsified for his sake. Big Daddy rushes out of the room in disgust

leading the party gathered out on the gallery to drift inside. Maggie, Brick, Mae, Gooper, and Doc Baugh (the family's physician) decide to tell Big Mama the truth about his suffering from cancer and she is devastated by the news. Gooper and Mae shedding their hypocrisy, start discussing the division of the Pollitt estate. Big Mama defends her husband from Gooper and Mae's proposals.

Big Daddy reappears and makes known his plans to die peacefully. Maggie tells him a lie that she is pregnant in order to secure Brick's inheritance, Gooper and Mae knows this is a lie, but Big Mama and Big Daddy believe that Maggie ''has life''. When they are alone again, Maggie locks away the liquor and promises Brick that she will ''make the lie true''.

1.6.3 Summer and Smoke

Tennessee Williams in this play deals with the ideas of falsehood and facing death in a unique manner.

Tennessee William's' *Summer and Smoke* is a two-part, thirteen-scene play which was originally titled *Chart of Anatomy* when he began to work on it in 1945. In 1964, Williams revised the play as *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale.* The phrase ''summer and smoke,'' is borrowed from Hart Crane's poem, ''Emblems of Conduct''.

Summer and Smoke is story of Alma Winemiller, unmarried minister's daughter. The play is set in Glorious Hill, Mississippi, from the turn of the century through 1916, and centers on a high-strung young woman Alma. The story deals with the spiritual/sexual romance that nearly blossoms between her and John Buchanan Jr., the wild, undisciplined young doctor who grew up next door to Alma. She, impeccably refined, identifies with the gothic cathedral, ''reaching up to something beyond attainment''; her name, as Williams makes clear during the play, means ''soul'' in Spanish; whereas Buchanan, doctor and sensualist, defies her with the soulless anatomy chart.

Towards the end of the play, the two characters Buchanan and Alma, however, exchange their places philosophically. She has been transformed beyond modesty. She throws herself at him, saying, ‘‘...now I have changed my mind, or the girl who said ‘no,’— she doesn’t exist anymore, she died last summer— suffocated in smoke from something on fire inside her.’’ But, by now, Buchanan has changed, he’s engaged to settle down with a respectable, younger girl; and, as he tries to convince Alma that what they had between them was indeed a ‘‘spiritual bond,’’ she realizes, in any event, it is too late. In the final scene, Alma accosts a young traveling salesman at dusk in the town park; and, as the curtain falls, she follows him off to enjoy the ‘‘after-dark entertainment’’ at Moon Lake Casino, the very place she’d resisted Buchanan’s attempt to seduce her the summer before.

Ckech Your Progress :

1. Make an illustrative note on the works of Eugene ONeill.

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2. Discuss Tennessee Williams as a playwright dealing with the themes of Southern values.

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1.7 SUMMING UP

This unit must have given you a comprehensive knowledge of the growth of American theater and drama, beginning roughly from the later 17th Century to the 20th Century. You must have also familiarized yourself with some leading figures from each period and some of their major works. The later part of this unit talks in some details about the playwright Tennessee Williams and his works. I hope, with this introduction you are prepared to begin exploring and analyzing Tennessee William's prescribed play *A Streetcar Named Desire.*

UNIT – V

T. WILLIAMS

A STREET CAR NAMED DESIRE

Structure

2.1 OBJECTIVE

This unit will give you a reasonable idea to understand the play and its context. After reading this unit you will be able to

- Understand the play and its background
- Identify its themes and motifs
- Describe the plays Characterization
- Figure out the Symbols and motifs

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams' play *A Street Car Named Desire* is a story of two characters – Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski. Blanche represents the old south values of over refined gentility, ostentation and brazen hypocrisy. On the other hand Stanley stands for raw animal power, coarseness and open sexuality. When these two diametrically opposite characters face each other they bring in the element of conflict in the play. The play is situated in an ancient section of New Orleans, the Elysian Fields, a city with a cosmopolitan touch but with an old south tradition. The Kowalskis live in a shabby two room flat in the suburban of the city. The setting of the place clearly conveys the low class life of the characters. To this place arrives a disturbed Blanche DuBois to live with her sister Stella carrying the baggage of her past of Laurel, Mississippi. Blanche and Stanley Kowalski show mutual hatred for each other living under the same roof in New Orleans. Stanley, her brutish brother-in-law leaves no stone unturned to humiliate Blanche and torment her at every available opportunity. The more she tries to hold on to her illusory aristocratic past of Belle Reve, her ancestral home, the more her reality crumbles around her finally leading her to a mental asylum.

2.2 PLOT OF THE PLAY

In the suburban locality of Elysian Fields, New Orleans arrives Blanche Du Bois, a school teacher from Laurel, Mississippi. She has come here with the purpose of living with her sister and brother-in-law Stella and Stanley Kowalski for a prolonged period of time as she was carrying a very huge trunk with her. Stanley Kowalski is a Polish immigrant who works as a motor parts salesman and clearly belongs to the lower strata of the society. Blanche reveals to Stella that she has lost Belle Reve, their ancestral home due to the heavy debts of their relatives. She also tells Stella, her younger sister, that she has been on a leave of absence from her teaching job in the High School because of her bad nerves.

She shows her disdain for the lower class surrounding of the Kowalskis, and their cramped two room flat although she could not afford a hotel as she did not have the money for it. She had dropped in here as purely a refugee. The working class neighborhood, noise, and congestion make her pass derogatory comments on the people. This behavior of Blanche invites Stanley's dislike of her. Stella has no regrets for leaving behind her shallow aristocratic past and settling down with Stanley in lower class society, but Blanche tries to constantly remind her of her past and the elite class she belonged to. Stella has left behind her past in exchange for sexual satisfaction Stanley has been giving her. She was even carrying the baby of her husband. Distrust grows between Stanley and Blanche as Stanley suspects Blanche of cheating her sister Stella of her share in the sale proceeds of Belle Reve. The disclosure that Belle Reve was lost because of foreclosed mortgage points to the dire state of her financial position. Blanche attempts to conceal her heavy drinking from her sister and brother- in-law does not help her cause.

During a poker game at Stanley's place Blanche causes great irritation to him by playing the radio which he did not like. The other

reason of Stanley's dislike for Blanche was that she has been successful in winning the affection of Stanley's friend Mitch. When Mitch leaves his seat at the poker game and speaks to Blanche in the bedroom, Stanley bursts into a fit of rage and throws the radio out of the window. Stella shouts at Stanley to defend Blanche. Stanley beats her. Stella and Blanche escape to upstairs to Eunice's apartment. The poker game is stopped. After a while when things cool off, a repentant Stanley cries for Stella's forgiveness bellowing like an animal. Much to the chagrin of Blanche Stella and Stanley reconcile and embrace each other passionately and go into their bedroom. Mitch meets Blanche outside the flat of Stanley and comforts her.

Blanche tries to share her illusion with Stella by suggesting her to leave Stanley for a better man befitting her social status. She tells Stella that there is a millionaire named Shep Huntleigh who happens to be her friend and would help them escaping from New Orleans. Stella laughs off the matter. But by giving such a proposal to Stella Blanche further worsens her position as Stanley was overhearing the whole conversation. Blanche reveals that she is completely broke. At this point Stanley walks in. Now Stanley hits her back by partially revealing a few facts about her sordid past in Laurel. Blanche looks visibly shaken.

Blanche shows her real self by brazenly seducing a newspaper boy when she was alone at home while waiting for Mitch to pick her up for a date. Blanche doesn't have any money for the newspaper boy, but she gives him a lustful kiss. Soon after the boy departs, Mitch arrives, and they go on their date. Blanche returns totally exhausted and with an uneasy feeling for the entire night about Stanley's knowledge of her disreputable past. She enters into an intimate discussion with Mitch, in which she reveals the tragic suicide of her young husband Allan Grey years ago. Her young husband had committed suicide after she discovered that he was a gay and Blanche had chastised him. Mitch too

describes his own loss of a former love, and he tells Blanche that both of them are in need of each other.

Stella is celebrating Blanche's birthday. She is preparing dinner for Stanley, herself and Mitch, the invited guest. When Stanley comes and tells her in detail what he has heard about the sordid past of Blanche from a person called Shaw. Oblivious of this Blanche was taking bath. He says that after losing Belle Reve, Blanche moved into a cheap motel from which she was eventually evicted because of her numerous sexual liaisons. Moreover, she was dismissed from her job as a school teacher when the father of a seventeen year boy complained to the principal that Blanche was having an affair with him. What horrifies Stella most is that Stanley has told everything about Blanche's past to Mitch thereby ruining whatever little chance she has of marrying him.

The birthday passes off, but Mitch is conspicuous by his absent. Stanley behaves more cruelly with Blanche. He tells her that he has every bit of information of her disdainful past and gives her a sarcastic birthday gift of a one way ticket to Laurel indicating that she is no more welcome in his home. Stella is shell shocked at Stanley's behavior with Blanche. It seemed that the Kowalski household would break but the onset of Stella's labour prevents the imminent fight.

A shattered Blanche, sits alone and drunk in the apartment. Mitch arrives also drunk, and repeats all he has learned from Stanley. Eventually Blanche is forced to confess that the stories are true, but she also reveals the reasons behind such conduct. She says that she too, as a human being needed love and affection of a fellow human after her husband's death. Mitch announces his rejection of Blanche as she isn't fit to live in the same house as his mother. But before he departs he attempts to have sex with Blanche, but she forces him to leave by yelling "Fire!" to attract the attention of a passersby outside. Stanley returns from the hospital and finds Blanche drunk. She in her drunken bravado boasts

that she will soon be leaving New Orleans with her former suitor Shep Huntleigh, who is now a millionaire, to Caribbean Islands. Stanley dismisses Blanche's claim as entirely an imagination. He is so happy about his baby that he proposes a celebration for their good fortune. Blanche spurns Stanley's offer, and things grow contentious. When she tries to go past him, he refuses to move out and grabs Blanche. Blanche tries to get rid of Stanley by smashing a bottle on the table and threatens Stanley by holding it. . Stanley overcomes her resistance and carries her to the bedroom. The pulsing music indicates that Stanley rapes Blanche.

Weeks later, Stella has returned to her home with the child from hospital. She and her neighbour Eunice are seen packing Blanche's bags. Blanche is in the bath, and Stanley plays poker with his buddies in the front room. A doctor with a nurse arrives to take Blanche to an insane asylum, but Blanche believes she is leaving to join her millionaire suitor Shep Huntleigh. Stella confesses to Eunice that she simply cannot allow herself to believe Blanche's assertion that Stanley raped her. When Blanche emerges from the bathroom, her deluded talk makes it clear that she has lost her grip on reality.

Seeing the doctor and the nurse, Blanche initially panics and struggles against them when they try to take her away. Stanley and his friends try to subdue Blanche, while Eunice holds Stella back to keep her from interfering. Mitch begins to cry. Finally, the doctor approaches Blanche in a gentle manner and convinces her to leave with him. She allows him to lead her away and does not look back nor bid goodbye to any as she goes. Stella sobs with her child in her arms, and Stanley comforts her with loving words and caresses.

2.3 List of major characters

2.3.1 Blanche DuBois

Blanche is Stella's elder sister and when the play begins we see her as a thirty year old woman who constantly tries to conceal her real

age. She was a teacher of English in a high school in Laurel, Mississippi. As the play progresses we come to know of her sordid past and the circumstance she was forced to leave her post. In Scene –III of the play in her conversation with Mitch she explains the meaning of her name Blanche DuBois as 'white woods'. But as the play progresses the irony of her name is gradually revealed. She has a dark past to hide, there is nothing which can be remotely associated with white and clear. Blanche is a fragile and complex woman who refused to accept reality. She lost her ancestral mansion Belle Reve, because of her relatives 'epic fornications'. Having lost Belle Reve, her reputation, dismissed from her job, Blanche is in a way forced to migrate to New Orleans at the Kowalski apartment and eventually reveals that she is completely destitute. She puts on a facade of dignity and high morality before the Kowalski neighbourhood, though she has strong sexual urges and has had many lovers. Avoiding reality is an inherent quality in her. So she avoids reality at all costs, preferring to live in her own illusory world. As the play progresses, Blanche's instability grows along with her misfortune. In her confrontation with Stanley her fragility gives way, Stanley sees through her and finds out the details of her past, destroying her relationship with his friend Mitch. Whatever little of her dignity was left, Stanley destroys too that by raping her and then having her committed to an insane asylum.

When the play begins, she is already a fallen woman in society's eyes. She has lost her family fortune and estate. She had lost her young husband to suicide in a controversial situation years ago, and she is socially ostracized due to her indiscrete sexual behavior in Laurel. She also has a bad habit of drinking, which she covers up poorly. Behind her façade of social snobbery and sexual propriety, Blanche is an insecure, dislocated individual. She is an aging Southern belle who lives in a state of perpetual panic about her fading beauty. Her manner is

dainty and frail, and she sports a wardrobe of showy but cheap evening clothes. For Stanley she becomes an easy victim when he seeks out information about her past.

Under the veneer of snobbery Blanche pretends, to be a woman who has never known indignity. Her false propriety is not simply snobbery, however; it constitutes a calculated attempt to make herself appear attractive to new male suitors. Blanche depends on male sexual admiration for her sense of self-esteem, which means that she has often succumbed to passion. Marriage for Blanche is a means to escape poverty and the bad reputation that haunts her. But because the chivalric Southern gentleman savior and caretaker (represented by Shep Huntleigh) she hopes will rescue her is extinct, Blanche is left with no realistic possibility of future happiness. As she sees it, Mitch is her only chance for contentment, even though he is far from her ideal.

Stanley's relentless persecution of Blanche foils her pursuit of Mitch as well as her attempts to shield herself from the harsh truth of her situation. The play chronicles the subsequent crumbling of Blanche's self-image and sanity. Stanley himself takes the final stabs at Blanche, destroying the remainder of her sexual and mental esteem by raping her and then committing her to an insane asylum. In the end, Blanche blindly allows herself to be led away by a kind doctor, ignoring her sister's cries. This final image is the sad culmination of Blanche's vanity and total dependence upon men for happiness. When she says, before going to the mental asylum, "Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" sums up her character.

Check your Progress :

1. How would you like to assess the character of Blanche— as a snobbish woman who is responsible for her own fall or a victim of a cruel society?

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2.3.2 Stanley Kowalski

Kowalski is a polish immigrant who works as an auto parts salesman in New Orleans and leads a contended life. He is the husband of Stella. Stanley is the embodiment of vital force. He is loyal to his friends, passionate to his wife, and heartlessly cruel to Blanche. With his Polish ancestry, he represents the new, heterogeneous America. He sees himself as a social leveler, and wishes to destroy Blanche's social pretensions. Around thirty years of age, Stanley, who fought in World War II, now works as an auto-parts salesman. Practicality is his forte, and he has no patience for Blanche's distortions of the truth. He lacks ideals and imagination. By the play's end, he is a disturbing degenerate: he beats his wife and rapes his sister-in-law. Horrifyingly, he shows no remorse. Yet, Blanche is an outcast from society, while Stanley is the proud family man.

Audience sees Stanley as an egalitarian hero at the play's start. He is loyal to his friends and passionate to his wife. Stanley possesses an animalistic physical vigor that is evident in his love of work, of fighting, and of sex. His family is from Poland, and several times he expresses his outrage at being called "Polack" and other derogatory names. When Blanche calls him a "Polack," he makes her look old-

fashioned and ignorant by asserting that he was born in America, is an American, and can only be called "Polish." Stanley represents the new, heterogeneous America to which Blanche doesn't belong, because she is a relic from a defunct social hierarchy. He sees himself as a social leveler, as he tells Stella in Scene Eight.

Stanley's intense hatred of Blanche is motivated in part by the aristocratic past Blanche represents. He also aptly sees her as untrustworthy and does not appreciate the way she attempts to fool him and his friends into thinking she is better than they are. Stanley's animosity toward Blanche manifests itself in all of his actions toward her—his investigations of her past, his birthday gift to her, his sabotage of her relationship with Mitch.

In the end, Stanley's highly pragmatic character proves harmfully crude and brutish. His chief amusements are gambling, bowling, sex, and drinking, and he lacks ideals and imagination. His disturbing, degenerate nature, first hinted at when he beats his wife, is fully evident after he rapes his sister-in-law. Stanley shows no remorse for his brutal actions. The play ends with an image of Stanley as the ideal family man, comforting his wife as she holds their newborn child. The wrongfulness of this representation, given what we have learned about him in the play, ironically calls into question society's decision to ostracize Blanche.

Check your progress :

1. Do you think Stanley's image as the ideal family man at the end of the play justified?

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2.3.3 Harold "Mitch" Mitchell

Stanley's army friend, co-worker, and poker buddy, who courts Blanche until he finds out that she had lied to him about her sordid past seems to be a man who lacks independent thinking. Mitch, like Stanley, is around thirty years of age. Though he is clumsy, sweaty, and has unrefined interests like muscle building, Mitch is more sensitive and more gentlemanly than Stanley and his other friends. Blanche and Mitch are an unlikely match: Mitch doesn't fit the bill of the chivalric hero, the man Blanche dreams will come to rescue her. Nevertheless, they bond over their lost loves, and when the doctor takes Blanche away against her will, Mitch is the only person present besides Stella who despairs over the tragedy.

Perhaps because he lives with his dying mother, Mitch is noticeably more sensitive than Stanley's other poker friends. The other men pick on him for being a mama's boy. Even in his first, brief line in Scene One, Mitch's gentlemanly behavior stands out. Mitch appears to be a kind, decent human being who, we learn in Scene Six, hopes to marry so that he will have a woman to bring home to his dying mother.

Mitch doesn't fit the bill of the chivalric hero of whom Blanche dreams. Though sensitive, he lacks Blanche's romantic perspective and spirituality, as well as her understanding of poetry and literature. She toys with his lack of intelligence— for example, when she teases him in French because she knows he won't understand— duping him into playing along with her self-flattering charades.

Though they come from completely different worlds, Mitch and Blanche are drawn together by their mutual need of companionship and support, and they therefore believe themselves right for one another. They also discover that they have both experienced the death of a loved one. The snare in their relationship is sexual. As part of her pretentious snobbery, Blanche repeatedly rejects Mitch's physical affections, refusing

to sleep with him. Once he discovers the truth about Blanche's sordid sexual past, Mitch is both angry and embarrassed about the way Blanche has treated him. When he arrives to chastise her, he states that he feels he deserves to have sex with her, even though he no longer respects her enough to think her fit to be his wife. Mitch displays his frustrated male psyche in his attempt to rape Blanche.

The difference in Stanley's and Mitch's treatment of Blanche at the play's end underscores Mitch's fundamental gentlemanliness. Though he desires and makes clear that he wants to sleep with Blanche, Mitch does not rape her and leaves when she cries out. Also, the tears Mitch sheds after Blanche struggles to escape the fate Stanley has arranged for her show that he genuinely cares for her. In fact, Mitch is the only person other than Stella who seems to understand the tragedy of Blanche's madness.

Check your Progress :

1. Do you think Mitch lacks independent thinking and lacks the will to act on his own? Give reasons.

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2.3.4 Stella Kowalski

Blanche's younger sister, about twenty-five years old and of a mild disposition that visibly sets her apart from her more vulgar neighbours. Stella possesses the same timeworn aristocratic heritage as Blanche, but she jumped the sinking ship in her late teens and left Mississippi for New Orleans. There, Stella married lower-class Stanley,

with whom she shares a robust sexual relationship. Stella's union with Stanley is animal and spiritual, violent but renewing. For Stella the basis of her marriage is a strong physical relationship which surprises Blanche. After Blanche's arrival, Stella is torn between her sister and her husband. Eventually, she stands by Stanley, perhaps in part because she gives birth to his child toward the play's end. While she loves and pities Blanche, she cannot bring herself to believe Blanche's accusations that Stanley dislikes Blanche, and she eventually dismisses Blanche's claim that Stanley raped her. Stella's refusal to accept reality at the play's end shows that she has more in common with her sister than she thinks.

Check your Progress :

1. As a sister, what do you think of Stella with regard to her treatment of Blanche?

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2.4 LIST OF MINOR CHARACTERS

2.4.1 Eunice

Stella's friend, upstairs neighbour, and landlady. Eunice and her husband, Steve, represent the low-class, carnal life that Stella has chosen for herself. Like Stella, Eunice accepts her husband's affections despite his physical abuse of her. At the end of the play, when Stella hesitates to stay with Stanley at Blanche's expense, Eunice forbids Stella to question her decision and tells her she has no choice but to disbelieve Blanche.

2.4.2 Allan Grey

The young man with poetic aspirations whom Blanche fell in love with and married as a teenager. One afternoon, she discovered Allan in bed with an older male friend. That evening at a ball, after she announced her disgust at his homosexuality, he ran outside and shot himself in the head. Allan's death, which marked the end of Blanche's sexual innocence, has haunted her ever since. Long dead by the time of the play's action, Allan never appears on stage.

2.4.3 A Young Collector

A teenager who comes to the Kowalskis' door to collect the newspaper bill when Blanche is home alone. The boy leaves bewildered after Blanche hits on him and gives him a passionate farewell kiss. He embodies Blanche's obsession with youth and presumably reminds her of her teenage love, the young poet Allan Grey, whom she married and lost to suicide. Blanche's flirtation with the newspaper collector also displays her unhealthy sexual preoccupation with teenage boys, which we learn of later in the play.

2.4.4 Shep Huntleigh

A former suitor of Blanche's whom she met again a year before her arrival in New Orleans while vacationing in Miami. Despite the fact that Shep is married, Blanche hopes he will provide the financial support for her and Stella to escape from Stanley. As Blanche's mental stability deteriorates, her fantasy that Shep is coming to sweep her away becomes more and more real to her. Shep never appears onstage.

2.4.5 Steve

Stanley's poker buddy who lives upstairs with his wife, Eunice. Like Stanley, Steve is a brutish, hot-blooded, physically fit male and an abusive husband.

2.4.6 Pablo

Stanley's poker buddy. Like Stanley and Steve, Steve is physically fit and brutish. Pablo is Hispanic, and his friendship with Steve, Stanley, and Mitch emphasizes the culturally diverse nature of their neighborhood.

2.4.7 A Negro Woman

In Scene One, the Negro woman is sitting on the steps talking to Eunice when Blanche arrives, and she finds Stanley's openly sexual gestures toward Stella hilarious. Later, in Scene Ten, we see her scurrying across the stage in the night as she rifles through a prostitute's lost handbag.

2.4.8 A Doctor

At the play's finale, the doctor arrives to whisk Blanche off to an asylum. He and the nurse initially seem to be heartless institutional caretakers, but, in the end, the doctor appears more kindly as he takes off his jacket and leads Blanche away. This image of the doctor ironically conforms to Blanche's notions of the chivalric Southern gentleman who will offer her salvation.

2.4.9 A Mexican Woman

A vendor of Mexican funeral decorations who frightens Blanche by issuing the plaintive call while selling flower.

2.4.10 A Nurse

Also called the "Matron," she accompanies the doctor to collect Blanche and bring her to an institution. She possesses a severe, unfeminine manner and has a talent for subduing hysterical patients.

2.4.11 Shaw

A supply man who is Stanley's coworker and his source for stories of Blanche's disreputable past in Laurel, Mississippi. Shaw travels regularly through Laurel.

2.4.12 Prostitute

Moments before Stanley rapes Blanche, the back wall of the Kowalskis' apartment becomes transparent, and Blanche sees a prostitute in the street being pursued by a male drunkard. The prostitute's situation evokes Blanche's own predicament. After the prostitute and the drunkard pass, the Negro woman scurries by with the prostitute's lost handbag in hand.

2.5 SCENE-WISE SUMMARY

2.5.1 Scene One

Summary

The setting is the exterior of a corner building on a street called Elysian Fields, which runs between the river and the train tracks in a poor section of New Orleans. Steve and Eunice live upstairs, and Stanley and Stella live downstairs.

Eunice and a Negro woman are relaxing on the steps of the building when Stanley and his buddy Mitch show up. Stanley hollers for Stella, who comes out onto the first-floor landing and replies calmly to his tough, streetwise banter. He hurls a package of meat up to her and says that he and Mitch are going to meet Steve at the bowling alley. They depart, and Stella soon follows to watch them. Eunice and the Negro woman find something hilariously suggestive in the meat-hurling episode, and their cackles indicate sexual innuendo.

Soon after Stella leaves, her sister, Blanche, arrives, carrying a

suitcase and looking with disbelief at a slip of paper in her hand and then at the building. Dressed in a fine white suit appropriate for an upper-crust social event, Eunice assures Blanche that the building is Stella's residence. When Blanche declines to go to the bowling alley, the Negro woman goes instead to tell Stella of her sister's arrival.

Eunice lets Blanche into the two-room flat, and Blanche investigates the interior of the Kowalskis' apartment. Making small talk, Eunice mentions what she knows of Blanche from Stella— that Blanche is from Mississippi, that she is a teacher, and that her family estate is called Belle Reve. Tiring of Eunice's questions, Blanche asks to be left alone. Eunice, somewhat offended, leaves to fetch Stella.

Stella returns with excitement, and she and Blanche embrace. Blanche talks feverishly and seems nearly hysterical. After initially expressing her thrill at seeing her younger sister, Blanche lets slip a critical comment on the physical and social setting in which Stella lives. She tries to check her criticism, but the reunion begins on a tense note. Blanche redirects the conversation by asking if Stella has any liquor in the flat. She claims she could use the drink to calm her nerves, but insists— without being asked— that she isn't a drunk. After the drink is poured, Blanche asks how Stella has allowed herself to stoop to such poor living conditions. Stella makes a light effort to defend her present lifestyle, but she mostly lets Blanche do the talking.

Stella's quietness unnerves Blanche, who suggests that Stella isn't happy to see her. She then explains that she has come to New Orleans because her nerves have forced her to take a leave of absence from her job as a schoolteacher during the middle of the term. She asks Stella to tell her how she looks, fusses over Stella's plumpness and disheveled appearance, and is surprised to learn that Stella has no maid.

Blanche takes another drink, and then worries about the privacy and decency of her staying in the apartment with no door to separate her

from Stella and Stanley in the next room. She worries that Stanley won't like her, and she makes several disparaging comments about Stanley's lower-class status, focusing on his Polish background. Stella warns Blanche that Stanley is very different from the men with whom Blanche is familiar back home.

In an outburst that builds to a crescendo of hysteria, Blanche reveals that she has lost Belle Reve, the family's ancestral home. She recounts how she suffered through the agonizingly slow deaths of their parents and relatives, and points the finger at Stella for running off to New Orleans and leaving all familial woes behind.

Outside the apartment, Stanley discusses plans for poker the following day with Steve and Mitch. Mitch discourages their discussion of borrowing money and refuses to host poker at his mother's house. The men settle on playing poker at Stanley's, and Steve and Mitch leave. Meanwhile, Blanche has been nervously moving through the apartment in anticipation of meeting Stanley. He enters the apartment, sizes Blanche up, and makes small talk with her, treating her casually while she nervously tries to engage with him. Stanley pulls the whiskey bottle out of the closet and notices that it is running low. He offers Blanche a drink, but she declines, saying that she rarely drinks. Stanley proceeds to change his sweaty T-shirt in front of Blanche, offending her modesty. All the while, Stella still hasn't emerged from the bathroom. When Stanley abruptly asks what happened to Blanche's marriage, Blanche replies haltingly that the "boy" died, then plops down and declares that she feels ill.

The play offers a romanticized vision of slum life that nevertheless reflects typical characteristics of New Orleans. The mix of characters and social elements around Elysian Fields demonstrates the way New Orleans has historically differed from other American cities in the South. It was originally a Catholic settlement (unlike most Southern

cities, which were Protestant), and consequently typical Southern social distinctions were ignored. Hence, blacks mingle with whites, and members of different ethnic groups play poker and bowl together. Stanley, the son of Polish immigrants, represents the changing face of America. Williams's romanticizing is more evident in his portrayal of New Orleans as a city where upper-class people marry members of the lower class, fights get ugly but are forgotten the next day.

The play immediately establishes Stanley and Blanche as poles apart , with Stella as the link between them. Stage directions describe Stanley as a virulent character whose chief pleasure is women. His dismissal of Blanche's beauty is therefore significant, because it shows that she does not exude his same brand of carnal desire. On the other hand, Blanche's delicate manners and sense of propriety are offended by Stanley's brutish virility. Stanley's qualities—variously described as vitality, heartiness, brutality, primitivism, lust for life, animality—lead him over the course of the play into an unrelenting, unthinking assault on the already crumbling facade of Blanche's world.

Blanche comes across as a frivolous, hysterical, insensitive, and self-obsessed individual as she derides her sister's lesser social status and doesn't express joy at seeing Stella so in love. Blanche, who arrives in New Orleans having lost Belle Reve and having been forced to leave her job, exudes vulnerability and emotional frailty. Stanley's cocky interactions with Blanche show him to be insensitive—he barely lets Blanche get a word in edgewise as he quickly assesses her beauty. Nevertheless, in this introduction, the audience is likely to sympathize with Stanley rather than Blanche, for Blanche behaves superficially and haughtily, while Stanley comes across as unpretentious, a social being with a zest for life.

Stanley's entrance with a package of meat underscores his primitive qualities. It is as if he were bringing it back to his cave fresh

from the kill. His entrance also underscores the intense sexual bond between him and Stella, which is apparent to the other characters as well. Eunice and the Negro woman see something sexual, and scandalously hilarious, in Stanley's act of tossing the meat to a breathlessly delighted Stella.

The name of the Kowalskis' street underscores the extreme, opposing archetypes that Stanley and Blanche represent. Elysian Fields is the name for the ancient Greek version of the afterlife. Stanley, the primitive, pagan reveler who is in touch with his vital core, is at home in the Elysian Fields, but the Kowalskis' home and neighborhood clearly are not Blanche's idea of heaven. Blanche represents a society that has become too detached from its animal element. She is distinctly over civilized and has repressed her vitality and her sexuality. Blanche's health and her sanity are waning as a result.

2.5.2 Scene Two

Summary

It is six o'clock in the evening on the day following Blanche's arrival. Blanche is taking a bath to soothe her nerves. When Stanley walks in the door, Stella tells him that in order to spare Blanche the company of Stanley's poker buddies in the apartment that night; she wants to take Blanche out, to New Orleans's French Quarter. Stella explains Blanche's ordeal of losing Belle Reve and asks that Stanley be kind to Blanche by flattering her appearance. She also instructs Stanley not to mention her pregnancy.

Stanley is more interested in the bill of sale from Belle Reve. Stella's mention of the loss of Belle Reve seems to convince Stanley that Blanche's emotional frailty is an act contrived to hide theft. He thinks Blanche has swindled Stella out of her rightful share of the estate, which means that he has been swindled. In order to prove his own

victimization, he refers to the Napoleonic code, a code of law recognized in New Orleans from the days of French rule that places women's property in the hands of their husbands.

Looking for a bill of sale, Stanley angrily pulls all of Blanche's belongings out of her trunk. To him, Blanche's glitzy evening dresses, feather boas, fur stoles, and costume jewelry look expensive, and he assumes she has spent the family fortune on them. He claims he'll have his friend come over to appraise the value of the trunk's contents. Enraged at Stanley's actions and ignorance, Stella storms out onto the porch.

Blanche finishes her bath and appears before Stanley in the kitchen. She says that she feels clean and fresh, then closes the curtains to the bedroom in order to dress out of Stanley's sight. When she unashamedly asks him to come and fasten her buttons, he refuses. He begins to question sarcastically how Blanche came to acquire so many fancy dress items, and he rejects Blanche's flirtatious bids to make the conversation more kind-spirited. Sensing that the impending conversation might upset Stella, Blanche calls out to her sister requesting that she run to the drugstore to buy a soda.

Blanche takes from her trunk a box filled with papers and hands it to Stanley. Stanley snatches additional papers from her trunk and begins to read them. Blanche is horrified and grabs back this second set of papers, which are old letters and love poems she has saved from her husband. She redirects Stanley's attention to the papers she originally handed to him, and Stanley realizes that Blanche has acted honestly—the estate really was lost on its mortgage, not sold as he suspected.

Blanche states that her ancestors owned an enormous plantation, but the men so mishandled affairs with their "epic fornications" that only the house and a small parcel of land containing the family graveyard were left by the time Blanche and Stella were born. Blanche manages to

disarm Stanley and convince him that no fraud has been perpetrated against anyone. Stanley lets slip that Stella is pregnant.

Stella returns from the drugstore, and some of the men arrive for their poker game. Exhilarated by the news of Stella's pregnancy and by her own handling of the situation with Stanley, Blanche follows Stella for their girls' night out. On their way offstage, Blanche comments that mixing their old, aristocratic blood with Stanley's immigrant blood may be the only way to insure the survival of their lineage in the world.

Scene Two starts to move our sympathies away from Stanley as the more malignant aspects of his character start to surface. Whereas Scene One stresses the sexual attraction that drew Stella and Stanley to one another despite class differences, Scene Two shows Stanley acting disrespectful to Stella and antagonistic to her sister. Meanwhile, our compassion for Blanche increases as Williams reveals just how destitute she has become.

In one sense, Stanley and Blanche are fighting for Stella—each would like to pull Stella beyond the reach of the other. But their opposition is also more elemental. They are incompatible forces—manners versus manhood—and peace between them is no more than a temporary cease-fire. Blanche represents the Old South's intellectual romanticism and dedication to appearances. Stanley represents the New South's ruthless pursuit of success and economic pragmatism. When Stanley confronts Blanche after her bath, she shows that she understands the nature of their clash when she tells him that Stella doesn't understand him as well as she does.

Calling upon the Napoleonic code enables Stanley to justify his feelings of entitlement toward Stella's inheritance. In doing so, he shows that he is ignorant of legal technicalities, because Belle Reve, located in Laurel, Mississippi, wouldn't fall under New Orleans jurisdiction. However, Stanley's repeated references to the Napoleonic

code highlight the fact that his conflict with Blanche is also a gender showdown. Stanley's greed reveals his misogyny, or woman-hating tendencies. As a man, Stanley feels that what Stella has belongs to him. He also hates Blanche as a woman and as a person with a more prestigious family name, and therefore suspects that Blanche's business dealings have been dishonest.

Blanche takes the first of many baths in this scene. She claims that steaming hot baths are necessary to calm her nerves, a believable excuse given her constant hysteria. Yet Blanche's constant need to wash her body symbolizes her need for emotional, spiritual, and mental cleansing. Her bathing foreshadows the eventual revelation of her sordid past. She desires to rid herself of her social blemishes and start over after leaving Laurel.

Two mysteries from Scene One are solved in Scene Two. Blanche reveals the "boy" she spoke of at the end of Scene One to be her husband Alan Grey. She tells Stanley that she hurt her husband the way that Stanley would like to hurt her, warning him that his goal is impossible, since she is "not young and vulnerable anymore." Blanche knew her husband's weakness and unfeelingly used that weakness to destroy him. Yet she is naïve to think that Stanley won't be able to do the same thing to her. She would like to believe that her age and experience protect her against Stanley's callous assaults, but Stanley recognizes Blanche's essential weakness. Also, Stella's revelation to the audience that she is pregnant (when she asks Stanley not to mention her pregnancy to Blanche) explains Blanche's remark about Stella's weight gain, and Stella's refusal to discuss her weight gain with her sister.

2.5.3 Scene Three

Summary

Steve, Pablo, Mitch, and Stanley are playing poker in the

Kowalskis' kitchen. They talk loudly under the effect of whiskey. Stanley dominates the table with his tough talk, while Mitch, who frets about whether or not he should go home to his sick mother, shows himself to be the most sensitive and sober man at the table. After exchanging a few harsh words with Stanley, Mitch rises from the table to go to the bathroom.

Stella and Blanche return. Blanche insists on powdering her face at the door of the house in anticipation of the male company. Stella makes polite introductions, but the men show no interest in Blanche's presence. When Stella asserts that it's time to stop playing for the night, Stanley refuses her request, tells her to go upstairs to Eunice's, and disrespectfully slaps her on the buttocks. Stella is shamed and joins Blanche, who is planning to take another bath. Mitch emerges into the bedroom from the bathroom and is sheepish and awkward upon meeting Blanche, indicating that he is attracted to her. Once he has left the room, Blanche passes a positive remark on Mitch and Stella agrees.

Stella and Blanche continue their sisterly chat in the bedroom while the poker game continues. Stanley, drunk, shouts at them to be quiet. While Stella is busy in the bathroom, Blanche turns on the radio, further irritating Stanley. The other men enjoy the music, but Stanley springs up and shuts off the radio. He and Blanche stare at each other. Mitch skips the next hand to go to the bathroom again. Waiting for Stella to finish in the bathroom, he and Blanche talk. They discuss Mitch's sick mother and the inscription on Mitch's cigarette case. Blanche lies that she is actually younger than Stella and that she has come to New Orleans because Stella is ailing and needs her assistance. She asks Mitch to put a Chinese lantern she has bought over the naked light bulb. As they talk Stanley grows increasingly annoyed at Mitch's absence from the game.

Blanche impulsively turns the radio back on and begins to dance

forcing Mitch to dance with her. Stanley leaps up, rushes to the radio, and hurls it out the window. Stella yells at Stanley, and he beats her. The other men pull him off. Stella cries out that she wants to get away, and Blanche scrambles to gather clothes and take Stella upstairs to Eunice's apartment. Mitch condemns Stanley's behavior to Blanche. Then the men attempt to revive the now limp and confused Stanley, but when they try to force him into the shower to sober him up, he fights them off. They grab their poker winnings and leave.

Stanley stumbles out of the bathroom, calling for Stella. He cries remorsefully and then telephones upstairs, but Eunice won't let him speak to Stella. After calling again to no avail, he hurls the phone to the floor. Then, half-dressed, he stumbles out to the street and calls for his wife again and again like the bellowing of a bull. Eunice warns him to stop, but his bellowing cry continues. Finally, a disheveled Stella slips out of the apartment and down to where Stanley is. They stare at each other and then rush together with "animal moans." He falls to his knees, tenderly caresses her face and belly, then lifts her up and carries her into their flat.

Blanche emerges from Eunice's flat, frantically looking for Stella. She stops short at the entrance to the downstairs flat. Mitch returns and tells her not to worry because Stella and Stanley are crazy about each other.

Scene Three highlights the primal nature of Stella and Stanley's union, and it cements Stanley's identity as a villain. After Stanley's drunken radio-hurling episode, Stella yells at him and calls him an "animal thing," inciting Stanley's attack. Later that night, Stanley bellows into the night like a wounded beast calling for the return of his mate. Their reunion is also described in terms of animal noises. Stanley's cruel abuse of his wife convinces the audience that genteel Blanche has her sister's best interests in mind more than Stanley does. Yet Stella

sides with Stanley and his base instincts, infusing the play with an ominous sense of gloom.

Audience sympathy may establish itself in Blanche's favor, but nothing about Blanche suggests that she will emerge as a heroine. The sense of mystery surrounding Blanche's peculiar arrival in New Orleans takes on a sinister taint, and Blanche's reluctance to be in bright light calls attention to this mysterious nature. Both metaphorically and literally, bright light threatens to undo Blanche's many deceptions. While conversing with Mitch, she asks him to place a Chinese lampshade on the bare light bulb in the bedroom, claiming that the naked bulb is "rude" and "vulgar." Bright light, whether from a naked bulb or the midday sun, reveals Blanche's true age. She can claim to be a woman of twenty-five in semi-darkness, but the glare of sharp light reveals a woman who has seen more, suffered more, and aged more. In addition, probing questions and honest speech function as a metaphorical light that threatens to reveal Blanche's past and her true nature. Blanche is in no mental condition to withstand such scrutiny, so she has fashioned a tenuous make-believe world. Her effort to create a more flattering, untruthful portrait of herself for Mitch continues in upcoming scenes.

Mitch and Blanche clearly feel attracted to one another, perhaps because both have a broken quality as a result of their experiences with the death of loved ones. Blanche lost her husband and Mitch the girl who gave him the cigarette case with the poetic inscription. Both also nursed their parents through lingering deaths. However, whereas Mitch's experiences have engendered in him a strong sincerity, Blanche seeks refuge in make-believe and insincerity—insincerity that is painfully obvious in her remarks about the sincerity of dying people. The difference in their reactions to similar experiences and in their approaches to life suggests that they are not an ideally matched pair. Blanche thinks on a spiritual level, while Mitch behaves practically and temperately. When

they dance, we see that they are ill suited to one another even on a physical level—Mitch dances clumsily, awkwardly mimicking Blanche's grand movements.

2.5.4 Scene Four

Summary

The morning after the poker game, Stella lies serenely in the bedroom, her face aglow. Her satiated appearance contrasts strongly with that of Blanche, who, haggard and terrified, tiptoes into the messy apartment. Blanche is greatly relieved to find Stella safe and sound. She demands to know how Stella could go back and spend the night with Stanley after what he did to her. Stella feels Blanche is making a big issue out of nothing, claiming that she likes Stanley the way he is. She explains that Stanley's violence is the type of bad habit you have to learn to put up with from other people, and she adds that Stanley has always been violent—on their honeymoon, he smashed all of the light bulbs with her shoe. Blanche is horrified, but Stella refuses to listen and cheerily proceeds to start cleaning the apartment.

Blanche's horror intensifies, and she begins to rant that she and Stella need to find a way out of their situation. She recounts how she recently ran into an old suitor named Shep Huntleigh who struck it rich in oil— perhaps he would be able to provide the money they need to escape. Blanche begins to compose a telegram to Shep, and when Stella laughs it off as ridiculous, Blanche reveals that she is in fact completely broke. Stella offers her five dollars of the ten that Stanley gave her as an apology that morning. She says she has no desire to leave and that Blanche merely saw Stanley at his worst. Blanche retorts that she saw Stanley at his best, because "what such a man has to offer is animal force."

Blanche simply cannot understand how a woman raised at Belle Reve could choose to live her life with such an ungentlemanly, brutish

man. Stella replies that physical relationship is the basis of their marriage. Blanche argues that sheer desire is no basis for a marriage. Stella hints that Blanche is familiar with the pleasure of gratifying her desire. Blanche agrees that she has done so, but she adds that she wouldn't settle down with a man whose primary attraction is sexual.

A train approaches, and while it roars past Stanley enters the flat unheard. Not knowing that Stanley is listening, Blanche holds nothing back and describes Stanley as a common, apelike, primitive brute. Stella listens coldly. Under cover of another passing train, Stanley slips out of the apartment, and enters it again noisily. Stella runs to Stanley and embraces him fiercely. Stanley grins at Blanche.

Although Stella technically condemns Stanley's propensity for violence, it is clear to Blanche and to the audience that Stanley's violent behavior heightens Stella's desire for him. When Stella tells Blanche that Stanley broke all the light bulbs with her shoe on their honeymoon, Blanche is horrified, but Stella assures her that she found the episode "thrilling." Even the stage directions at the beginning of Scene Four, which liken Stella's glowing face after a night spent with Stanley to that of an Eastern idol, suggest there is a mystical aspect to Stanley and Stella's violent attraction. Stella calmly lies in bed at the scene's opening as if she has just taken part in something holy.

When telling Stella that sheer desire is no basis for a marriage, Blanche points out that there is a streetcar in New Orleans named "Desire" that "bangs through the [French] Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another." She invokes the streetcar as a metaphor for what she believes Stella feels. Stella asks whether Blanche has ever ridden on the streetcar, and Blanche's answer, "It brought me here," foreshadows later events in the play. As Stella, Stanley, and Mitch soon learn, Blanche's wanton acts of desire are indeed what led to her expulsion from life in Laurel, Mississippi. In fact, her

family's attitude toward desire began to push her toward her present predicament even before she was born. The family's socially regulated need to shroud desire and cover up "epic fornications" led to the breakup of the Belle Reve estate and to the impoverishment of the present generation.

Scene Four reveals Blanche to be entirely calculating when it comes to her relations with men. As she rambles on about money, Shep Huntleigh, and other things, this comment suggests that Blanche survives by scheming up ways to get money from men. Blanche's threat to "laugh in [Stella's] face" if Stella tries to claim that her attraction to Stanley is "just one of those electric things" shows that Blanche does not truly believe in love. Throughout the play, Blanche claims to possess romantic notions of timeless relations, but her comments to Stella in this scene reveal her as a cold cynic.

Scene Four also contains one of Blanche's most famous speeches, in which she describes how humankind has evolved too far past the beast that Stanley represents for Stella to reduce herself to his level. This passage best articulates Williams's examination of the widely held belief among plantation owners and their descendants that the end of the South's agrarian culture led to a decline of American civilization. He depicts Blanche as an antiquated relic of a dead society, while Stanley epitomizes the new type of American, who lacks refinement, education, and spirituality. Yet, although Williams gives voice to Blanche's nostalgia and exposes her fears, he does not necessarily share her belief that the new Americans are lesser beings on the evolutionary scale. He even illustrates the irrationality of Blanche's opinions by having her hysterically cry to Stella,

2.5.5 Scene Five

Summary

Stella and Blanche are in the bedroom on an August afternoon. Blanche breaks out in laughter at the untruthfulness of the letter she has just finished writing to Shep Huntleigh, prompting Stella to ask her about the letter's contents. Blanche gleefully reads the letter aloud. In it, she suggests that she visit Shep in Dallas, and she claims that she and Stella have been amusing themselves with society parties and visits to luxurious country homes. Stella finds no humor in her sister's stories.

Their conversation is interrupted by the sound of Steve and Eunice fighting upstairs. Eunice accuses Steve of infidelity and cries out as he begins to beat her. After a huge noise, Eunice runs out of her flat, yelling that she is going to the police. Stanley, returning home from bowling, asks Stella why Eunice is so distraught. Stella says that Eunice has had a fight with Steve, and she asks whether Eunice is with the police. Stanley replies that he has just seen her at the bar around the corner, having a drink. Stella responds lightheartedly that alcohol is a "more practical" cure than the police for Eunice's woes. Steve comes downstairs nursing a bruise on his forehead, inquires after Eunice's whereabouts, and grumpily hurries off to the bar.

In the Kowalski apartment, Stanley and Blanche have a tense conversation. Blanche makes superficially charming comments to Stanley that subtly insults his lower-class disposition. Stanley is unusually rude to Blanche. He insinuates that he has acquired knowledge of Blanche's past and asks her if she knows a certain man named Shaw. Blanche falters immediately at the mention of Shaw's name and answers evasively, replying that there are many Shaws in the world. Stanley goes on to say that the Shaw he met often travels to Blanche's hometown of Laurel, Mississippi, and that Shaw claims Blanche was often the client of a disreputable hotel. Blanche fiercely denies Stanley's

accusation and insists that Shaw must have confused her with someone else. Stanley says he will check with Shaw the next time he sees him. Eunice and Steve stroll back to their apartment, affectionately wrapped in each other's arms. Stanley then heads off to the bar, telling Stella to meet him there.

Stanley's remarks leave Blanche horribly shaken, but Stella doesn't seem to notice. Blanche demands to know what people in town have been saying about her, but Stella has no idea what Blanche is talking about. Blanche confesses that she has behaved badly during the past two years, the period when she was losing Belle Reve. She criticizes herself for not being self-sufficient and describes herself as "soft," claiming that she has to rely on Chinese lanterns and light colors to make herself "shimmer and glow." She then admits that she no longer has the youth or beauty to glow in the soft light.

Offering Blanche a soda, Stella responds that she doesn't like to hear such depressing talk. Blanche says that she wants a shot of alcohol to put in the Coke. She tries to get it herself, but Stella insists on waiting on her, claiming that she likes to do so because it reminds her of their childhood. Blanche becomes hysterical and promises to leave soon, before Stanley throws her out. Stella calms her for a moment, but when she accidentally spills a little soda on Blanche's skirt, Blanche lets out a shriek.

Blanche tries to laugh off the fact that she is shaking, claiming that she feels nervous about her date that evening with Mitch. She explains that she hasn't been honest with him about her age and that she feels she lacks the forces of attraction her youthful beauty once provided her. She has not gone to bed with him because she wants Mitch's respect, but she's worried he will lose interest in her. She is convinced that she must maintain her act if Mitch is to love her. She wants him very badly and says she needs him as a stabilizing force—

and as her ticket away from Elysian Fields. As Stanley comes around the corner, yelling for Stella, Steve, and Eunice, Stella assures Blanche that everything will work out. She gives Blanche a kiss and then runs off to join Stanley at the bar. Eunice and Steve run after her.

Sipping her drink, Blanche sits alone in the apartment and waits for Mitch. A young man comes to the door to collect money for the newspaper. Blanche flirts with him, offers him a drink, and launches a seduction. The young man is uncomfortable and nervous. Blanche declares that he looks like an Arabian prince, then kisses him on the lips and sends him on his way, saying, "I've got to be good—and keep my hands off children." A few moments later, Mitch appears with a bunch of roses. Blanche accepts the flowers with much fanfare, while Mitch glows.

Although Stella's reassurance and comforting of Blanche about her relationship with Mitch is a rare moment of unchecked affection between the two sisters, by not revealing her past Blanche prevents Stella's full comprehension of the desperate nature of Blanche's situation. Even without Stanley around to prevent free and open communication, Blanche cannot bring herself to explain her belief that Mitch is her last chance of salvation from ruin. Because Stella does not know the full weight of the baggage Blanche is carrying, she cannot provide the advice and support Blanche needs, and she simply expresses hope that Mitch will bring Blanche the same contentment that Stanley brings her.

When she throws herself at the young newspaper boy, Blanche reveals her hypocrisy—she is lustful underneath her genteel, morally upright facade. Blanche condemns Stanley and Stella's purely sexual relationship, but we see that her urges are every bit as strong as Stella's, yet much less appropriate. Compared with Blanche's behavior, Stella's love life looks healthy and wholesome. Eunice and Steve's quick reconciliation after their fight also underscores the notion that Stella

and Stanley's violent love is the norm in these parts. Like the sexual attachment between Stella and Stanley, Eunice and Steve's sexual attachment appears far healthier than Blanche's, and Blanche's expectations for love begin to seem unrealistic. As a dramatic device, the scene with the newspaper boy prepares us to learn the truth about the circumstances surrounding Blanche's departure from Mississippi. She is one of the "epic fornicators" of her clan, the last in a line of aristocrats who secretly indulged in forbidden acts because they could not find a stable outlet for their desires. When a bumbling Mitch arrives at the apartment for his date with Blanche, he quickly becomes an antidote to Blanche's strong carnal desires.

As the identity Blanche has constructed for herself begins to disintegrate, she begins to lose ground in her battle against Stanley. Stanley's questioning of Blanche about her acquaintanceship with Shaw is the play's first direct mention of Blanche's blemished past. Blanche does a poor job of pretending not to know Shaw. Her claim that she needs to avoid revealing her past to Mitch further supports our suspicions about her truthfulness. Up to this point, Blanche's jitteriness and her need to hide herself from the outside world have suggested that she also had a past to hide. Now, the emerging facts of Blanche's past begin to confirm the hypocrisy of her social snobbery.

2.5.6 Scene Six

Summary

Blanche and Mitch return to the Kowalski flat after their date from an amusement park. Blanche appears completely exhausted. Mitch is more awake but clearly melancholy. He apologizes for not giving her much entertainment during their evening, but Blanche says it was her fault that she simply couldn't manage to enjoy herself. She reveals that she will be leaving the flat soon. Blanche explains that though Mitch's

attraction flatters her, a single girl becomes "lost" if she doesn't keep her urges under control. She teases Mitch, suggesting that he is used to women who are easy on their first date. Mitch tells Blanche that he likes her because she is different from anyone he has ever met, an independent spirit. Blanche laughs and invites him in for a nightcap.

Blanche lights a candle and prepares the drinks, saying they must celebrate and forget their worries on their last night together. She suggests that they pretend to be on a date at an artists' café in Paris. Blanche grows rapidly more amorous. Mitch won't take his coat off because he's embarrassed about his perspiration, so she takes it off for him. She tries to put Mitch at ease by admiring his imposing physique. When he asks her what she weighs, she tells him to guess. He picks her up, and the game leads to a brief and somewhat clumsy embrace. Blanche stops him from putting any more moves on her, claiming she has "old-fashioned ideals." She sarcastically rolls her eyes as she offers this remark, but Mitch cannot see her face.

After an uncomfortable silence, Mitch asks where Stanley and Stella are, and he suggests that they all go out on a double date some night. Blanche laughs at the idea, and asks how Mitch and Stanley became friends. Mitch replies that they were military buddies. Blanche asks what Stanley says about her, expressing her conviction that Stanley hates her. Mitch thinks that Stanley simply doesn't understand her. Blanche argues that Stanley wants to ruin her.

Mitch interrupts Blanche's increasingly hysterical tirade against Stanley to ask her how old she is. Caught off guard, she responds by asking why he wants to know. He says that when he told his ailing mother about Blanche, who would like to see Mitch settled before she dies, he could not tell her how old Blanche was. Blanche says that she understands how lonely Mitch will be when his mother is gone. She fixes another drink for herself and gives a revealing account of what

happened with the tender young man she married. She was only sixteen when they met, and she loved him terribly. Somehow, though, her love didn't seem to be enough to save him from his unhappiness—something was tormenting him. Then one day she came home to find her young husband in bed with an older man who had been his longtime friend. In the hours after the incident, they all pretended nothing happened. The three of them went out to a casino. On the dance floor, while dancing a polka, the Varsouviana, she drunkenly confronted her young husband and told him he "disgusted" her. The boy rushed out of the casino, and everyone heard a shot. He had killed himself with a bullet to the head.

Mitch comes to her and holds her, comforting her. He tells her, "You need somebody. And I need somebody, too." They kiss, even as she sobs. Blanche says, "Sometimes— there's God— so quickly!"

Blanche's encounter with Mitch exposes her sexual double standard. In secret, she bluntly attempts to seduce the young man collecting for the newspaper, an interaction that happens outside the boundaries of acceptable or even reasonable behavior. Because the incident is so far removed from Blanche's professed moral standards, she feels free to behave as she likes without fear. In contrast, since the Kowalskis and their neighbors know of Blanche's outings with Mitch, she believes that they must take place within the bounds of what she sees as social propriety.

Blanche's revelation of the story of her first love occurs in a heavily symbolic manner. Blanche describes her all-consuming first love in terms of lightness and darkness, using the concept of light to explain her interior state as she does earlier in the play. She says that when she fell in love, the once-shadowy world seemed suddenly illuminated with a "blinding light." She extends the metaphor when she describes the aftermath of her thoughtless, cruel remark to her husband, saying, "[T]he searchlight ... was turned off again and never for one moment since has

there been any light that's stronger than this—kitchen—candle." We see in earlier scenes that a lack of light has enabled Blanche to live a lie, but now we see also that, without light, Blanche has lived without a clear view of herself and reality.

The music of the Varsouviana that plays in the background during Blanche's story is also symbolic. Blanche mentions that the Varsouviana was playing as she told her husband that he disgusted her, and the music represents Blanche's memory of her husband's suicide. When the polka surfaces from this point on, it signals that Blanche is remembering her greatest regret and escaping from the present reality into her fantasy world. Allen Grey's suicide was the critical moment in her life, the moment she lost her innocence.

Mitch's lack of formal manners and education make him an imperfect match for Blanche, but he and Blanche are able to relate on a ground of common suffering and loneliness. Though she is clearly the object of Mitch's affection, he is the one with the upper hand in the relationship. Blanche needs Mitch as a stabilizing force in her life, and if her relationship with him fails, she faces a world that offers few prospects for a financially challenged, unmarried woman who is approaching middle age. Unfortunately, though Blanche lets down her flippant guard and confesses her role in her husband's suicide to Mitch at the scene's close, her failure to be upfront about her age, her entire past, and her intentions signals doom for her relationship with him. She tacitly admits that she needs Mitch when she accepts his embrace, but her fears of acknowledging reality overpower her and prevent her from telling the full truth.

2.5.7 Scene Seven

Summary

Stella is decorating her apartment on an afternoon in mid-

September. Stanley comes in, and Stella explains to him that it is Blanche's birthday. Blanche is in the bathroom, taking yet another hot bath to calm her nerves. Stanley makes fun of Blanche's habit of taking baths, but Stella admonishes him. She points out that she and Blanche grew up differently than he did, but he says he won't stand for that excuse any longer. He tells Stella to sit down and listen— he has dirt on Blanche. Blanche's unconcerned voice issues from the bathroom as she sings the sugary popular ballad "It's Only a Paper Moon."

Stanley has learned the shady details of Blanche's past from Shaw, a supply man he works with who regularly travels to Blanche and Stella's hometown of Laurel, Mississippi. Gleefully, Stanley recounts how Blanche earned a notorious reputation after taking up residence at the seedy Flamingo Hotel. The hotel asked her to leave, presumably for immoral behavior unacceptable even by the standards of that establishment. She came to be regarded as crazy person by the townspeople, and her home was declared off-limits to soldiers at a nearby base. She was not given a leave of absence by her school—she was kicked out after a father reported his discovery that Blanche was having a relationship with a seventeen-year-old boy. Stanley surmises that Blanche, having lost her reputation, her place of residence, and her job, had no choice but to wash up in New Orleans. He is certain that she has no intention of returning to Laurel.

Stanley's stories don't fully convince Stella. She admits that Blanche has her problems, but explains them as the result of Blanche's tragic young marriage to a homosexual man. Stanley asks Stella how many candles she's putting in Blanche's cake, and Stella says she'll "stop at twenty-five." She says that Mitch has been invited, but Stanley abashedly says not to expect Mitch to show up. Stanley says it was his duty to reveal the truth about Blanche to his army friend and bowling teammate. He has told Mitch the bad news about Blanche, and there's

no way Mitch will marry her now. Stella is horrified because both she and Blanche had been convinced Mitch and Blanche would marry.

Stanley tells Stella that he has bought Blanche a birthday present: a one-way bus ticket back to Laurel. He yells at Blanche to get out of the bathroom. When at last Blanche emerges, she is in high spirits, until she sees Stanley's face as he passes by. He goes into the bathroom and slams the door. Blanche senses from Stella's dazed responses to her chatter that something is wrong. She asks Stella what has happened, but Stella feebly lies and says that nothing has happened.

It is difficult to assess whether Stanley or Blanche herself is more to blame for Blanche's ruin, which is sealed by the end of Scene Seven. To some extent, Blanche brought her fate upon herself by leading a promiscuous and almost deranged life, in spite of the genteel morality to which she pays lip service. But Blanche's desire and her hypocrisy do not absolve Stanley of his vindictive pursuit of Blanche's vulnerabilities. Stanley is shortsighted and unsympathetic, as we can see in his inability to understand why the story of Allan Grey, Blanche's lost husband, moves Stella so deeply. To Stanley, the fact that Blanche's husband committed suicide renders her a weak rather than sympathetic person.

Stanley's behavior toward Blanche seems even crueler once he reveals that Blanche is not just flighty and sensitive but also mentally unsound. In addition to proving Blanche's hypocrisy, the stories Stanley tells Stella about Blanche introduce the first outright reference to Blanche's mental state. Describing what he's heard from Shaw, Stanley declares that in Laurel Blanche is seen as a crazy woman.

Blanche's interminable baths function as a metaphor for her need to cleanse herself of her sordid past and reputation. She emerges from them refreshed and temporarily renewed. Stanley's repeated objections to Blanche's baths, ostensibly because he would like to urinate, function

on a metaphorical level to show his rejection of Blanche's make-believe purification, which allows her to pretend modesty and put on airs without acknowledging reality.

The lyrics of "It's Only a Paper Moon," the popular 1940s ballad Blanche sings while bathing, summarize Blanche's situation with regard to Mitch. She sings, "It's a Barnum and Bailey world / Just as phony as it can be / But it wouldn't be make-believe / If you believed in me." Blanche's hope in a future with Mitch rests in his believing her act—or in his believing in her strongly enough to make the act reality. Williams juxtaposes Blanche's merry rendition of this song with Stanley's malicious revelations about her character, creating a situation of tense dramatic irony as Blanche sings about a future that will never come to fruition. The song describes the fanciful way one perceives the world while in love, but it also foreshadows the fact that Mitch falls out of love with Blanche after his illusions about her have been destroyed.

2.5.8 Scene Eight

Summary

Blanche's gloomy birthday dinner came to an end without Mitch joining. Blanche tries to break the gloomy silence by asking Stanley to tell a funny story. He declines, so Blanche tells a lame joke involving a priest and a swearing parrot. Stanley makes a point of not laughing. Instead, he reaches across the table for a chop and eats it with his fingers. Stella scolds him for having greasy fingers and orders him to help clean up. He smashes his plate and declares that he is sick and tired of being called derogatory names such as "greasy." He orders both sisters never to forget that he is the king of his house. He smashes his cup and saucer, yells that he has cleared his place, and storms out onto the porch. Stella begins to cry. Blanche again asks Stella what happened while she was taking a bath, but Stella says that nothing happened.

Blanche declares that she will call Mitch to find out why he didn't attend her dinner. Stella implores her not to, but Blanche goes into the bedroom to make the call. Stella joins Stanley on the porch. Blanche leaves a message— Mitch is not home— and stays by the phone, looking frightened. Stanley holds Stella, ignoring her reproaches, and promises her that things will be all right again after Blanche leaves and the baby comes. Stella goes back inside and lights the candles on the cake. Blanche and Stanley join her.

Blanche announces that she should never have called Mitch and that she doesn't need to take insults from a man like him. Stanley begins to complain about the lingering heat from Blanche's steam bath, and she snaps that she has already apologized three times. She says that a healthy Polack like Stanley wouldn't understand her need to calm her nerves. Stanley angrily retorts that Polish people are called Poles, not Polacks, and that he is "one hundred percent American."

The phone rings, and Blanche tries to answer it, expecting Mitch. Stanley intercepts her and speaks to the caller, one of his bowling buddies. Blanche anticipated Mitch to call and she tries her best to control herself as Stanley returns to the table. With a thin veneer of kindness, Stanley offers Blanche a birthday present. She is surprised and delighted—until she opens it and sees that it is a one- way ticket back to Laurel on a Greyhound bus, leaving Tuesday.

The Varsouviana music begins to play as Blanche tries first to smile, then to laugh. When her efforts fail, she runs to the bedroom and then to the bathroom, clutching her throat and making gagging noises as if Stanley's cruelty has literally taken her breath away. Stanley, pleased with himself and his actions, prepares to go bowling. But Stella demands to know why Stanley has treated Blanche so callously. She admits that much about Blanche is insufferable, but argues that Blanche's naïve trust and kindness have been abused over the years, and that the current

Blanche is the product of suffering. He explains that Stella thought he was common when they first met, but he took her off her pedestal, and things were wonderful until Blanche arrived and made fun of him. As he speaks, a sudden change comes over Stella, and she slowly shuffles from the bedroom to the kitchen. After a minute, Stanley notices that something is wrong and cuts his diatribe short. Stella quietly asks to be taken to the hospital. Stanley is with her in an instant, speaking softly as he leads her out the door.

In Scene Eight, Stanley, Blanche, and Stella become increasingly short-tempered. Stanley shows that he has taken all that he can handle of Blanche and will allow Stella to sway him with her protestations no longer. He is intent on removing Blanche from his house, and he sees no need for delicacy or kindness in doing so. However, Blanche too seems to have reached the limit of her capacity for niceness. She loses her temper briefly when she snaps to Stanley that she has already apologized three times for her bath. Her outburst constitutes the first time Blanche openly expresses anger in the play.

Stella too becomes increasingly assertive as she begs Stanley to explain his contempt for Blanche and to attempt to understand Blanche's nature. She insists that Stanley not leave to go bowling and demands an explanation from him for his cruelty to Blanche. These actions constitute the greatest assertion of independence Stella makes toward Stanley throughout the entire play. As Stella grows angrier, her grammar becomes more formal, and she uses words such as "needn't." Stanley's grammar, on the other hand, grows sloppier, and he begins to speak in sentence fragments. The language Stella and Stanley use indicates their respective retreats away from each other into their social roles. But just when Stella seems to be thinking independently from Stanley and reasserting her connection to Blanche in her outrage at Stanley's cruelty, she goes into labor. The baby reasserts Stella's connection to Stanley and makes Stella

dependent on him for help. He is once again in control as he takes her to the hospital.

Stella does not recognize her own similarities with Blanche. Her comments to Stanley as she begs him to understand Blanche's situation show that she views Blanche with pity. Yet, when making her case to Stanley, Stella argues that Blanche was trusting in her youth until "people like you abused her." Even though Stella recognizes that Blanche was worn down by "people like" Stanley, she does not reject him or realize that she could wind up in Blanche's place. Stanley, however, reminds Stella of her similarity to Blanche when he points out that he had to pull Stella down from the columns of Belle Reve.

Stanley's discussion of his and Stella's relationship as a response to Stella's demand to know why he is so cruel to Blanche seems strange. He begins by asking Stella if she remembers when she found him "common," and states that after he pulled Stella down from the columns of Belle Reve, he and Stella were happy to be "common" together until Blanche showed up. The implication of Stanley's speech is that he desires to take ownership of people and things, like Blanche and Stella, that make him feel inferior. What Stanley doesn't understand is how precarious and insecure the once majestic world of Belle Reve was by the time Stella and Blanche were born. His actions toward Blanche are all the more cruel because he misunderstands how weak Blanche is to begin with. Stanley's desire for ownership manifests itself as the furious sexual desire he displays for Stella in the play. The heated passion of Stanley's marriage foreshadows his enraged violence toward Blanche, which also expresses his need for ownership, but in a different form.

2.5.9 Scene Nine

Summary

Later the same evening, Blanche sits tensely in the bedroom. On

a nearby table are a bottle of liquor and a glass. The Varsouviana, the polka music that was playing when Blanche's husband killed himself, can be heard. Williams's stage directions state that the music we hear is in Blanche's head and that she drinks to escape it.

Mitch, unshaven and wearing work clothes, comes to the door. The doorbell startles Blanche. She asks who it is, and when he gruffly replies, the polka music stops. She frantically scurries about, applying powder to her face and stashing the liquor in a closet before letting Mitch in with a cheerful reprimand for having missed her birthday celebration. She expects a kiss, but Mitch walks right past her into the apartment. Blanche is frightened but continues in her light and airy mode, scolding him for his disheveled appearance and forgiving him in the same breath.

Mitch, a bit drunk, stares and then asks Blanche to turn off the fan, which she does. He plops down on the bed and lights a cigarette. She offers him a drink, fibbing that she isn't sure what the Kowalskis have on hand, but Mitch says he doesn't want Stanley's liquor. Blanche retorts that she's bought her own liquor, then changes the subject to Mitch's mother's health. Mitch is suspicious of Blanche's interest in his mother, so she backs off, saying she just wants to know the source of Mitch's sour mood. As Blanche retreats into herself, the polka music again begins in her head, and she speaks of it agitatedly, identifying it as the same tune that was playing when her husband, Allan, killed himself. She breaks off, then explains that the usual sound of a gunshot, which makes the music stop, has come. Mitch has no idea what Blanche is talking about and has little patience for her anxiety.

As Blanche rambles on about the birthday evening Mitch missed, she pretends to discover the whiskey bottle in the closet. She takes her charade so far as to ask what Southern Comfort is. Mitch says the bottle must be Stan's, and he rudely rests his foot on Blanche's bed. Blanche

asks Mitch to take his foot off the bed and goes on about the liquor, pretending to taste it for the first time. Mitch again declines a drink and says that Stanley claims Blanche has guzzled his liquor all summer on the sly.

At last Blanche asks point-blank what is on Mitch's mind. Mitch continues to beat around the bush, asking why the room is always so dark. He comments that he has never seen Blanche in full light or in the afternoon. She has always made excuses on Sunday afternoons and has only gone out with him after six to dimly lit places. Blanche says she doesn't get Mitch's meaning, and he says that he's never had a good look at her. Mitch tears the paper lantern off the light bulb. She begs him not to turn the light on, but he says that he wants to be "realistic." Blanche cries that she doesn't like realism and "want[s] magic." She explains that her policy is to say what "ought" to be true. Mitch switches the light on, and Blanche lets out a cry and covers her face. He turns the light off.

Mitch says he doesn't really care about Blanche's age, but he cannot stand the way Blanche lied to him all summer, pretending to be old-fashioned and morally upright. Blanche tries to deny Mitch's charge, but Mitch says that he has heard stories about her from three different sources: Stanley, Shaw, and a merchant from Laurel named Kiefaber with whom Mitch spoke on the phone. Each man presented the same facts about Blanche's shady past. Blanche argues that all three men are liars, and that Kiefaber concocted stories about her as revenge for her spurning his affection.

Finally, Blanche breaks down and admits the truth through convulsive sobs and shots of liquor. She says that she panicked after Allan's death and looked to strangers for human companionship to fill her loneliness. She did not know what she was doing, she claims. She eventually ended up in trouble with a seventeen-year-old student from

Laurel High School and was forced to leave her position. She thought she had nowhere to go, until she met Mitch. He gave her hope because he said he needed her as she needed him. But, says Blanche, she was wrong to hope, because her past inevitably caught up with her. After a long pause, Mitch can say only that Blanche lied to him, "inside and out." Blanche argues that she didn't lie "inside . . . in [her] heart."

A blind Mexican woman comes around the corner selling bunches of tacky tin flowers to use at funerals. In Spanish, she says, "Flowers. Flowers for the dead." Hearing the vendor's voice, Blanche opens the door, and she is terrified when the woman offers her funeral flowers. She slams the door and runs back into the apartment as the vendor continues down the street. The Varsouviana polka tune resumes.

Blanche begins to think out loud while Mitch sits silently. Every so often, the Mexican woman's call can be heard. In her tortured soliloquy, Blanche discusses regrets, and then legacies. She speaks about pillowcases stained with blood, and seems to be recalling a conversation she had with her mother about not having enough money to pay a servant. Blanche then begins to speak about death, saying that it once seemed so far from her. She says that "the opposite [of death] is desire." And she begins to reminisce about camp of soldiers that used to be near Belle Reve. On Saturday nights the drunken soldiers would stumble onto Blanche's lawn and call for her while her deaf mother slept. Occasionally, Blanche went outside to meet them.

The polka music fades. Mitch approaches Blanche and tries to embrace her. He says that he wants what he waited for all summer. Blanche says he must marry her first, but Mitch replies that Blanche isn't fit to live in the same house as his mother. Blanche orders him to leave, rapidly collapsing into hysterics. When he does not move, she threatens to scream "Fire!" He still does not leave, so she screams out the window. Mitch hurries out, and Blanche falls to her knees, devastated.

Piano music can be heard in the distance.

Mitch's act of turning on Blanche's light explicitly symbolizes his extermination of the fake persona she has concocted. Mitch recognizes that Blanche's deceptions have relied on darkness to obscure reality, thereby giving Blanche the freedom to describe things as she feels they "ought to be." For example, in Scene Six, Blanche revises eality by lighting a candle, claiming that she and Mitch will be bohemian and imagine they are in Paris.

Mitch behaves with resignation rather than anger when he confronts Blanche, showing that he holds genuine feelings for her. He initially bides his time, getting up the nerve to say what he has come to say. Sadness over lost love tempers his anger and frustration. When Mitch turns on Blanche's light, he violates Blanche's false dignity, but he does not violate Blanche sexually when she refuses him. However, his advances demonstrate that the only way he knows how to express his frustration over the relationship ending is through sexuality.

Whereas Mitch faces his breakup with Blanche with resignation, Blanche becomes desperate and unhinged. She sees marriage as her only means of escaping her demons, so Mitch's rejection amounts to a sentence of living in her internal world. Once Mitch crushes the make-believe identity Blanche has constructed for herself, Blanche begins to descend into madness. With no audience for her lies, which Blanche admits are necessary when she tells Mitch that she hates reality and prefers "magic," Blanche begins performing for herself. Yet Blanche's escapist tendencies no longer manifest her need to live in a world full of pleasant bourgeois ease. Instead of fancy and desire, her new alternate reality reflects regret and death. She is alone, afraid of both the dark and the light; her own mind provides her with a last bastion of escape. Her fantasies control her, not the other way around, but still she shrinks from the horror of reality.

Scene Nine fails to tell us conclusively whether Blanche is responsible for her fate or whether she is a victim of circumstances beyond her control. Mitch claims that it is Blanche's lying, not her age, that bothers him. Indeed, it is likely Mitch figures out that Blanche is past her prime in Scene Six, when she evades his questions about her age. Given Mitch's statement, it seems that Blanche's sexual duplicity and romantic delusions have been the source of her fall. Yet Blanche is also the victim of social circumstances. She was born into a society that required the suppression of desire, and her sense of entitlement, to wealth and social status, elicit the anger of new Americans in an increasingly diverse social landscape. Additionally, Blanche is Stanley's victim. His investigations of her past and his disclosure of his findings contribute directly to Blanche's fate.

2.5.10 Scene Ten

Summary

It is a few hours after Mitch's departure. Blanche's open trunk sits with clothes hanging out of it in the middle of the bedroom. Blanche sits before the mirror, places a tiara on her head, and speaks out loud, flirting with imaginary suitors. She speaks of boozing and carousing after a late-night party. A closer glance at herself in a hand mirror quickly upsets her, and she angrily smashes the mirror.

Stanley enters the apartment, slamming the door behind him and giving a low whistle when he sees Blanche decked out in an old white satin evening gown and jeweled party shoes. Like Blanche, Stanley is drunk, and he carries several unopened beer bottles. Blanche asks about Stella, and Stanley tells her the baby won't be born until the following day. They will be the only two in the apartment that night.

With mock politeness, Stanley asks why Blanche is all dressed up. She tells him that Shep Huntleigh, a former admirer, has sent her a

telegram inviting her to join him on his yacht in the Caribbean. She explains that she has nothing suitable to wear on a cruise. Stanley seems happy for Blanche. As he takes off his shirt, Blanche requests that he close the curtains before finishing undressing, but Stanley says that he's done for the moment. He opens a bottle of beer on the corner of the table, then pours the foam on his head. He suggests that he and Blanche each have a beer to celebrate their good news—his new baby and her millionaire. Blanche declines Stanley's offer, but his good spirits persist.

In anticipation of good news from the hospital, Stanley goes to the bedroom to find his special silk pajamas. Blanche continues to talk about Shep Huntleigh, feverishly working herself up as she describes what a gentleman he is and how he merely wants the companionship of an intelligent, spirited, tender, cultured woman. Blanche claims that though she is poor financially, she is rich in spirit and beautiful in mind. She asserts that she has been foolishly lavishing what she has to offer on those who do not deserve it—"casting [her] pearls before swine."

At the word "swine," Stanley's amicable mood evaporates. Blanche continues, recounting how Mitch arrived earlier that night to accuse her of the slanderous lies that Stanley told him. Blanche claims that after she sent Mitch away, he came back in vain, with roses and apologies. She says that she cannot forgive "deliberate cruelty," and that the two of them are too different in attitude and upbringing for their relationship to work.

Stanley disrupts Blanche's story to ask if Mitch came by before or after her telegram from Shep Huntleigh. Blanche is caught off guard and forgets what she has said about Shep's telegram, and Stanley jumps on her mistake. He launches an attack, tearing down her make-believe world point by point. It turns out that Stanley saw Mitch after his encounter with Blanche, so Stanley knows that Mitch is still disgusted with her. All Blanche can say in reply is "Oh!" Stanley finishes his

accusation of Blanche with a disdainful laugh and walks through the bedroom into the bathroom.

Frightening, sinister shadows and reflections begin to appear on the walls, mimicking Blanche's nervous movements. Wild, jungle-sounding cries can be heard. Blanche goes to the phone and desperately tries to make a call to Shep Huntleigh for help. She does not know his number or his address, so the operator hangs up on her. Blanche leaves the phone off the hook and walks into the kitchen.

The back wall of the Kowalskis' apartment suddenly becomes transparent, revealing the sidewalk, where a drunkard and a prostitute scuffle until a police whistle sounds and they disappear. Soon thereafter, the Negro woman comes around the corner rifling through the prostitute's purse.

Even more panicked, Blanche returns to the phone and whispers to the operator to connect her to Western Union. She tries to send a telegraph saying that she needs help desperately and is "[c]aught in a trap," but she breaks off when Stanley emerges from the bathroom in his special pajamas. He stares at her, grinning, while the phone begins to beep. He crosses the room and replaces the phone on the hook. Still grinning, he steps between Blanche and the door. The sound of the piano becomes louder and then turns into the sound of a passing train, disturbing Blanche. When the noise ends, she asks Stanley to let her pass by, and he takes one step to the side. She asks him to move further away, but he stays put and laughs at Blanche for thinking that he will try to prevent her from leaving.

The jungle voices swell as Stanley slowly advances toward Blanche, ignoring her cries that he stay away. She grabs a bottle and smashes its end on the table, threatening to smash the remaining fragment on Stanley's face. He jumps at her, grabs her arm when she swings at him, and forces her to drop the bottle. "We've had this

date from the beginning," he says, and she sinks to her knees. He picks her up and carries her to the bed. The pulsing music indicates that Stanley rapes Blanche.

Williams mimics classical tragedy by not showing Blanche's rape, the play's climax and most violent act. The omission of the rape heightens our sense of its offensiveness and also reflects the notions of acceptable stage behavior held by Americans in 1947, when A Streetcar Named Desire was first produced. Our sense of the rape's inevitability is another reason why it seems unnecessary that the act take place onstage. Stanley's final statement to Blanche that they have "had this date from the beginning" suggests that his rape of her has been fated all along. Instead of an act of force, he casts what happens as the endgame of their elemental struggle against each other.

The way Stanley terrorizes Blanche by shattering her self-delusions parallels and foreshadows his physical defeat of her. Increasingly, Blanche's most visceral experiences are the delusions and repressed memories that torment her, so that her physical rape seems an almost inevitable consequence of her psychological pain. The rape also symbolizes the final destruction of the Old South's genteel fantasy world, symbolized by Blanche, by the cruel but vibrant present, symbolized by Stanley. In the New South, animal instinct and common sense win out over lofty ideals and romantic notions.

Williams indicates the impending rape through Stanley's macho, imposing, animalistic body language. Like a snake, Stanley flicks his tongue at Blanche through his teeth. He corners her in the bedroom, refusing to move out of her way, then "springs" at her, calling her a "tiger" as he captures her. Blanche's silent resignation as Stanley carries her to the bed indicates the utter defeat of her will.

Our opinion of Stanley has changed greatly by this second-to-last scene. At the start of the play, Stanley is more likable and down-to-

earth than Blanche. He lacks her pretension, and he represents the new America, where reward is based on merit and good work, not on birth into fortunate circumstances. But Stanley's rape of Blanche just before his child is born, when he is at his most triumphant and she at her most psychologically vulnerable, is the ultimate act of cruelty. If rape is realism, then surely Blanche's world of dreams and fantasies is a better alternative. To confirm the terrible nature of reality, the back of Blanche's make-believe world falls away, and the world of the street, with its prostitution, drinking, and thievery, impinges upon her surroundings. Each of these three characters—the prostitute, the drunkard, and the thief—reflects to Blanche an aspect of her personality.

2.5.11 Scene Eleven

Summary

A few weeks later, Stella cries while packing Blanche's belongings. Blanche is taking a bath. Stanley and his buddies are playing poker in the kitchen, which the stage directions describe as having the same ghastly atmosphere as on the poker night when Stanley beat Stella. Eunice comes downstairs and enters the apartment. Stanley boasts about his own ability to survive and win out against others thanks to his spectacular confidence, and Mitch stammers incoherently in angry disbelief.

Eunice calls the men callous and goes over to Stella to see how the packing is going. Stella asks how her baby is, and Eunice says the baby is asleep. Eunice asks about Blanche, and Stella says they have arranged for Blanche to spend some time resting in the country, but Blanche thinks she is going to travel with Shep Huntleigh. Blanche emerges from the bathroom briefly, asking Stella to tell any callers that she'll phone them back shortly. She requests that Stella find her yellow silk suit and its accessories, then returns to the bathroom. Stella tells

Eunice that she isn't certain she did the right thing, but that there is no way she could believe Blanche's story about the rape and continue to live with Stanley. Eunice comforts Stella, saying she had no choice but to doubt Blanche's story and continue life as usual with Stanley. Blanche opens the bathroom door hesitantly, checking to make sure that the men playing poker won't be able to see her as she comes out. She emerges with a slightly unhinged vivacity to the strains of the Varsouviana polka. Stella and Eunice behave in a gentle, accommodating manner. Blanche asks if Shep Huntleigh has called, and Stella answers, "[N]ot yet."

At the poker table, the sound of Blanche's voice sends Mitch into a daydream, until Stanley snaps him out of it. The sound of Stanley's voice from the kitchen stuns Blanche. She remains still for a few moments, mouthing Stanley's name, then with a rising hysteria demands to know what is going on. The women quiet and soothe her, and the men restrain Stanley from interfering. Blanche is appeased for the moment, but frantically anxious to leave. The other women convince her to wait. They offer her grapes, and she worries about whether they have been washed. Blanche starts to leave, but the women detain her again. They manage to hold her in the bedroom by playing on her fear of walking in front of the men at the poker table, saying she should wait until the game is over. Blanche lapses into a reverie about her upcoming vacation, imagining that she will die at sea from eating a dirty grape with a handsome young ship's doctor at her side.

The doorbell rings, and Blanche waits tensely, hoping that the caller is Shep Huntleigh, her savior. In reality, a doctor and nurse are at the door. Eunice returns and announces that someone is calling for Blanche, saying she thinks it might be Shep. Blanche becomes tense, and the Varsouviana begins again. When Eunice mentions that a lady accompanies Blanche's caller, Blanche grows more nervous. She frets again about walking in front of the poker players, but Stella accompanies

her. The poker players stand uncomfortably as Blanche passes, except for Mitch, who stares at the table. When Blanche steps out onto the porch and sees the doctor, not Shep Huntleigh, she retreats in fright to where Stella is standing, then slips back into the apartment.

Inside, Stanley steps up to block Blanche's way to the bedroom. Blanche rushes around him, claiming she has forgotten something. The weird reflections and shadows reappear on the walls, and the Varsouviana music and jungle cries grow louder. The doctor sends the nurse in after Blanche. In stage whispers, Stanley advises the doctor to go in, and the doctor tells the nurse to grab Blanche. As the nurse speaks to Blanche, her voice echoes eerily. Blanche panics and asks to be left alone. Stanley says the only thing Blanche could have possibly forgotten is her paper lantern, which he tears from the lightbulb and hands to her. Blanche shrieks and tries to escape. The nurse holds Blanche, who struggles in her grasp.

Stella bolts out onto the porch, and Eunice goes to comfort her. Stella begs Eunice to stop the group from hurting Blanche, but Eunice won't let Stella go. She tells Stella that she has made the right decision. The men move toward the bedroom, and Stanley blocks Mitch from entering. When Mitch goes to strike Stanley, Stanley pushes him back, and Mitch collapses in tears at the table. The doctor takes off his hat and approaches Blanche gently. At Blanche's soft request, the doctor tells the nurse to release Blanche, and that a straitjacket won't be necessary. The doctor leads Blanche out of the bedroom, she holding onto his arm. "Whoever you are," Blanche says, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

The doctor leads Blanche through the kitchen as the poker players look on. Stella crouched on the porch in agony, calls out her sister's name as she passes by. Blanche allows herself to be led onward and does not turn to look at Stella. The doctor, the nurse, and Blanche turn

the corner and disappear. Eunice brings the baby to Stella and thrusts it into her arms, then goes to the kitchen to join the men. Stanley goes out onto the porch and over to Stella, who sobs while holding her child. Stanley comforts Stella with loving words and begins to caress her. In the kitchen, Steve deals a new hand.

Blanche's behavior toward the poker players and during her bath reflects the way being raped by Stanley has scarred her. At the start of the play, she performs for Stanley's friends and demands their charm and devotion. By its end, she wants to hide from their gaze and hopes they won't notice her. Blanche spends much of Scene Eleven in the bath, but the bathing in this scene is different than before—an attempt to wash away Stanley's recent violation rather than her past sexual acts. She also bathes to prepare for her imagined meeting with Shep Huntleigh rather than for any real encounter with a man. Blanche's bath in this scene shows her cleansing herself for an impending ritual and hiding from real danger rather than simply calming her nerves. It is clear that Stanley has destroyed Blanche's already tenuous connection to reality. She no longer hopes that reality will prove itself adaptable to her dreams.

Blanche's illusions and deceptions about her past lose out to the disturbing reality of the Kowalskis' marriage, but by the end of the scene the marriage proves to be a sort of illusion, based on deception. The two sisters' roles reverse. Stella admits that she may have entered a world of make-believe when she acknowledges that she cannot believe Blanche's story about the rape and continue to live with Stanley. Blanche, by retreating into hysteria and madness, and by refusing to acknowledge her sister as she leaves the apartment with the doctor, may be sparing Stella the horror of having to face the truth about her husband. Blanche's descent into madness shields Stella from the truth. If Blanche were to remain lucid, Stella might have to give Blanche's claims credibility.

In many of his plays, Williams depicts unmarried, fallen, Southern

women such as Blanche who are victims to society's rules. The desperate nature of Blanche's situation is apparent in her mental attempts to convince herself that the chivalric gentleman still exists in the form of Shep Huntleigh. Her quiet determination to depend "on the kindness of strangers" is funny, because in the past Blanche has slept with quite a few strangers, but it also indicates the resignation and defeat women in her position must accept when it comes to counting on their families. Most of the strangers we see in the play—the newspaper boy, the Mexican flower woman—show that they have very little other than sadness to offer Blanche. Social convention in the Old South diminishes unmarried women completely, leaving them vulnerable to domination or destruction by men. By showing the triumph of brutality and ruthlessness over gentility and delicacy, this scene captures and portrays the disposable nature of Blanche's kind.

When she insists that Stella's life with Stanley must go on, Eunice argues that male companionship is a woman's means of survival in the face of social convention. Eunice believes that Stella must work fiercely to maintain her relationship with Stanley. Given what the audience sees Stella and Eunice suffer at the hands of their husbands, it is unlikely that these women believe nothing of Blanche's story. However, acknowledging its truth would require them to acknowledge their husbands' brutality, and it would interfere with their survival. Life "going on" depends on having the social protection of marriage and a family, regardless of the cost.

Stella's "luxurious" tears at the end of the play are shed not only for her sister, but also for the complexity and tension between illusion and reality, between Blanche's story and Stella's own understanding of her life. Stella cannot believe Blanche's story, but she cannot completely deny it either. Ultimately, Stella cries for herself, for Blanche, and for the fact that a part of her is glad to see Blanche go. She accepts the

overdone comfort Stanley offers, which are peppered with endearments like “now, love,” and which conforms to the script Stella needs for life to go on. An offstage announcement that another poker game (“seven-card stud”) is about to commence ends the play with a symbol of the deception and bluffing that has taken place in the Kowalski house. The play’s last line also serves as a subtle reminder that the nature of the game in the Kowalski household can always change.

2.6 THEMES, MOTIFS & SYMBOLS

2.6.1 Themes

- **Real world versus fantasy world**

Although Williams’s protagonist in A Streetcar Named Desire is the romantic Blanche DuBois, the play is a work of social realism. Blanche explains to Mitch that she lies because she refuses to accept the hand fate has dealt her. Lying to herself and to others allows her to make life appear as it should be rather than as it is. Stanley, a practical man firmly grounded in the physical world, disdains Blanche’s fabrications and does everything he can to unravel them. The antagonistic relationship between Blanche and Stanley is a struggle between appearances and reality. It propels the play’s plot and creates an overarching tension. Ultimately, Blanche’s attempts to remake her own and Stella’s existences—to rejuvenate her life and to save Stella from a life with Stanley—fail.

One of the main ways Williams dramatizes fantasy’s inability to overcome reality is through an exploration of the boundary between exterior and interior. The set of the play consists of the two-room Kowalski apartment and the surrounding street. Williams’s use of a flexible set that allows the street to be seen at the same time as the interior of the home expresses the notion that the home is not a domestic sanctuary. The Kowalskis’ apartment cannot be a self-defined world

that is impermeable to greater reality. The characters leave and enter the apartment throughout the play, often bringing with them the problems they encounter in the larger environment. For example, Blanche refuses to leave her prejudices against the working class behind her at the door. The most notable instance of this effect occurs just before Stanley rapes Blanche, when the back wall of the apartment becomes transparent to show the struggles occurring on the street, foreshadowing the violation that is about to take place in the Kowalskis' home.

Though reality triumphs over fantasy in A Streetcar Named Desire, Williams suggests that fantasy is an important and useful tool. At the end of the play, Blanche's retreat into her own private fantasies enables her to partially shield herself from reality's harsh blows. Blanche's insanity emerges as she retreats fully into herself, leaving the objective world behind in order to avoid accepting reality. In order to escape fully, however, Blanche must come to perceive the exterior world as that which she imagines in her head. Thus, objective reality is not an antidote to Blanche's fantasy world; rather, Blanche adapts the exterior world to fit her delusions. In both the physical and the psychological realms, the boundary between fantasy and reality is permeable. Blanche's final, deluded happiness suggests that, to some extent, fantasy is a vital force at play in every individual's experience, despite reality's inevitable triumph.

❖ Inability to accept truth

Blanche lives in a cocoon of unreality to protect herself against her weaknesses and shortcomings, including her inability to repress sexual desire. To preserve her ego, she lies about her promiscuous behavior in Laurel; she shuns bright light, lest it reveal her physical imperfections; and she refuses to acknowledge her problem with alcohol. Stanley effectively penetrates her cocoon verbally with his crude insults

and physically with his sexual assault near the end of the play. Stanley has his own problem: He lacks the insight to see what he really is— a coarse, domineering macho man ruled by primal instincts. Unlike Blanche, though, he is happy in his ignorance. For her part, Stella accepts the truth— partly. She acknowledges that Stanley is crude and that her apartment is cramped and shabby. But, in the end, she refuses to accept the truth about her sister's past and about Stanley's violation of Blanche. "I couldn't believe [Blanche's] story [about the rape] and go on living with Stanley," Stella says.

❖ The Relationship between Sex and Death

Unbridled sexual desire leads to isolating darkness and eventually death. Williams establishes this theme at the beginning of the play, when Blanche takes a streetcar named Desire (sex), transfers to one named Cemeteries (Death), and gets off at a street named Elysian Fields (the Afterlife). He maintains the theme during the play with references to Blanche's first husband, a homosexual who committed suicide after she caught him with another man, and with Blanche's literal and figurative retreat into the shadows after having many sordid affairs. She shuns bright lights; she dates Mitch only in the evening. Blanche's fear of death manifests itself in her fears of aging and of lost beauty. She refuses to tell anyone her true age or to appear in harsh light that will reveal her faded looks. She seems to believe that by continually asserting her sexuality, especially toward men younger than herself, she will be able to avoid death and return to the world of teenage bliss she experienced before her husband's suicide.

Sex leads to death for others Blanche knows as well. Throughout the play, Blanche is haunted by the deaths of her ancestors, which she attributes to their "epic fornications." Her husband's suicide results from her disapproval of his homosexuality. The message is that indulging

one's desire in the form of unrestrained promiscuity leads to forced departures and unwanted ends. In Scene Nine, when the Mexican woman appears selling "flowers for the dead," Blanche reacts with horror because the woman announces Blanche's fate. Her fall into madness can be read as the ending brought about by her dual flaws—her inability to act appropriately on her desire and her desperate fear of human mortality. Sex and death are intricately and fatally linked in Blanche's experience.

❖ Dependence on Men

A Streetcar Named Desire presents a sharp critique of the way the institutions and attitudes of postwar America placed restrictions on women's lives. Williams uses Blanche's and Stella's dependence on men to expose and critique the treatment of women during the transition from the old to the new South. Both Blanche and Stella see male companions as their only means to achieve happiness, and they depend on men for both their sustenance and their self-image. Blanche recognizes that Stella could be happier without her physically abusive husband, Stanley. Yet, the alternative Blanche proposes—contacting Shep Huntleigh for financial support—still involves complete dependence on men. When Stella chooses to remain with Stanley, she chooses to rely on, love, and believe in a man instead of her sister. Williams does not necessarily criticize Stella—he makes it quite clear that Stanley represents a much more secure future than Blanche does.

For herself, Blanche sees marriage to Mitch as her means of escaping destitution. Men's exploitation of Blanche's sexuality has left her with a poor reputation. This reputation makes Blanche an unattractive marriage prospect, but, because she is destitute, Blanche sees marriage as her only possibility for survival. When Mitch rejects Blanche because of Stanley's gossip about her reputation, Blanche immediately thinks of another man—the millionaire Shep Huntleigh—who might rescue

her. Because Blanche cannot see around her dependence on men, she has no realistic conception of how to rescue herself. Blanche does not realize that her dependence on men will lead to her downfall rather than her salvation. By relying on men, Blanche puts her fate in the hands of others.

❖ **Destruction of the Old South**

The final destruction of the Old South, symbolized by Blanche and Belle Reve (the family property seized by creditors) and Blanche's final journey to a mental asylum completes this symbolism. This theme begins to unfold in the opening scene of the play. Two women, one white and one black, sit as equals on the steps of an apartment building while Blanche arrives on scene with the attitude and finery of a southern belle of yesteryear. She finds herself as an alien, a strange creature from another time, another place.

2.6.2 Motifs

❖ **Light**

Throughout the play, Blanche avoids appearing in direct, bright light, especially in front of her suitor, Mitch. She also refuses to reveal her age, and it is clear that she avoids light in order to prevent him from seeing the reality of her fading beauty. In general, light also symbolizes the reality of Blanche's past. She is haunted by the ghosts of what she has lost—her first love, her purpose in life, her dignity, and the genteel society (real or imagined) of her ancestors.

Blanche covers the exposed light bulb in the Kowalski apartment with a Chinese paper lantern, and she refuses to go on dates with Mitch during the daytime or to well-lit locations. Mitch points out Blanche's avoidance of light in Scene Nine, when he confronts her with the stories Stanley has told him of her past. Mitch then forces Blanche to stand

under the direct light. When he tells her that he doesn't mind her age, just her deceitfulness, Blanche responds by saying that she doesn't mean any harm. She believes that magic, rather than reality, represents life as it ought to be. Blanche's inability to tolerate light means that her grasp on reality is also nearing its end. In Scene Six, Blanche tells Mitch that being in love with her husband, Allan Grey, was like having the world revealed in bright, vivid light. Since Allan's suicide, Blanche says, the bright light has been missing. Through all of Blanche's inconsequential sexual affairs with other men, she has experienced only dim light. Bright light, therefore, represents Blanche's youthful sexual innocence, while poor light represents her sexual maturity and disillusionment.

❖ Bathing

Throughout A Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche bathes herself. Her sexual experiences have made her a hysterical woman, but these baths, as she says, calm her nerves. In light of her efforts to forget and shed her illicit past in the new community of New Orleans, these baths represent her efforts to cleanse herself of her odious history. Yet, just as she cannot erase the past, her bathing is never done. Stanley also turns to water to undo a misdeed when he showers after beating Stella. The shower serves to soothe his violent temper; afterward, he leaves the bathroom feeling remorseful and calls out longingly for his wife.

❖ Drunkenness

Both Stanley and Blanche drink excessively at various points during the play. Stanley's drinking is social: he drinks with his friends at the bar, during their poker games, and to celebrate the birth of his child. Blanche's drinking, on the other hand, is anti-social, and she tries to keep it a secret. She drinks on the sly in order to withdraw from harsh reality. A state of drunken stupor enables her to take a flight of

imagination, such as concocting a getaway with Shep Huntleigh. For both characters, drinking leads to destructive behavior: Stanley commits domestic violence, and Blanche deludes herself. Yet Stanley is able to rebound from his drunken escapades, whereas alcohol augments Blanche's gradual departure from sanity.

2.6.3 Symbols

Streetcar named Desire: Blanche's desire. Although Blanche arrives in New Orleans as a somewhat broken woman, she keeps alive her desire to be with a man and to lead a life as an elegant, respectable woman.

Streetcar named Cemeteries: Old, disgraced Blanche, the one that Blanche left behind— dead, so to speak— in her hometown of Laurel, Miss., to begin anew in New Orleans. This streetcar can also suggest that life is over for the new Blanche as well, for she is damaged property edging toward madness.

Street named Elysian Fields: The new life Blanche is seeking. In Greek mythology, the Elysian Fields (also called *Elysium and the Elysian Plain*) made up a paradise reserved for worthy mortals after they died. Because Blanche's old self ''died'' in Laurel, Miss., she traveled to New Orleans to seek her Elysium.

Belle Reve: Name of Blanche's family home in Mississippi. It represents the ''beautiful dream'' (the meaning of *Belle Rêve* in French) that Blanche seeks but never experiences.

Blanche's white suit: False purity and innocence with which Blanche masks her carnal desire and cloaks her past.

Blanche's frequent bathing: Her attempt to wash away her past life.

Alcohol: Another way Blanche washes away bad memories.

Bright light: Penetrating gaze of truth that sees the real Blanche with all her imperfections. When she greets Stella the first time in the apartment, she says, "And turn that over-light off! Turn that off! I won't be looked at in this merciless glare!" Blanche avoids bright lights throughout the play.

Blanche: *Blanche* means *white* in French, and— in keeping with her name—she wears a white dress and gloves in the opening scene of the play to hide her real self in the purity that white suggests.

Stella: *Stella* means *star* or *like a star* in Latin, although she lives in a shabby apartment building in a lower-class section of New Orleans. It could be argued that she is the star of her husband's life and the star that led Blanche to New Orleans.

Stanley: Old English name meaning *stone field.* Thus, it is possible he represents a cemetery for Blanche. *Stanislaus* was the name of a king of Poland. Clearly, Stanley is the king of his household.

The small Kowalski apartment: The size and plainness of the life to which Blanche, who formerly lived in a splendid mansion, must adjust.

Allen Grey: Gray area of Blanche's life, between the bright light that she avoids and the darkness she seeks. She loved Allen Grey, but he betrayed her. In New Orleans, she remembers the good and the bad of her relationship with him.

Paper : Imagery centering on paper represents impermanence, unreality, or artificiality. For example, the paper legal documents Blanche brings with her to New Orleans attest to the loss of the family homestead,

Belle Reve. The youth collecting for the local paper, *The Evening Star,* represents the transience of sexual gratification. Apparently, he reminds Blanche of Allen Grey. On a whim, she suddenly kisses the youth but then dismisses him, mindful of the disgrace she brought upon herself with her liaison with a student. The song Blanche sings while bathing, ‘‘Paper Moon,’’ symbolizes the fantasy world of love.

❖ Shadows and Cries

As Blanche and Stanley begin to quarrel in Scene Ten, various oddly shaped shadows begin to appear on the wall behind her. Discordant noises and jungle cries also occur as Blanche begins to descend into madness. All of these effects combine to dramatize Blanche’s final breakdown and departure from reality in the face of Stanley’s physical threat. When she loses her sanity in her final struggle against Stanley, Blanche retreats entirely into her own world. Whereas she originally colors her perception of reality according to her wishes, at this point in the play she ignores reality altogether.

❖ The Varsouviana Polka

The Varsouviana is the polka tune to which Blanche and her young husband, Allen Grey, were dancing when she last saw him alive. Earlier that day, she had walked in on him in bed with an older male friend. The three of them then went out dancing together, pretending that nothing had happened. In the middle of the Varsouviana, Blanche turned to Allen and told him that he “disgusted” her. He ran away and shot himself in the head.

The polka music plays at various points in *A Streetcar Named Desire,* when Blanche is feeling remorse for Allen’s death. The first time we hear it is in Scene One, when Stanley meets Blanche and asks her about her husband. Its second appearance occurs when Blanche

tells Mitch the story of Allen Grey. From this point on, the polka plays increasingly often, and it always drives Blanche to distraction. She tells Mitch that it ends only after she hears the sound of a gunshot in her head.

The polka and the moment it evokes represent Blanche's loss of innocence. The suicide of the young husband Blanche loved dearly was the event that triggered her mental decline. Since then, Blanche hears the Varsouviana whenever she panics and loses her grip on reality.

"It's Only a Paper Moon"

In Scene Seven, Blanche sings this popular ballad while she bathes. The song's lyrics describe the way love turns the world into a "phony" fantasy. The speaker in the song says that if both lovers believe in their imagined reality, then it's no longer "make-believe." These lyrics sum up Blanche's approach to life. She believes that her fibbing is only her means of enjoying a better way of life and is therefore essentially harmless.

As Blanche sits in the tub singing "It's Only a Paper Moon," Stanley tells Stella the details of Blanche's sexually corrupt past. Williams ironically juxtaposes Blanche's fantastical understanding of herself with Stanley's description of Blanche's real nature. In reality, Blanche is a sham who feigns propriety and sexual modesty. Once Mitch learns the truth about Blanche, he can no longer believe in Blanche's tricks and lies.

❖ Meat

In Scene One, Stanley throws a package of meat at his adoring Stella for her to catch. The action sends Eunice and the Negro woman into peals of laughter. Presumably, they've picked up on the sexual innuendo behind Stanley's gesture. In hurling the meat at Stella, Stanley states the sexual proprietorship he holds over her. Stella's delight in catching Stanley's meat signifies her sexual infatuation with him.

Expressionism:

In literature expressionism is a movement or writing technique in which a writer depicts a character's feeling about a subject or the writer's own feeling about it rather than the objective surface reality of the subject. A writer in effect presents his interpretation of what he/she sees. Often the presentation is a grotesque distortion or phantasmagoric representation of reality. However, there is logic to this approach because not everybody perceives the world the same way. What one person may see as beautiful or good another person may see as ugly or bad. Sometimes a writer or his character suffers from a mental debility such as depression or paranoia which alter his perception. Expressionism enables the writer to present this altered perception.

STOP TO CONSIDER

Some important dialogues

Blanche: They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get out at – Elysian Fields. (Sc-I)

Stella: The best I could do was make my own living, Blanche. (Sc-I)

Stella: People have got to tolerate each other's habits, I guess. (Sc-IV)

Blanche: He acts like an animal, has an animal's habit! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There is even something – sub-human— something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes something— ape-like about him …. (Sc-IV)

Mitch: I don't think I ever seen you in the light.

Blanche: I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! (Sc-IX)

Blanche: Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers. (Sc-XI)

2.7 SUMMING UP

After reading this unit you must have understood the prescribed play in a better way. It should enable you to develop you own analysis and interpretation of the plays themes, motifs, symbols and characterization. Hope, the unit well supplements you own reading of the text.

Questions:

1. To what extent is Blanche a victim of her own self-delusions and Old South attitudes? To what extent is she the victim of males who take advantage of her, deceive her, or abuse her?
2. Blanche quotes literature and occasionally speaks French; her language is elegant, educated. Stanley, on the other hand, uses coarse, sometimes brutal, language. Does their speech reflect their perceptions of reality? Explain your answer.
3. Who is the most admirable character in the play?
4. What is the meaning of the scene at the beginning of the play in which Stanley throws a package of meat up to Stella? Is it simply intended to show that Stanley is a macho male who delivers what women want, sexually, or is there more to the scene?
5. The confrontation between Stanley and Blanche is central to the plot of A Streetcar Named Desire - what do you think are the sources of their animosity toward one another?
6. If indiscrete sexuality causes the downfall of Blanche DuBois, how do you assess society's acceptance of Stanley Kowalski after his rape of Blanche?
7. Prepare an illustrative note on the use of symbols in A Street Car Named Desire.

8. Do you think Blanche DuBois is responsible for her own fall or the society has a hand in her ultimate ruin?
9. Assess the character of Stanley Kowalski.
10. What is your opinion of Stella's role in the clash between Stanley and Blanche?

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SELF LEARNING MATERIAL

Master of English

4th Semester

ENGLISH

COURSE : ENG - 404

AMERICAN LITERATURE-II

BLOCK : II

POETRY

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ENGLISH

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ENGLISH
COURSE : ENG – 404

AMERICAN LITERATURE - II

CONTENTS

BLOCK – II
POETRY

The objective of this block is to give you an overview of American poetry. The block, comprising four units, will acquaint you with the major trends and developments in American poetry by providing you with a selection of poems. We will start this block with Walt Whitman. The first ten sections of his long poem 'Song of Myself' are included for your study in Unit 1. One of the major American poets of the twentieth century, Robert Frost, will be dealt with in Unit 2. Four poems of his, pointing to his wide range and variety, are selected for study. Ezra Pound who is easily the most experimental as also the most controversial poet of his time is covered in the next unit. You will be expected to study three poems by Pound in the unit. Unit 4 will consist of two poems by another important American poet, Wallace Stevens. The block, thus, covers a long period of American poetry, from the colonial period to the modern.

American poetry, in fact, can be taken as a reference point in understanding the larger American culture. The poetry produced in America, just like poetry written elsewhere, is always related to its cultural domain. While, on the one hand, American poetry celebrates the landscape and tradition of America, on the other, it also questions and rejects its culture. Between these two extremes the poets play variations on the basic themes of American culture—themes like unity and diversity of American life, the notion of individual freedom versus the impulse to community, the isolation of individual, religion, nature, etc.

The first American poet of significance is undoubtedly Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672). Her poetry is largely in the Puritan tradition, meditating about the contending claims of the flesh and the spirit. She is America's first woman poet, a forerunner of the emancipated woman and her autobiographical writings are generally regarded to have initiated a tradition of woman's autobiography in America. Another notable poet of the Puritan period of American poetry was Edward Taylor (1642-1729). A distinctly American lyric voice of the colonial period was the black woman poet Phillis Wheatley (1754-1784). She was one of the best-known poets of her day and her poems were typical of New England culture at the time, meditating on religious and classical ideas

American romantic poetry can be said to begin after its Independence with William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878). He sings of the American landscape and of her Prairies and forests. He is also linked to the Transcendentalists to a certain extent. He insisted on American subjects and forms in poetry. He is widely considered to be a precursor of the American Renaissance.

Bryant's nature poetry can be contrasted with the works of poets like Henry Longfellow (1807-1882) and John Whittier (1807-1892) who represent the aristocracy of American poetry. They wanted to preserve the culture and tradition in the face of newer styles, and were also committed to preserving links with England.

Emerson (1803-1882), on the other hand, resisted the American intellectual dependence on Europe. He wanted the American poets to relate to their own landscape and culture and to work with American materials. He was also the leader of Transcendentalism which was the distinctly American strain of English Romanticism. While Romanticism transitioned into Victorianism in post-reform England, it grew more energetic in America from the 1830s through to the Civil War. Thoreau (1817-1862) continued the same tradition, writing poems with a distinct American ambience.

However, it is in the works of Walt Whitman (1819-1892) that the various strains of American culture fulfil themselves. The Puritan, the Transcendental, the realistic, the visionary and the prophetic all come together in his poetry. His thematic and technical innovations opened up possibilities for future American poets. His influence is particularly evident in the works of later poets like Hart Crane (1899-1932) and Carl Sandburg (1878-1967).

The work of Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is equally significant. There is little doubt that she is America's most distinguished woman poet and her career is a remarkable example of how self-imposed isolation can be transformed into a condition of intense poetic expression. Thus, Dickinson, Bradstreet and Wheatley represent a counterfoil to the main currents of the tradition.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) provides a contrast to Whitman and represents the European strain in American poetry. He was probably the most recognized American poet outside of America during this period. He is a precursor of modernism and an influence on T.S.Eliot. Edward Arlington Robinson (1869-1935), Stephen Crane (1871-1900) and Robert Frost (1874-1963), on the other hand, represent the formalist strain in twentieth-century American poetry. They are the originators of twentieth-century American verse, poets who wrote in a dramatic and conversational style, but in traditional forms.

Modernism, however, is associated with Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and T.S.Eliot (1888-1965) and the Imagist movement. Imagism was radical in its insistence on free verse, openness of form and subject matter and in its insistence on the word-picture as the basic unit of poetry. Both helped in the development of American poetry in terms of complexity with emphasis on new techniques. Pound, in particular, opened up American poetry to diverse influences, including the traditional poetry of China and Japan. Modern American poetry was taken further forward by many other notable poets. William Carlos Williams

(1883-1963), through his Objectivism, makes the poetic image yet another object in a world of surfaces and things. E.E.Cummings (1894-1962) remains notable for his experiments with typography and evocation of a spontaneous, child-like vision of reality. Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) with his ornate diction and symbolic passages helped revive the philosophical lyric.

An important aspect of American poetry in the twentieth century was the impact of black poets. In their poems they raised concerns about the history of slavery and racism in American culture, and consequently gave rise to a movement called the 'Harlem Renaissance'. Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was the principal figure of this movement. He revolutionized Black writing and in poetry introduced the rhythms of Jazz and the Blues. Claude McKay (1890-1948) and Countee Cullen (1903-1946) are other important black writers of the period.

Williams' open forms combined with Pound's example was the inspiration for newer traditions in American poetry such as Beat and Confessional poetry. The Beats like Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) represents an alienated America of the 1950s. Their poetry is largely a protest against the Establishment. The Confessional poets like Robert Lowell (1917-1977), Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and John Berryman (1914-1972) were agonizing about their fractured selves and foregrounded their self in poetry.

Because of space constraint, we have provided only a brief introduction to American poetry here. But this should suffice for your immediate requirement. For a more detailed study of American poetry, you can go through any decent volume on American literature in general, and poetry in particular.

UNIT - I

WALT WHITMAN

Contents

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall introduce you to one of the greatest American poets Walt Whitman by focusing on his most well-known poem 'Song of Myself' (Sections 1-10). After reading this unit, you will be able to :

- outline the theme of 'Song of Myself'
- explain whitman's concept of the 'self'
- highlight the technical aspects of the poem
- analyse the democratic elements in Whitman's poem

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is regarded as one of the most representative American poets. His poetry is marked by his spontaneous, although occasionally iconoclastic, speaking voice, an overwhelming nationalist concern and a profound support for democracy. He is credited for introducing free verse (or *vers libre*) into American poetry and also for incorporating the concept of Transcendentalism (for explanation see Key Words). *Leaves of Grass* (1855) is his major work and is widely acclaimed as an American epic. Besides 'Song of Myself', 'O Captain, My Captain', 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking', 'Passage to India' and 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' are his most well-known poems.

'Song of Myself' was first published as the untitled opening poem of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. The poem went through many revisions and expansions in the years that followed. In its final form, the poem is divided into 52 sections and has more than 1300 lines. It is now considered to be an American epic as Whitman catalogues the vignette of American life. The poem upholds human values of compassion and companionship. Besides, the poem also delves into the meaning of cycles of birth, death and rebirth.

In this unit, we shall study the first ten sections of Whitman's 'Song of Myself'. We will provide you with an outline of the prescribed sections as well as an appreciation of the poem. You will be able to monitor your progress through the CYP exercise.

1.2 'SONG OF MYSELF'

1.2.1 Outline of the Poem

Section 1

Whitman establishes a link between his own self and the collective human self. He is confident that the beliefs and ideals held by him are also held by other people. The poet invites his soul to observe a blade of grass. He states his proud American lineage by saying that he was "formed from this soil" just like his ancestors. He celebrates his oneness with Nature and hopes to continue his celebration of self until his death, thereby having a bond with primeval Nature. For the time being he wants to keep away from religions, saints and philosophers.

Section 2

The poet asserts his separation from the artificial aspects of life like perfumes and fragrances. Instead, he wishes to remain close to the eternal world of nature. His spiritual journey traverses all the sensory experiences of nature. He presents a catalogue of things that he loves which shows his zest for life. For Whitman, poems are the ultimate realisation of human consciousness and its origins can only be discovered by being rooted in Nature and not by ideas which have been passed on by books at second or third hand. Even his ideas are not to be taken at face value. One should go to nature and learn to filter true knowledge for one self.

Section 3

Whitman has no inclination to discuss philosophical ideas about origins and ends. Rather, he states that nothing is more important than the present, the "now". For him the ever-present procreative urge (sex) can be equated with a knit of identity and is the bond that breeds life. Body and soul, worldly and other-worldly experiences are equally important, for one completes the other. It is only through the seen (the body) that the unseen (the soul) is realised. The poet admires each organ of his body claiming that no part of a man's body is vile. He celebrates life. The poet remembers an encounter that provides him with bliss. It can be a physical encounter or a mystical encounter with God.

Section 4

Memories of his past experiences surround the poet. He remembers people asking him about his early life, his opinion on authors and books, his dress, looks and his loved ones. They also enquire about the battles, fratricidal wars, etc. that he may have witnessed. But the poet says that these things are not part of his self. His new role is that of a curious onlooker as he gets immersed in spiritual and impalpable experiences. The poet remembers his earlier vague pursuits of truth and points out that he has no argument left in him now.

Section 5

The poet is ecstatic in his union with his soul. He describes this union in terms of a sexual union. There is a feeling of oneness with God and of brotherhood with his fellowmen. This union brings him joy, peace and a vision of love. He sees that even the humblest objects contain the infinite universe. All creation is equally holy and valuable.

Section 6

Whitman introduces the central symbol of the poem in this section. A child comes with both his hands full of grass and wants to know what its significance is. The grass that the child brings up to him is the symbol of divinity, of democracy and of the continuity inherent in the life-death cycle. The smallest sprout of grass actually proves that nothing really dies and life goes on. Death is actually a birth into new life which is better and happier than life on this earth.

Section 7

The poet mentions that one is just as lucky to die as he is to be born. Death is not the end of life but the beginning of a new existence. Mere physical body cannot contain man—he is more than what could be contained between his hat and boots. His universalised self finds good everywhere—the earth, the stars as well as their adjuncts. He is part of everyone around him. He is the friend of all people, young and old, men and women. He loves all equally. He knows all whether they are rich or poor. And since he knows everybody, none can put him off.

Section 8

The poet is the unattached observer in this section of the poem. He looks on various aspects of life—birth, life and death, as represented by the sleeping child, the joyous lovers and the man committing suicide. The poet catalogues all that he sees in the city—the little babies, youngsters, corpses, sleighs, carts, etc. He is a part of them. He looks around and finds different sorts of people and hears different sorts of sounds. The poet comes and sees everything and then departs.

Section 9

The poet describes the countryside in this section. He takes delight in the entire process of harvesting, from the abundance of the harvest to the loading of the produce in the carts. Everything (the barns, the dried grass, the wagon, etc.) is ready for harvest. The section provides a picture of nature during the autumn season.

Section 10

Like the previous two sections, Whitman continues cataloguing the various aspects of American life in this section too. He describes the experience of hunting in the woods. He enjoys the company of the boatman, the clam-digger and the trapper. He also witnesses a marriage ceremony in a Red-Indian family by the riverside. The poet also describes how he looked after an injured runaway slave.

1.2.2 Appreciation

We shall best understand 'Song of Myself' by comprehending the 'concept of self' as typified by Whitman. For the poet 'the self' is both individual as well as universal. The "myself" or the all-powerful "I" of the poem which serves as the narrator is not be confined to Whitman himself, or any single individual for that matter. The persona described has transcended the conventional boundaries of self. The merging of the individual self with the universal self points out to the possibility for communion between individuals. Starting from the premise that "what I assume you shall assume" Whitman tries to prove that he both encompasses and is indistinguishable from the universe:

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

'Song of Myself' presents three basic themes: the concept of the self, the identification of the self with other selves, and the poet's relationship with the elements of nature and the universe. Despite being tempted by the fragrances of the perfumes coming out of houses and rooms and shelves, the poet would not let them intoxicate him. Instead he wants to be close to the odourless atmosphere which symbolizes the universal self. In fact, the concept of self is the most significant aspect of Whitman's mind and art.

To Whitman, the self is both individual and universal. Man has an individual self, whereas the world, or cosmos, has a universal or cosmic self. The poet wishes to maintain the identity of his individual self, and yet he desires to merge it with the universal self, which involves the identification of the poet's self with mankind and the mystical union of the poet with God, the Absolute Self. Once a link has been established between his own self and the collective human self, Whitman proceeds to assert his oneness with Nature. He believes that the origin of human consciousness can only be discovered by being rooted in Nature. Neither the artificial aspects of life nor even philosophical treatises on origins and ends work for him. In order to enter the mystical state he dissociates himself from all man-associated things like "creeds and schools". It is the present, the "now", which is more important than the past or future.

Whitman's admiration for bodily pursuits is as strong as his other-worldly experiences. Sexuality is part of common humanity, and Whitman ignores pretenses in order to reach to the universal truths of human identity, including the truths of the body.

> … go bathe and admire myself.
> Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean,
> Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.

The poet's democratic bent of mind is apparent in his feeling of oneness with God and of brotherhood with his fellowmen. We find him employing the symbol of the grass to express the idea of democracy inherent in American life. Moreover, by cataloguing various aspects of American life—city, country, men, women, children, animals—Whitman insists that he is a part of everything around him.

1.2.3 Poetic Devices

You will notice that 'Song of Myself' is written in Whitman's characteristic free verse style. Free verse is a style of poetry without rhyme or meter:

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,

Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same…

Whitman broke the rules of conventional poetics. This verse style allowed Whitman to explore the themes of identity, nationality, and transcendence in a free country. (Try to find more examples of the free-verse style.)

Words, for Whitman, have both a 'natural' and a 'spiritual' significance. Colloquial words unite the natural with the spiritual, and 'Song of Myself' abounds with many colloquial expressions.

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the tale of the beginning and the end,

But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

The catalogue is another special characteristic of Whitman's poetic technique:

Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,

My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs…

You will find many such instances of cataloguing throughout the poem.

Whitman uses numerous images drawn from nature as well as everyday life to suggest and heighten the impression of a poetic idea. For instance, you can note the following example,

The big doors of the country barn stand open and ready,

The dried grass of the harvest time loads the slow drawn wagon,

The clear light plays on the brown gray and green intertinged

The armfuls are pack'd to the sagging mow.

These images appear to have no clear organization; yet, in effect, they have a basic underlying unity, usually involving a spiritual concept, which gives meaning and coherence to the apparently disconnected images or scenes.

Whitman uses symbolism to express ideas inherent in his poems. As you might have observed, Grass is the central symbol of 'Song of Myself'. It represents the divinity contained in all living things. The handful of grass that the child brings to the poet becomes a symbol of the regeneration in nature. But they also signify a common element that binds disparate people all over America together. Grass, the ultimate symbol of democracy, grows everywhere. The grass also reminds Whitman of graves— grass feeds on the bodies of the dead. Everyone must die eventually, and so the natural roots of democracy are therefore in mortality:

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,

And ceased the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses…

Grass suggests the divinity of common things. The nature and significance of grass unfold the themes of death and immortality, for grass is symbolic of the ongoing cycle of life present in nature, which assures each man of his immortality.

You should also mark that Whitman's poems have enough evidence of his profound love for his country. In 'Song of Myself', too, there are many references to American men, women, scenes and animals. You will notice that Section 8 has pictures of the heavy omnibus, the clank of the horses, the excited crowd and policemen at work. Section 10 has pictures of the Yankee clipper, the boatmen, the marriage ceremony of a Red family and a runaway slave.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What does 'the self' mean for the poet?

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2. What are the three basic themes of 'Song of Myself'?

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3. What does 'the grass' in Section 6 symbolize?

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4. What is Whitman's attitude towards his own body?

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5. How does his love for his country manifest itself in the poem?

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6. What is free-verse?

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1.4 SUMMING-UP

As you might have observed 'Song of Myself' (Sections 1-10) deals with the themes of God, life, death, and nature. Whitman's primary aim is to reveal the nature of the poet's journey through life and the spiritual knowledge which he strives for along the way. They reveal an

essential element in a mystical experience — the awakening of the poet's self. "Song of Myself" is a poetical expression of that mystical experience. It arises out of a belief that it is possible to achieve communion with God through contemplation and love, without the medium of human reason. It is a way of attaining knowledge of spiritual truths through intuition. Sections 1 to 5 concern the poet's entry into a mystical state, while sections 6-10 describe the awakening of the poet's self to his own universality.

You will notice that the poem represents the essence of America. Whitman undertakes not only thematic but also technical innovations in the poem. Techniques like free verse, symbolism and cataloguing serves him well in bringing out the nuances of the poem.

1.5 KEY WORDS

Transcendentalism: Literary, religious and philosophical movement originating in New England in the mid-1830s and remaining influential until the 1860s. The philosophy behind transcendentalism was an eclectic mix of English romanticism, anti-rationality, anti-Puritanism, the mysticism of Emanuel Swedenborg and aspects of Eastern philosophies. The central beliefs of transcendentalism were in unity between nature and God, the presence of God in each individual, and the potential perfectibility of human beings.

Free-Verse: Derived from the French term 'vers libre' ('free line'), free-verse has been used since the 1880s to describe unrhymed poetry written according to speech cadence rather than to a set metre; that is, in which there is no set pattern to the relation between stressed and unstressed syllables. In American poetry, free verse is especially associated with Walt Whitman, from whom it embodied a rejection of the formalism that he considered characteristic of European writing.

1.6 FURTHER READING

Chase, Richard. *Walt Whitman Reconsidered*. New York, 1955.

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1.7 REFERENCES

Narasimhaiah, C.D. (Ed.). *Students' Handbook of American Literature*. Ludhiana: Kalyani, 1997.

Patil, Mallikarjun. *Studies in American Literature*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2009.

Ramanan, Mohan. *Four Centuries of American Poetry*. Madras: Macmillan, 1996

MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Whitman's concept of 'the self' with reference to 'Song of Myself'.

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2. Attempt an analysis of the symbolism and imagery in 'Song of Myself.

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3. "Whitman was the most representative American poet." Discuss.

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4. Write an essay on the technical aspects of Whitman's poetry with reference to the prescribed sections of 'Song of Myself'.

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5. Consider Whitman as a mystic poet.

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UNIT - II

ROBERT FROST

Contents

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will introduce you to Robert Frost who is widely considered to be one of the most popular and revered poets of America of the twentieth century. After going through the four prescribed poems of Frost, you will be able to

- comprehend the meaning of the prescribed poems
- identify major themes of Frost's poetry
- explain Frost's poetic style and technique

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost (1874-1963) wrote in traditional forms, preferring as he said "the old-fashioned way to the new." He used the plain speech of rural New England and wrote some of the finest short poems in English. The lyric and the narrative poem were his chief forms. His poems are remarkable for their wit, formal variety and simple grandeur. As well as rooting his poems in the New England rural landscape, Frost used American speech patterns as the basis of his blank verse.

Unlike the complex and highly allusive poetry of his contemporaries like Ezra Pound and T.S.Eliot, Frost adhered to the more formal qualities of poetry. He wanted to get away from the bookish and literary in his poetry. His aim was to root his themes and diction in contemporary life. His subject matters included the relationship of man to nature, man's place in the universe and the relations between men and women.

Frost's earliest poetic attempts did not receive any enthusiastic publishers in America. He, therefore, decided to shift to England in order to further his literary career. The decision proved to be a correct one as his poems were immediately received by readers and publishers alike. Frost has been variously referred to as a poet of nature, a New England regionalist (see Key Words), a dramatic poet, or as a poet of

man. His magnificent poetic oeuvre consists of works such as *A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston*, *Mountain Interval, New Hampshire* and *West Running Brook*.

The four poems that make up this unit are indicative of his wide range and broad style. Whereas 'Home Burial' and 'West Running Brook' are dramatic in form, 'Once by the Pacific' and 'Out, Out—' are marked by their concern for nature and man respectively. This unit will discuss the content and themes of these poems as well as about Frost as a poet. The CYP exercises will help you to keep track of your progress.

2.2 'WEST RUNNING BROOK'

2.2.1 Outline of the Poem

The poem begins with a woman asking her husband, Fred, the direction of north. The husband casually points out towards the north and adds that the brook runs towards the west. The woman is perplexed at this because the particular brook flows in the opposite direction to the other ones in the country. She playfully compares the west-running brook to themselves and says that the brook, like them, "go by contraries." She asks in hesitating and doubtful tones about who they really are. Fred calls themselves a young or new couple.

The woman believes that the brook can unite the two as if they are married not only to each other but to the brook as well. It can serve to bridge the gap between them—the gap of their different attitudes towards life. She feels that the waves in the brook seem to be beckoning them as if they understand her words. But for him the waves have no such kinship with them. The waves move backwards against the stream. The waves have been standing off the shore since time immemorial. He does not believe that the waves beckon them.

The woman, however, still holds on to her intuitive belief that she shares an intimate and private kinship with the west-running brook. The husband, therefore, casually dismisses her world as forbidden to him and remarks that he has nothing more to say about the brook. She insists on hearing his reflections on the wave and the brook. The mood of the poem changes from playful to metaphysical at this point as the husband offers his own interpretation of the brook.

The brook runs counter to itself in the white wave. Against this backdrop the poet studies our origin and existence. Existence is regarded as a dance that harmonises stillness and movement. But the speaker thinks differently and says that it does not stand still. Like the brook that engulfs whatever comes by it, existence is a strange power that always keeps pounding on us. Like the brook all things that move forward seem to hark back to its origin, its source.

The wife now seems to accept her husband's thought. The poem ends with a perfect agreement between the husband and the wife.

2.2.2 Appreciation

'West-Running Brook' has serious philosophical undertones presented in the manner of a playful argument. The basic argument of the poem is about how the 'west-running brook' came to be called thus. We can observe that Frost extends the focus of the poem from the description of a natural thing (in this case, a river) to a more profound and philosophical idea that in life contraries meet in one.

Beginning as it does in a conversational tone the poem quickly establishes the apparently different views of the man and his wife. It develops the paradox of the brook moving west unlike the other brooks in the country. The wife finds this 'contrary' reflected in their own conjugal relationship. The metaphysical turn of the poem becomes clear as human existence is linked up with the brook by the woman. Her

fanciful and intuitive thoughts are, however, not shared by her husband. The latter's interpretation of the brook's flowing in the opposite direction is more philosophical in nature.

The wave becomes a metaphysical conceit containing the paradoxes of stillness in movement and of permanence in change. By running counter to itself, the brook becomes symbolic of an effort to go back to the beginning of beginnings. Frost also stresses on flux that characterizes human life. The poem points out to the final nothingness of all things:

The universal cataract of death
That spends to nothingness…

The wave that carries everything forward has a touch of regret that seems to resist the flux. This touch of regret, Frost believes, harmonises the brook and symbolizes life— all things in thus being carried forward seem to hark back— as if they would return to the source.

The interpretation of the west-running brook offered by the husband focuses attention on the inevitable flux that is momentarily resisted by this contrary movement. But Frost always puts man ahead of nature and, therefore, the movement of the brook also illuminates a human condition. If it expresses a sense of horror at the "universal cataract of death", we realize that the poem also captures the tenderness of this backward-looking regret, this yearning for the source.

The poem ends on a note of perfect understanding between the wife and the husband. The memorable monologue of Fred that virtually contains the crux of the poem's philosophy is followed by another conversation between the two. The final conversation is one of concord as they agree that the day will always remain memorable.

2.2.3 Poetic Devices

After carefully reading the poem, you should immediately notice that Frost combines elements of the dramatic and lyric in this poem. It opens with a conversation between a husband and a wife. You should take note of the unrelenting questioning and the halting manner in which the wife speaks. You may interpret it as indicative of the doubts and perplexity in her mind about the brook as well as about their relationship. For example,

> Fred, where is north?
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> Or,
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> What does it think it's doing running west
> When all the other country brooks flow east
> To reach the ocean? It must be the brook
> Can trust itself to go by contraries
> The way I can with you—and you with me—
> Because we're—we're— I don't know what we are.
> What are we?

The playful manner in which the husband responds to her points to his initial casual attitude:

> North? North is there, my love. The brook runs west.

Again, in reply to her question regarding who they are, he says, almost playfully,

> Young or new?

The brilliant monologue that follows in the middle of the poem shifts the tone of the poem from playful to metaphysical. The ending of the poem is also conversational although the broken and stuttering speech gives way to rhythmic expression of mutual agreement:

Today will be the day of what we both said.

The poet also develops the wave image throughout the poem. What does it symbolize? You can understand it as symbolic of an effort to go back to the origin of existence:

It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us.

The symbol also illuminates a human tendency to look back in regret.

Descriptive realism combined with a touch of the meditative is the hallmark of Frost. His description of the west-running brook shows his acute sense of observation. The backward-looking wave is pictured as “white” whereas the moving stream as “black”. Note that the contrast in colour is repeatedly emphasized by Frost in the poem. In fact, repetition is used as a major device by Frost in this poem. Not only words like “white wave”, “black stream”, “runs”, “flows”, etc. but also phrases like “sending up” are repeated throughout the poem. The final part of the poem also has repetition of the phrase “today will be the day” which suggests mutual acceptance of differing points of view.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is unusual about the west-running brook?

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2. What does the woman think about the waves?

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3. What does the brook symbolize by running counter to itself?

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4. Why do they think that the day will be memorable to them?

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5. Which words and phrases does Frost repeat in the poem? What purpose do they serve?

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2.3 'HOME BURIAL'

2.3.1 Outline of the Poem

As the poem opens the husband finds his wife at the top of a staircase staring outwards through the window. There is an unknown fear on her face. She hesitatingly comes down the stairs for a moment but goes back again to look at what she was watching. He advances towards her seeking to know what she always looks at outside the window. Her looks changed from terrified to dull. Even when he insisted on knowing what she sees, she does not give any reply. She was sure that her husband would not be able to see what she was looking at for he is a "blind creature" who is oblivious to her grief.

At first, he did not see anything unusual. But later he tells her that he can see what she always looks at from her vantage point. She challenges him to tell her what it is. He replies that he must be habituated to the place and, therefore, he did not notice the little family graveyard outside. It is not very large in any case. There are only three stones of slate and one of marble. He tells her not to mind those. He also tells her that he understands she must be disturbed to see their child's grave.

The moment the husband mentions "the child's mound," the woman breaks down and asks him not to recall the death of their child. She comes downstairs and looks back at him in an angry manner. He is shaken by her reaction and asks if a man is not even allowed to speak of his dead child. She retorts back by saying that *he* cannot do so. She wants to get away from her husband. She starts to look for her hat, and prepares to go out even without it.

The husband pleads with her not to get away from him. He sits on the stairs with his hands on his chins. He tells her that he would like to ask her something. She is, however, reluctant to listen to his question and tells him that he does not know how to ask it. She goes to open the door and turns the door knob.

He tells her that his words always cause offense to her. He would like to know from her what he should speak so as to keep her happy. He believes a man must give up on his intrinsic qualities to be with a woman. They could make some arrangement by which he could refrain from mentioning any topic she does not like. He is, however, not in favour of any such condition between two people who love each other. As she moves the door knob, he asks her not to take her problem to someone else. He pleads to be allowed to help her in her moment of grief. He is not much different from other people as she thinks he is. He asks her why she takes the death of her first born so seriously despite the immense love he has for her. She thinks that he is only sneering at her loss. He is irritated by her reaction and says that the situation has turned so bad that a man cannot even talk of his dead child.

The wife's concealed emotions now burst out. She has been nurturing a grudge against her husband for not showing the same kind of grief at the death of their child. She had seen him digging the grave of their child. He had then entered the kitchen wearing the same stained shoes and stood the spade against the wall. At this point he interrupts to tell her that she is overreacting to the situation. But she continues her tirade and accuses him of being bothered by everyday concerns rather than the death of their child. For her the time it takes for a birch to rot has nothing to do with the child's death. She then makes a generalization and says that even the closest friends do not grief for long after the death of a dear one. As for herself she is willing to weep forever if need be.

The husband believes that by letting out all her pent-up emotions she will feel much better now. She will not go outside any more. Amy is still very upset and threatens to go out as she cannot make her understand her grief. He promises to bring her back wherever she goes, resorting to force if need be.

2.3.2 Appreciation

'Home Burial' is a blank verse poem in which Frost dramatizes domestic strife between a rural husband and his wife. The resulting crisis revolves around definitions of 'home'. We find that the poem describes two tragedies: first, and the more obvious, is the death of a young child, and second, the death of a marriage. As such, the title "Home Burial," refers not just to the death and subsequent burial of the child in the family graveyard but also to the 'burial' of the couple's relationship. It is the 'burial' of their 'home'. The grief for the death of the child is further accentuated by their failure to understand each other. Although both characters feel grief at the loss of the child, their approach to life thereafter is totally different. Frost employs the dramatic form to bring out their contrasting attitudes through their conversation. While the husband seems to have overcome the grief to move on in life, the wife is too overwhelmed by the tragedy and is on the verge of losing her mental well-being.

With the staircase as the setting of the poem, Frost manages to show the crisis in the relationship between the characters by positioning them on opposites ends of the steps. With her position closest to the window, the wife seems to be still struggling with her grief over the loss of her child. The husband, on the other hand, appears to have come to terms with the tragedy. He digs the child's grave with his own hands and talks about everyday issues nonchalantly, much to the dismay of his wife who would have expected a more extended and sustained period of mourning. Each character fails to understand the other's way of expressing grief. In fact, both husband and wife take a narrower view of the ways in which the other deals with grief, for she condemns his attempt to cope with the loss by continuing with his routine, while he insists that she keep the expression of her grief within the emotional confines of the marriage and the physical confines of the home.

Frost does not attempt to pass any judgment on the behaviour of the two characters. Empathy could be one way of reconciliation between the two. The husband attempts to empathize with his wife, moving up the staircase toward her and trying to understand her position even if he does not totally agree with her point of view:

Don't—don't go.
Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.

But the wife is unable to reciprocate and rather keeps moving away. The conflict continues into the close of the poem.

The action of the poem is largely about the reaction of the parents to the death of their child. Their contrasting ways of expressing grief leads to the conflict in the poem. But we can clearly observe that Frost also brings into focus larger issues such as husband-wife relationship or that between man and woman, or life and death, or the world at large:

The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all …
… But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!

Frost deals with situations confronting Man in many of his poems. He is, in other words, as much a poet of man as he is of nature. Disintegration of values and disillusionment of the modern man are oft-repeated themes in his poems. He presents persons suffering from loneliness and frustration, loss and disease of modern life. 'Home Burial' also portrays the disharmony prevailing in the modern world. Partly, that breakdown in relationship is due to the inescapable limits of any

communication. The poem deals with an essential loneliness, which is linked to the limits of empathy and the sense that some things are simply inexpressible.

2.3.3 Poetic Devices

'Home Burial' is a dramatic poem rather than a narrative or descriptive one. Frost employs the primary device of dialogue to present the strife that threatens to break a relationship. It is 'dramatic' in its choice of subject matter in that Frost deals with a situation that is emotionally charged.

You will note that Frost also employs a direct and colloquial speaking voice in the poem. The poem opens *in medias res* (see Key Words) with the woman on verge of a mental breakdown:

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.

Despite the charged atmosphere and the unusual situation, the poem moves with the accents of everyday speech. Deep anguish that verges on hysteria is depicted in the broken and stuttering speeches of the wife suggested by Frost's repeated use of dashes and parentheses:

Not you!—Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air—
I don't know rightly whether any man can.

The broken syntax externalizes the emotional upsurge in the characters' mind. (Try to locate some more instances of the casual speaking voice in the poem.)

At the time of its publication, the poem represented a truly new poetic genre. It was considered to be an extended dramatic exercise in the natural speech rhythms of a region's people, from the mouths of common characters.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Why does the wife call her husband ‘a blind creature’ ?

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2. What is the reason for the wife’s mourning ?

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3. What does the wife accuse her husband of ?

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4. What generalization does she make about death?

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5. Why does Frost use the device of broken syntax?

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2.4 'OUT, OUT—'

2.4.1 Outline of the Poem

The buzz saw in the yard made a rattling sound and produced fine dust as it ran. Wooden sticks that can be used in the stove dropped out of the machine. A sweet smell emanated from it as the wind blew over the logs of wood. From the place where the saw stood five mountain ranges one behind the other as far as the state of Vermont could be seen. The saw kept on making the rattling sound as logs of wood of different sizes were put into it. There was nothing unusual about it till that time. The day's work was almost over. The poet feels that the boy who was working on the buzz saw would have greatly cherished had he been released from work half an hour earlier that day. Soon his sister stood behind him and announced "supper". But exactly at that moment the boy's hand got accidentally entangled in the saw. It seemed as if the saw which too was hungry ate the boy's hand when dinner was announced. It is the same thing whether the saw leaped at his hand or the boy offered his hand voluntarily. The result in both the cases remained the same—the boy lost his hand. The boy's first reaction was a smile that expressed regret. He swung toward his sister holding his hand not only looking for help but also to prevent himself from bleeding to death. Although the boy was only a child doing a man's work, he was old enough to realise that his hand cannot be saved. He appealed to his sister not to let the doctor cut off his hand but it was too late. The doctor put him under anesthesia. Slowly his pulse began to drop and then the boy began to die. Finally life ended in the boy and there was nothing left in him to build. Once he was dead the people attending him returned back to their affairs.

2.4.2 Appreciation

'Out, Out—' is a significant lyric of Robert Frost which presents the grim tragedy of a young boy. The poem weaves together many themes to create the final impression about death and how life must go on.

The primary theme of the poem comes from the title itself. It refers to a dialogue from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "Out, out brief candle! /Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/and then is heard no more. . ." Frost hints at this soliloquy to borrow not only its theme, but the way Macbeth treated death without rage, tears, or wailing similar to the young boy's family;

And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

That life continues to go on even after death is reaffirmed by Frost. Tragic though the boy's death was, there was "no more to build on there" and the world of the living continues.

Frost also brings forth in this poem, as he does in many of his poems, his concern for a child coming to terms in an adult world, and thereby attaining manhood. In 'Out, Out—' the boy is essentially doing a man's work, though he is still "a child at heart". Frost is possibly also commenting on the contemporary socio-economic condition of the world that forces poor young boys to come out of their childhood to make a living. The work that the boy was involved in was also potentially hazardous. The moment the visibly tired boy let loose his guard results in the accident which finally led to his death. We can possibly interpret the young boy's death as the death of childhood and innocence. The predicament of poor young boys who have to work much beyond their physical and mental capability is, thus, poignantly depicted by Frost in the poem.

Frost feels that the boy's life could have been saved with a little more compassion from the adults. Had the boy received an early excuse from work that day, he would have avoided cutting off his hand and would have been saved from death. Moreover, the half hour that the boy might have got would have pleased him a great deal and allowed him to cherish his childhood for howsoever a brief moment:

Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.

Nature which is usually a major theme in the poems of Frost is presented in a slightly different light in 'Out, Out—'. The beauty of the mountain ranges of Vermont or the sweet smell in the air is described almost in passing. We can see the accident that befalls the young boy as Nature's way of taking revenge against humanity for its wanton destruction of trees—the boy was putting fell trees into the buzz saw after all.

The pathos of the poem that Frost creates also comes from the reaction of the boy after his hand is severed. Although still a child, he is old enough to realise that he has lost too much blood to survive. His appeal to his sister not to allow the doctor to amputate his hand is largely a desperate attempt on his part to maintain his dignity, even in death. The description of the boy's death is done by Frost in a touching, if somewhat dramatic, manner. He ends as he usually does with a bit of aphoristic wisdom as he points out that despite the tragedies that may befall man, life must continue and cannot come to an end.

2.4.3 Poetic Devices

The title of the poem is extremely suggestive. The pause at the end (indicated by the "–") is symbolic of the idea of termination of life. You will find that Frost continues to employ broken syntax and short phrases in moments of high intensity or pathos as in moments leading up to the boy's death:

And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.

You may have also noticed this method employed by Frost in some of his other poems as well.

Another device that he makes use of in this poem is personification. You will mark that Frost uses the method of personification to great effect in this poem. The buzz saw is described as a cognizant being, aggressively snarling and rattling as it does its work. When the sister makes the dinner announcement, the saw demonstrates that it has a mind of its own by "leaping" out of the boy's hand in its excitement:

At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand…

Although the poem is brief, the use of these devices makes it a significant work of Frost.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the vocation of the young boy?

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2. How did he lose his hand?

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3. What was his first reaction after the accident?

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4. What did the others do after the boy died?

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5. How is the saw personified in the poem?

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2.5 'ONCE BY THE PACIFIC'

2.5.1 Outline of the Poem

The poem is about a storm that the poet once finds raging in the Pacific Ocean. The waves hit the shore in such a severe manner that it created a loud noise while the resulting droplets made everything around it misty. The ferocity with which the waves struck the sea shore made it seem that it intends to do something which had never been done before. The gray clouds were hanging low in the sky like a lock of hair blown forward on the face. However, the shore is lucky in being backed by a steep rock, which in turn was backed by a whole continent. It seemed that the storm will last not just for a night but for an age. So people must brace themselves to face the oncoming fury of the storm. Still the poet feels that there must be something more than a storm before God declares "put out the light" which will end the world.

2.5.2 Appreciation

Nature has always been a major theme in Frost's poetry. His familiarity with the New England landscape allowed him to present pastoral scenes based on rural setting. However, he does not confine himself only to conventional natural imagery of beautiful locations. We also find him focusing on the dramatic struggles that occur within the natural world. In 'Once by the Pacific', for instance, Frost deals with the destructive aspects of nature.

One of Frost's best lyrics, 'Once by the Pacific' attempts to describe the destructive rage of the ocean against all of mankind. The opening of the poem is striking as Frost creates a vivid picture of an impending ocean storm. The ocean waves have a palpable consciousness that is concerned only with the destruction of anything they can touch:

> Great waves looked over others coming in.
> And thought of doing something to the shore
> That water never did to land before.

The "thought" of the ocean waves makes them the most terrifying because their war against humanity seems to be premeditated. Moreover, the vast ocean is an unconquerable foe; even the shore and cliffs need to be supported by the entire continent in order to face the malignant waters.

The poet could read the ominous signs of the storm and exhorts people to prepare themselves to face the oncoming fury. Yet this warning is laced with fear—"Someone had better be prepared for rage."

However, the poem does end on a rather positive note. The poet expresses his complete faith in God's benevolence. For him, no matter how mighty the storm may be, it is finally the will of God that will save the world, or otherwise. The poet believes that the world which was created at His behest—"And God said let there be light and there was light"—will only end by his command: "Put out that light!"

2.5.3 Poetic Devices

As in the previous poem, you can observe that personification is a major device of this poem too. The waves are personified by Frost as malevolent beings intent on destroying whatever comes in its way. These waves are presented as evil beings that intend to use all of their might to destroy anything they can touch. The "thought" of the ocean waves makes them the most terrifying because their war against humanity seems to be premeditated. You will notice that personification is employed again in describing the shore and cliff:

The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
The cliff by being backed by continent.

Frost also compares the low and dark clouds to the hair falling on the forehead of a girl:

The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.

Do you feel that the comparison helps to visualise the seascape just before the start of a storm?

Moreover, you can also mark that there is a biblical reference in the poem. According to the Bible, the creation of the world was at God's command—"And God said let there be light and there was light." Frost says that it will also come to an end at his behest—"Put out the light."

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Explain the meaning of "misty din".

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2. With what does the poet compare the gray clouds on the horizon?

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3. Why is the shore considered to be lucky?

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4. What will end the world?

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5. How are the waves personified in the poem?

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2.6 SUMMING-UP

Robert Frost wrote some of the finest short poems in English. The flavour of New England life, an insight into New England character and the plain speech of rural New England are found in his poems. The lyric and the narrative poem were his chief forms. His subject matters included the relationship of man to nature, man's place in the universe and the relations between men and women. Frost has been variously

referred to as a poet of nature, a regionalist, a dramatic poet, or as a poet of man. In this unit you have studied four poems of Frost which are indicative of his wide range and broad style.

'West-Running Brook' has serious philosophical undertones presented in the manner of a playful argument. Frost extends the focus of the poem from the description of a river to a philosophical idea that in life contraries meet in one. By running counter to itself, the brook becomes symbolic of an effort to go back to origin of our existence. The movement of the brook is also symbolic of a human condition. It captures the tenderness of this backward-looking regret, the yearning for the source. Frost combines elements of the dramatic and lyric in this poem. It opens and ends with a conversation between a husband and a wife.

'Home Burial' is a blank verse poem in which Frost dramatizes domestic strife between a rural husband and his wife over the death of their child. Their contrasting ways of expressing grief leads to the conflict in the poem. But Frost also brings into focus larger issues such as man-woman relationship, disharmony of the modern world or life and death. It is a dramatic poem rather than a narrative or descriptive one. Frost employs the primary device of dialogue to present the strife that threatens to break a relationship. It is 'dramatic' in its choice of subject matter in that Frost deals with an emotionally tense situation.

'Out, Out—' is a significant lyric of Robert Frost which presents the grim tragedy of a young boy. The poem weaves together many themes to create the final impression about death and continuity of life thereafter. The story of the poor boy lends great pathos to the poem. Frost uses the method of personification to great effect in this poem. The buzz saw is described as a malevolent being, aggressively snarling and rattling as it does its work.

In 'Once by the Pacific', Frost deals with the destructive aspects of nature. He attempts to describe the destructive rage of the ocean against all of mankind. However, the poem does end on an optimistic note. The poet expresses his complete faith in God's benevolence. For him, it will take more than just a storm to destroy humanity. Only God can decide to end the world. Personification is a major device of this poem also. The waves are personified by Frost as malevolent beings intent on destroying whatever comes in its way.

2.7 KEY WORDS

Regionalism: Literary movement that developed in the 1890s. Regionalists were interested in exploring how a region had shaped the mentality and outlook of its inhabitants; in this regard regionalism sometimes shares characteristics of Naturalism. It is especially associated with the Mid-West and later with the South, but it was also a feature of writing that originated in New England—for example, Robert Frost and Edward Arlington Robinson are important New England regionalists.

In medias res: Literally it means "in the middle of things". A device used in all forms of literature where the narrative starts at a critical point in the action.

2.8 FURTHER READING

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Narasimhaiah, C.D. (Ed.). *Students' Handbook of American Literature*. Ludhiana: Kalyani, 1997.

Patil, Mallikarjun. *Studies in American Literature*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2009.

Ramanan, Mohan. *Four Centuries of American Poetry*. Madras: Macmillan, 1996.

MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Robert Frost as a poet of nature on the basis of the poems you have read in this unit.

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2. Write an essay on Frost as a poet of man.

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3. The most dramatic features of Frost are the colloquial voice and the speaking tones. Elaborate.

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4. Write a note on Frost's poetic style and craftsmanship.

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5. On the basis of the poems you have studied, write an essay on symbolism of Frost.

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UNIT – III

EZRA POUND

Contents

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will introduce you to Ezra Pound who is probably one of the finest poets America has produced. He is also perhaps the most controversial figure of the last century. After studying the prescribed poems of Pound, you will be able to

- comprehend the meaning of the prescribed poems
- identify major themes of Pound's poetry
- explain Pound's poetic style and technique

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Ezra Pound (1885-1972) is one of the most influential poets and critics of the twentieth century. His work has been widely regarded as instrumental in the development of Modernism. He attended the University of Pennsylvania where he began a lifelong friendship with William Carlos Williams. He left the United States shortly thereafter and visited Europe on several occasions, developing a particular interest in the medieval troubadour tradition. His major works include *A Lume Spento* (1908), *Personae* (1909), *Lustra* (1916) and the unfinished *The Cantos* (1925-60).

Pound also played an important role in encouraging emerging talents, especially through his editorial positions on various journals, including *Poetry*, *The Little Review* and *The Dial*. He helped shape the work of important writers such as W.B.Yeats and James Joyce, and worked closely with T.S.Eliot on *The Waste Land*. He also developed what became a major interest in Chinese and Japanese poetry. But if his translations are inaccurate from the scholar's viewpoint, they often capture the spirit of the original better than most scholars can. Pound was a major exponent of Imagism (see Key Words), and he learned a lot from the Japanese *haiku*, which combines thought and picture in highly concentrated form.

Pound is an inescapable influence in the transformation and direction of modern literature, although assessments of his own work will always be complicated by his extreme views on politics and economics. At his finest Pound was one of the greatest lyric poets of the twentieth-century and among the most perceptive and forceful of critics.

This unit has outlines of the prescribed poems. Along with it there are sections on their appreciation and poetic devices employed by Pound. This unit will help you to make an assessment of Pound as a major American poet. The CYP exercises will help you keep assessing your development.

3.2 'HISTRION'

3.2.1 Outline of the Poem

The poet says that no man has been brave enough to write on the subject he is dealing with. Yet, he says, he knows that the souls of all great men pass through us. Our own selves are fused with them. We are, therefore, nothing but reflections of the souls of these great men. In this sense, the spirit of Dante, the great poet, as well as that of Francois Villon, who was a French poet and thief, is present in me. Besides, I am also the reflection of all saints and holy men but whom I cannot name for I will be accused of committing blasphemy.

This can be compared to a sphere deep inside us which is made of molten gold and is translucent in nature. This sphere is the self, the 'I'. And into this same form like Christus, John or Eke the Florentine is imposed. Our subjectivity is, thus, only a form that is imposed upon. We are, hence, transformed from our 'selves' to souls of all the great men. These "masters of the soul" will live on to eternity.

3.2.2 Appreciation

'Histrion' (1908) is one of Pound's early poems and it deals with the subject of transformation of self. History and the histrionic are closely related in Pound's poem. The poet or historian, through contemplation of the past, is at once filled with its malleable spirit and becomes a curiously malleable mould through which the past projects itself into the present.

We find that the influence of Robert Browning is clearly evident in 'Histrion'. Although Pound does not imitate the diction of Browning, the poem does possess a few characteristic archaisms. Its central metaphor owes much to Browning's golden ring metaphor in 'The Ring and the Book'. In its list of those whom the poet personates Pound combines his own particular heroes, Dante and Villon, with Browning's characters ("Christus, or John, or eke the Florentine"). The speaker declares that the souls of great men and his own individuality melt into each other. The poet's "I" is a clear space, into which the spirits of others are imposed. Pound takes transformation of self or spirit possession as the metaphor to describe how the poet speaks. Thus, Villon or Dante, even Christus or John, should possess and speak through the poet.

We should note how Pound also deliberately sets out to reincarnate poets of the past. He mentions Dante and Villon as the poets he admires most. But he places them in the company of religious figures who were heroes of his youth. Thus, when he speaks of them, he is equating Christ and John the Baptist with Dante as inspirations for poetry.

Pound employs metaphors that explicitly evoke the minting of coin to drive home his point. The poem evokes the process whereby the passive molten ingot of the self, stamped by the form or name of "all men great," is released from its material incarnation to assume its ideal, poetic character as one of the "Masters of the Soul."

3.2.3 Poetic Devices

You must have noticed that the entire poem is centred on the metaphor of the self melting into the souls of great men. The metaphor itself is inspired from the golden ring metaphor of Browning in 'The Ring and the Book'. It can also be understood in terms of coin-making:

> 'Tis as in midmost us there glows a sphere
> Translucent, molten gold, that is the "I"
> And into this some form projects itself.

Observe closely how Pound brings together religious and literary figures, Christ and Dante for instance, to explain the process of transformation of self, the melting of all great souls into his own. Moreover, the allusion to Browning's poem adds a particular charm to the poem.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who are Dante and Francois Villon that the poet refers to in the poem?

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2. Why does the poet not name the holy ones?

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3. Which figure of speech is employed by Pound in this poem? Where is it derived from?

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4. Why is Christ equated with Dante?

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5. What is "clear space"?

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3.3 'THE RIVER MERCHANT'S WIFE'

3.3.1 Outline of the Poem

The poem opens with a central image of the river merchant and his wife as young children. The girl remembers the time when she was a mere child. Her hair was cut in such a manner that it fell on her forehead. She was playing at the front gate. She was also pulling flowers from the front yard. The young boy came on stilts and circled around where she was sitting. He was playing with blue plums. At that time they had a contended life and love blossomed between them. They married soon after and started living in the village of Chokan. They were a young couple who had no suspicion or dislike for each other.

The second stanza places the young girl and the boy in the adult world. The girl says that when she turned fourteen she married him. Following the tradition of her community she does not take her husband's name. Rather she refers to him with the respectful title of "My Lord". The girl was very shy and never laughed. She also kept her head bent low and averted her eyes. She was so shy that she could not even respond to her husband's calls.

At fifteen years of age their love bond became even stronger. She stopped looking at her husband in an angry or annoying manner. She made a vow of not parting from her husband ever. After his death she would not feel the need to look for another man.

The wife says that a year later her husband, a river-merchant, departed for the distant Ku-to-en through the river route. His absence turns out to be a long one as he has not returned for five months. The pain of separation is reflected in the fact that the noise monkeys make on the roof of her house seem sorrowful to her.

The final stanza of the poem begins with an image of the river-merchant's absence. He was unwilling to go on this visit. She returns to this gate (perhaps the same gate they played about in their childhood) and in her memory sees him reluctantly leaving again. Moss has grown there, but she is aware that there are different kinds of mosses, which she has not cleared away since his departure. They are now too deep to clear away. The falling leaves and the wind of autumn remind her of her painful separation from her husband. She observes the butterflies in the garden which are "paired" as she is not, and they are becoming "yellow" changing with the season, growing older together. She says that the butterflies "hurt" her because they emphasize the pain of her realization that she is growing older without her husband by her side. The poem closes with the grief-stricken wife reaching out to her husband with a request to tell her how and when he is returning so that she could go as far as Cho-fu-sa to meet her.

3.3.2 Appreciation

Ezra Pound's third collection of poems, *Cathay: Translations* (1915), which includes 'The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter', contains what he calls 'translations' of Chinese poems of Li Po. These are taken from the notes of Ernest Fenollosa, a scholar of Chinese literature. Pound's translations, though, have not always been highly regarded by scholars of Chinese language and literature. However, they have been acclaimed nonetheless as "poetry" for their clarity and elegance. They are variously referred to as "translations," "interpretations," "paraphrases," and "adaptations."

Pound was closely associated with the Imagism movement in poetry. Over the years he also developed a major interest in Chinese and Japanese poetry. And his preoccupation with Chinese poetry made him realise that Chinese poets had long been aware of the image as the fundamental principle for poetic composition. Moreover, Pound believed that the poetic image does not lose its effectiveness in case of translations like his own. 'The River-Merchant's Wife', for example, is Pound's attempt to put in images the human pain of separation and the human experience of love.

We can interpret the poem as a verse "letter" in which the young wife communicates her feelings for the absent husband to whom she writes. Pound makes use of vivid images and appropriate words to convey the pain that the wife goes through. It is largely the use of a convincing speaking voice of the persona, innocent and vulnerable and yet at once full of emotional maturity and sophistication, which lends the poem its beauty. (Note how Pound's careful use of words also tells us a great deal about what the young wife feels, and the simplicity of her language suggests her sincere and deep longing.)

The noises that the monkeys create overhead seem "sorrowful" to the wife and she worries about the dangers her husband might face in

the perilous “river of swirling eddies”. The manner in which she states her unwillingness to look for other potential suitors shows her to be committed, desirous and desperate for his presence. Her desire for him is shown to be strong enough to make her to go beyond the limited confines of her everyday world in order to hasten their reunion.

The young girl’s recollection of her love, marriage and life thereafter is neatly categorized by Pound. We can easily see that the different stages in her emotional and physical development are presented in different stanzas in the poem. Pound delineates the range of emotions in the girl, from the first blossoming of love to a period of absence to a possibility of a reunion.

The poem is certainly more than a mere literal translation. Readers can consider it to be a cultural translation of ideas as well. In spite of situating the protagonists of the poem in some remote Chinese village, Pound is able to universalize what is essentially a human emotion of the pain of separation.

3.3.3 Poetic Devices

Pound was a leading figure of the Imagist movement in poetry. The present poem also belongs to that genre of poetry. Pound expresses through precise images the desperation and loneliness of the young wife as she waits in anticipation of her long absent husband. The various stages of her life in relation to her husband are pictured through carefully selected images. For instance, you must have observed how the opening lines of the poem present before us an image of two young people in their childhood carefree days with the further hint of love blossoming between them.

> While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
> I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
> You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
> You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

The poem abounds in images of this kind portraying the love, marriage and painful separation that is characteristic of human life across cultures. If you take these images collectively, they facilitate the construction of the image of a tender, vulnerable and yet emotionally strong and matured woman. (Try to locate a few more images of this kind in the poem.)

Pound was opposed to the overtly sentimental or formally elegiac style of late Victorian poetry. You can observe how the style that he adopts for his poems like 'The River Merchant's Wife' imports a tender, melancholic tone into English that is at once intimate and nostalgic without displaying any of the conventional Victorian tendencies.

In the poem, Pound presents a complex psychological interaction between the tone of playful, childish innocence and the painful seriousness of a young wife suddenly made older by the loneliness and anxiety of separation. Pound's precise and objective rendering of the emotional situation faced by the wife makes 'The River Merchant's Wife' the kind of poetry at which the Imagists were aiming.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How old was the girl when she got married?

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2. What are the different stages of her married life?

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3. What feeling comes to her on hearing the noise made by the monkeys?

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4. Give two examples of imagism in this poem.

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5. Which basic human emotion does the poem deal with?

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3.4 'A PACT'

3.4.1 Outline of the Poem

The narrator, assumed to be Ezra Pound himself, declares that he is making a deal with Walt Whitman. He says that the hatred he had long borne in his mind for Whitman has now ended. The rashness of his childhood is now being replaced by a growing maturity as he slowly

warms up to the man whom he had denounced for so long. He had felt so intimidated by Whitman that he regarded the latter as his "pig-headed father". But he is now matured enough to let go his earlier aversion and start a more friendly relation with Whitman. He can now understand and appreciate Whitman's poetry to its fullest extent. It was Whitman who introduced new conventions into American poetry. And it is now left to Pound and others to create masterpieces and great literary works from what has been provided. Both Pound and Whitman have the same background and interest. At the end, Pound connects himself to Whitman and seals the "pact". He hopes to draw inspiration from Whitman while at the same time to add new views about the earlier poet. In other words, he would like to have a reciprocal relationship ("commerce") between them.

3.4.2 Appreciation

"A Pact" (1916) seems to be Pound's veiled tribute to the genius of Walt Whitman. Pound's attitude toward Whitman was highly ambivalent. While, on the one hand, Pound might almost feel dwarfed by Whitman in terms of talent he also sees Whitman as the anti-thesis of an idol or role model. He depicts himself as the petulant child of a stubborn father, and the struggle he has had to undergo in relating himself to Whitman. The poem is about Pound's coming to terms with the aversion that he had long held for Whitman and embracing him as a poet.

Pound's distrust of Whitman as a poet was quite well established. In his essay published in 1909 entitled 'What I Feel About Walt Whitman,' Pound speaks in not so friendly terms about his self-singing style and what he called his "artistic barbarism." However, he is honest enough to admit that his early attitude towards Whitman was only due to a lack of a better judgement that suggested a kind of childhood

rashness. He believes his new found maturity will help him to acquire a more correct estimate of Whitman. In the end, Pound subordinates the superficial disregard for Whitman's poetic credentials to the profound bond of their common origin and message. By crediting Whitman of breaking new ground for American poetry, Pound recognizes the unfairness of his earlier position. However, he asserts the relevance of Whitman in the present time by stressing that a lot of work still needs to be done as he says:

It was you who broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.

Whitman broke the "new wood" of free verse, and Pound seeks to carve a finer product out of it.

Pound's reconciliation with Whitman is complete when he asserts their common American heritage. Pound speaks in terms of "a pact" and "commerce" which points out to the reciprocal nature of the reconciliation between them. If the newer poets like Pound can create great literary works drawing inspiration from Whitman, then they can also help in a re-evaluation of the former great.

'A Pact' is a short poem that expresses Pound's indebtedness to a great American poet like Whitman. But we should not assume it to be a blind tribute or even an attempt to reconsider the worth of Whitman. The feelings are Pound's own as he goes about to reassess his relationship with Walt Whitman.

3.4.3 Poetic Devices

'A Pact' is a brief poem that encapsulates Pound's feelings, or rather the change in his feelings, about the iconic American poet Walt Whitman. You should mark that the "pact" that he announces in the first line of the poem is symbolic of his new found affection for Whitman,

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman.

What that "pact" really signifies, however, is stated in the last line of the poem,

Let there be commerce between us.

Through the metaphor of "commerce" Pound expresses the two-way nature of the relationship between the two poets.

From the above discussion you will agree that Whitman was an outstanding poet who was credited for introducing unique innovations into American poetry. He was, to use Pound's metaphor, the one who "broke the new wood." The "carving" that Whitman's successors need to do suggest the hard work that must be done to take his legacy forward and create great works of art. Pound and Whitman, and by extension successive generations of poets, share the same heritage—"one sap and one root". Pound, thus, highlights the common American background of the two.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who is Walt Whitman?

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2. Why does the poet give up his earlier aversion for Whitman?

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3. What is the "pact" that the poet want to make with Whitman?

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4. What does having "one sap and one root" mean?

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5. Explain the last line of the poem.

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3.5 SUMMING-UP

In this unit you have studied three poems of Ezra Pound who is one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century and whose work has been widely regarded as instrumental in the development of Modernism. He, in turn, was highly influenced by Chinese and Japanese poetry. Pound was a major exponent of Imagism, and following the form of the Japanese *haiku*, he combines thought and picture in highly concentrated form in his poetry.

'Histrion' which is one of Pound's early poems deals with the subject of transformation of self. The poet, through contemplation of the past, is at once filled with its malleable spirit and becomes a curiously malleable mould through which the past projects itself into the present. Its central metaphor owes much to Browning's golden ring metaphor in

'The Ring and the Book'. The speaker declares that the souls of great men and his own individuality melt into each other. The poet's "I" is a clear space, taking the forms of others' spirits. Pound employs metaphors that explicitly evoke the minting of coin to drive home his point.

'The River-Merchant's Wife' is a 'translation' of a Chinese poem by Li Po. It is Pound's attempt to present the human pain of separation and the human experience of love in apt images. The poem is in the form of a verse "letter" in which the young wife communicates her feelings for the absent husband to whom she writes. The different stanzas in the poem present the different stages in her emotional and physical development. Pound universalizes the human emotion of the pain of separation. The poem abounds in images portraying the love, marriage and painful separation that is characteristic of human life across cultures. The poem uses a tender, melancholic tone without displaying any of the conventional Victorian tendencies.

'A Pact' is about Pound's coming to terms with the aversion that he had long held for Walt Whitman and embracing him as a poet. Although Pound's distrust of Whitman as a poet was well-known, he credits Whitman of breaking new ground for American poetry. He even asserts their common American heritage. Pound speaks in terms of "a pact" and "commerce" which points out to the reciprocal nature of the reconciliation between them. His use of metaphors brings out the theme of the poem in a befitting manner.

3.6 KEY WORDS

Imagism: Poetic technique in which an image or series of images alone is intended to convey meaning. The imagists rejected narrative and what they regarded as redundant exposition, in favour of clear, concentrated, direct treatment of the subject, somewhat in the manner of the Japanese form *haiku*, although in freer verse. Imagism flourished

from 1909 until about 1919 and was an international movement. The English aesthetician T.E.Hulme provided much of the intellectual theory supporting the imagists, while Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell were two leading American members of the group.

3.7 FURTHER READING

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'Modern American Poetry'. <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps>.

Ramanan, Mohan. *Four Centuries of American Poetry*. Madras: Macmillan, 1996.

MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Pound as an Imagist poet with reference to the poems in this unit.

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2. Examine ‘A Pact’ as Pound’s re-evaluation of Whitman as an American poet.

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3. Discuss the central idea of ‘Histrion’.

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UNIT - IV

WALLACE STEVENS

Contents

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to acquaint you with Wallace Stevens—a poet who is somewhat difficult and obscure but a master craftsman nonetheless. Although an amateur poet, his poetic sensibility turns him to be, in the words of Harold Bloom, "a vital part of the American mythology." Sincere study of this unit will help you to

- understand and appreciate the prescribed poems
- identify Stevens' themes and concerns
- elaborate upon his poetic technique

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) is generally not considered to be of the same league as T.S.Eliot or Ezra Pound. In fact, he is not even regarded by many as a major poet in the conventional sense of the term. Yet by the sheer difficulty that he poses he remains one of America's most fascinating poets. His views on modern poetry mark him out to be a poet of distinct originality.

Stevens was an insurance man by profession and a poet by temperament. His poems began appearing in literary magazines in 1914. In *Harmonium* (1923), his first work, he introduced the theme with which he remained concerned throughout his poetic career—the relationship between imagination and reality. His later poetry, in works such as *Ideas of Order* (1936), *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), *Transport to a Summer* (1947) and *The Rock* (1955) continued to explore this theme even more rigorously.

Stevens was influenced by the philosopher George Santayana with whom he also shared his faith in poetry as a surrogate for religion. His experience of the division between fact and fiction, the inner and outer, imagination and reality is sharply focused in his work. He devoted much attention to the quality of the poetic imagination. He wrote many

poems directly or indirectly on the nature of the poem or the quality of the poetic experience.

Stevens' poems have strong visual images, colour and sensuousness. In his mainly blank verse poems he deliberately comes up with analogies with painting and music to create rare visual and sound patterns. He can, perhaps, be accused of using inane and gaudy phraseology but beneath his ornamental eloquence and grandeur is a sharp awareness of the modern dilemma and its sense of abandonment. The extreme technical and thematic complexity of his work makes Stevens a willfully difficult poet. But he was also acknowledged as an eminent abstractionist and a provocative thinker, and that reputation has continued since his death. In 1975, for instance, noted literary critic Harold Bloom, whose writings on Stevens include the acclaimed *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate,* called him "the best and most representative American poet of our time."

In the years since his death Stevens's reputation has remained formidable. Many of his poems may on first encounter seem needlessly obscure and even deliberately difficult. Yet the obscurity and abstraction of his poetry has proven particularly appealing among students and academicians and has consequently generated extensive criticism. Wallace Stevens was, therefore, somewhat of a literary anomaly who rose to earn respect from literary colleagues for his whimsical ironies, skepticism, and the sensuous, ever-shifting intricacy of his vision.

The present unit is structured keeping in mind your needs as students. You will get appreciation of the prescribed poems along with their general outline. Sections on the poetic devices have also been included to help you to understand the technique and craft of Stevens. You will be expected to attempt the CYP exercise.

4.2 'A HIGH-TONED OLD CHRISTIAN WOMAN'

4.2.1 Outline of the Poem

The poem is directed towards a widow whom the poet describes as a "high-toned old Christian woman." Addressing the woman, the speaker proposes an alternative to Christianity. He tells the woman that poetry is the supreme fiction. He asks her to take the "moral law" and make "a nave of it". A nave is the open, empty place of the church that serves little to no purpose other than space for worshipers. Perhaps he is suggesting that the church once held great importance, but is now tainted with corruption because he refers to heaven as being "haunted".

The Christian belief forces people to follow their conscience and the word of God while still maintaining free will. However, the moral law makes people act only in the manner that God sees fit thereby defeating the purpose of free will. Thus, "the conscience is converted into palms." Then he proposes an alternative by telling the woman to "take the opposing law and make a peristyle," which is a Greek/Roman style of architecture in which there is a building with columns, and an open center containing a garden. Just as a classical peristyle might be set in opposition to a Gothic nave, a pagan moral perspective might, "palm for palm", replace the conventional moral and religious order. The alternative to the haunted heaven is still simply a "projection". The speaker describes such a method as a "masque", which is hiding the truth from "beyond the planets." In his view point, the Christians are opposed to anything that is against conventional religion and restrain them within a columned structure. The speaker believes that those who are against the conventional ideas of religion and lead a more bawdy life are also condemned to eternal suffering. The poet's argument thus reaches where it began.

The speaker then associates the old woman with flagellants, showing a more crazed and corrupted side of religion. He goes on to ridicule their lofty and frivolous ways, thus enforcing the fact that they have no right to look down upon others. The other universe that the speaker proposed cannot be controlled and takes on its own carnivalesque, ribald masks; the "hullabaloo among the spheres" is a kind of carnival.

The poet ends by saying that the alternative that he proposes may not be favourable to the woman whose reaction to his words is only an expression of embarrassment. The poem ends with what seems to be an appreciation of paganism. The poet is speaking to the old Christian widow throughout this poem, and the reader can imagine her reaction to his words worsening with time. But the more she would deny that aspect of life, the more it asserts itself: "But fictive things / Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince."

4.2.2 Appreciation

Wallace Stevens is of the opinion that with the onset of Modernism, there was a consequent loss of faith in conventional Christian beliefs. This loss of faith and the increased questioning of Christianity is the theme of his poem, 'The High-Toned Old Christian Woman'. The poem is addressed to a widow who belongs to those people who have complete faith in the Christian religion and hold on to it even in the face of a growing opposition to it.

We can clearly imagine the speaker being intent on mocking the old Christian woman's ideas about her religion. The three main aspects of Stevens' poetry are the real world, imagination and poetry itself. In fact, the poem begins with Stevens dismissing poetry as a supreme fiction. He then sets up a parallel to dismiss the creed of Christianity as well.

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven.

In a tone which can be termed as mocking, he questions the authority of conventional Christianity and the idea of an objective moral order. Instead, earthy or imaginative desire, without epitaphs, becomes one of Stevens's articles of faith. The poem, thus, moves towards an appreciation of paganism as an alternative to the Christian faith. He also stresses in a half-mocking tone that the alternative he proposes will assert itself despite not being favourable to the devout Christians like the old woman:

This will make widows wince. But fictive things
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

There is another interpretive direction that some critics have offered. They believe that the poem is about nihilism rather than an alternative morality of pagan virtues. This seems to concede that the alternative construction would not be a moral perspective, capable of sustaining its own moral sentiment, but rather a nihilistic "lewd" rejection of "the moral sentiment"— enough to make a high-toned Christian widow wince.

We can, therefore, say with some justification that the poem is not particularly easy to understand. The difficulty arises from Stevens's perplexing language and contradicting religious terms. The meaning of phrases likes "squiggling like saxophones", "muzzy bellies in parade", and "tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk" are often confusing to the reader. It seems as if this poem literally represents the confusion that surrounds people in the Modern period.

4.2.3 Poetic Devices

You can observe that 'A High-Toned Christian Woman' is in the form of a dramatic monologue. Stevens uses the persona of the speaker

to put across his views on religion and other related matters. Also note how he uses a mocking tone to great effect in this poem:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves…

There is a deliberate attempt on Stevens' part to use extensive vocabulary in the poem. Words like "nave", "citherns", "peristyle", "masque", "flagellants", and "muzzy" appear to confuse the readers. The confusion is symptomatic of the chaos and confusion that confront people in Modern period. The abstract ideas present in the poem make it difficult for common readers to comprehend fully.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Whom does the poet address in the poem?

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2. What does he propose to the old woman?

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3. Give a few instances of the poet using unfamiliar terms in the poem.

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4. Explain the phrase “hullabaloo among the spheres”.

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5. What is the reaction of the woman to the words of the poet?

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4.3 ‘PETER QUINCE AT THE CLAVIER’

4.3.1 Outline of the Poem

The poem opens with the speaker, Peter Quince, describing his feelings on thinking about the striking figure in “blue-shadowed silk.” He was playing a musical instrument, the clavier, and he equates his feelings to the music that he creates with his fingers on the keys. The speaker then makes a reference to the biblical story of Susanna in the book of Daniel. He imagines his feelings to be similar to those awakened in the elders who had spied on Susanna bathing in her garden one evening.

Part II of the poem describes Susanna bathing in the clear water of the spring. She remembers about her past standing on the bank of the pool. She wanders nude through the garden, with the wind caressing her body. She begins to walk away when the elders came behind her suddenly which stopped her. She was left in a state of shock as they violated her dignity.

Part III shows Susanna’s attendant Byzantines coming to her making noises like the sound of tambourines. They wondered why she

was crying with the elders near her. They talked in whispers and discovered that Susanna was raped by the elders themselves. They were too late to be of any help. Unable to help her, they left the scene making the same tambourine sound.

The last part of the poem contains the speaker's reflection of beauty. Beauty may be momentary in the mind but in the flesh it lives for ever. Even after something dies, whatever comes after it sustains the beauty that was created. For example, even when evenings, gardens and maidens die, their beauty continues to exist. Susanna's beauty awakened feelings of lust in the elders. But even after her death the memory of her beauty remains.

4.3.2 Appreciation

'Peter Quince at the Clavier' (1923) is one of Wallace Stevens' earliest poems. Yet it bears ample evidence of his diverse skills as a poet such as his extraordinary vocabulary, his penchant for memorable phrasing, use of vivid imagery, and the ability to be both comic and serious. In this poem, a beautiful woman's humiliating encounter with lustful elders becomes a meditation on the nature of beauty.

The poem is Stevens' version of the biblical story of Susanna, the story of violation of a maiden's chastity. The retelling of the myth occupies the central portion of the text, over which Stevens superimposes the musical structure of a sonata that fuses into the famous coda (see Key Words). Stevens borrows the speaker of his poem, Peter Quince, from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As the director of the naive troupe of tradesmen-players in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Peter is a comic figure. He is the stage manager of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play (within the play) performed at Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. As in a dream, Stevens collapses time and space, and as the poem moves back and forth in time, the two events of the

poem (Quince at the clavier and Susanna and the elders in the garden) seem to occur simultaneously.

The four-part poem begins by introducing both its theme and its subject. For the poet music is more than just sound emanating from some instrument. It is rather the emotion stirred by those sound waves. Secondly, the biblical tale of Susanna and the elders exemplifies this theme. The speaker at his instrument wishes to find some adequate chords to communicate his desire, which he compares to the lust of the elders in the story of Susanna. Peter Quince suggests that desire is the origin of art; beauty plays on the spirit of the perceiver just as the perceiver plays on the keys of his instrument. There is a correspondence between desire and music.

> Just as my fingers on these keys Make music, so the selfsame sounds
> On my spirit make a music, too.

However, we often overlook that the speaker's reverie about Susanna is apparently stimulated by the beauty of another woman of the present:

> what I feel, Here in this room, desiring you,
> Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk, Is music. It is like the strain
> Waked in the elders by Susanna.

The poem develops the theme that "music is feeling" by combining the poetic devices of alliteration, assonance, and consonance with puns on musical terms to suggest the sounds of the musical instruments mentioned, as in the passage describing the feelings of the lascivious elders:

The basses of their beings throb In witching chords, and their thin blood Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.

"Basses" fuses "base" suggesting both "low and unworthy" and "foundation" with the musical term "bass". Musical tone then becomes

moral tone. The line "Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna" mimics the plucking of strings but may also have sexual connotation. We can see this turning of music into words, and words into music, throughout the poem.

In section II of 'Peter Quince' Stevens allows Susanna to express her point of view. Her thoughts, though, are not very clear:

> She searched The touch of springs, And found
> Concealed imaginings. She sighed, For so much
> melody.

Stevens places Susanna in a sort of Eden, through which she wanders nude, with the wind's caresses as a simile of her maids' attempt to dress her. The tranquility of her bath is immediately contrasted with the violent interruption of the lustful elders. And the immediate sequel to Susanna's pleasure is her rape, also conveyed musically with her plight emphasized by descriptions of sounds from nature—

A cymbal crashed, Amid roaring horns.

The cymbal is of course Susanna's shock and fear; the horns, the virile elders.

The poem culminates in a reflection on the permanence of the woman's physical beauty, which, the speaker says, exists forever in memory and through death in the union of body and nature:

The body dies; the body's beauty lives.

Stevens departs from the biblical legend and closes with an ode to beauty. For him the details of the story are secondary to the importance of beauty itself. Although Susanna's admirable physique could not last, the memory of her loveliness survives "death's ironic scraping," leaving a memory as clear as the sweep of a bow over a violin. This, according to the poet, is the constant of art.

4.3.3 Poetic Devices

The meaning and emotion emphasized by Stevens in 'Peter Quince' gets further accentuated by the magnificent interplay of rhythm

and sound. This makes the poem a remarkable example of what can be termed as a musical imagism. You should note that while the poem opens with the tender reflective music suggestive of the delicate keys of the clavier, the first section ends with the throbbing bass music that suggests the awakening of carnal desires in the elders. Similarly, Susanna's poignant and spiritual music in section II of the poem is interrupted by the crash of the cymbal and the roaring horns. In section III, the nervous rhythms and the couplets create a very delicate music appropriate for the Byzantine servant girls. The music of Section IV is stately and sweeping, and evokes a sense of the continuity underlying change, partially by the use of the series of four rhymes ending in 'ing':

> So evenings die, in their green going, A wave, interminably flowing, So gardens die, their meek breath scenting
> The cowl of winter, done repenting.

From your reading of the poem, you must have also realized that the poem abounds in vivid imagery of colour. The image of "blue-shadowed silk" begins the scene of Susanna's bath, a segment of the poem that places particular significance on colour. The narrator goes on to describe the "green evening" when the "red-eyed elders" watched Susanna "in the green water" of her bath. The "blue-shadowed silk" implies a sensual fabric viewed in a dimly lit environment. The "green evening" and "green water" paint an environment that is natural and serene. The "red eyes" of the elders immediately convey an impression of an unnatural state, that of anxiety and agitation. Individually, the colours are symbolic of characters' attitude: the speaker's aesthetic/ sexual desire, Susanna's quietly beckoning fertility, the elders' lustful envy. Even before any interaction has taken place, the colours set up a framework for plot development.

You will also notice that the colour imagery reappears towards the end of the poem in more circumscribed form. "So evenings die, in their green going" associates time with the course of life, recognizing the fleeting nature of life and beauty. In contrast are the "white elders", who having satisfied their lust, are no longer "red-eyed," but are instead drained of colour and warmth.

Stevens attempts to bring music and poetry closer together in 'Peter Quince'. Mark the elegance and precision of phrasing and music in the poem. Also see how Stevens is deliberate and controlled in his imagery and his symbols. His use of colour such as blue and green for symbolic effect adds to its beauty.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who is Peter Quince?

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2. Which biblical story does the poem make a reference to?

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3. What does Susanna remember while bathing in the spring?

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4. Explain the symbolic significance of "cymbal" and "roaring horns".

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5. Give two examples of Stevens' use of colour imagery.

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4.4 SUMMING UP

Wallace Stevens is one of America's most fascinating poets and his views on modern poetry mark him out to be a poet of distinct originality. The relationship between imagination and reality is the dominant concern of his poetic career. He was also influenced to a great extent by the philosopher George Santayana with whom he shared his faith in poetry as a surrogate for religion. In his largely blank verse poems Stevens has employed strong visual images, colour and sensuousness. He has also been accused from time to time of using inane and gaudy phraseology making his poems increasingly difficult for ordinary readers. Yet the very obscurity and abstract qualities of his poems have continued to appeal and fascinate generations of readers.

In this unit you have studied two poems of Wallace Stevens—'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman' and 'Peter Quince at the Clavier'—that adequately represents his qualities as a poet. The first poem is directed towards a widow who has great faith in the Christian religion. The loss of faith and increased questioning of Christianity that the

onset Modernism brought about is the theme of the poem. Addressing the woman, the speaker proposes an alternative to Christianity. The poet ridicules the lofty and ridiculous ways of the Orthodox Christians while also maintaining that the alternative universe proposed by him is rather carnivalesque in nature. The poem is, thus, an appreciation of paganism as an alternative to the Christian faith. Because of Stevens' use of perplexing language and extensive religious vocabulary the poem may seem slightly obscure. The confusion is, perhaps, a deliberate attempt on the poet's part to represent the chaos and confusion that confront people in Modern period.

'Peter Quince at the Clavier' is Stevens' version of the biblical story of Susanna, the story of violation of a maiden's chastity. Peter who is playing the musical instrument imagines his feelings to be similar to those awakened in the elders who had spied on Susanna bathing in her garden one evening. The poem retells the story of how she was raped by the elders. Her attendant ladies could only helplessly witness her shame. The last part of the poem contains the speaker's reflection of beauty. Beauty may be momentary in the mind but in the flesh it lives for ever. Even after Susanna's death the memory of her beauty remains. The poem moves back and forth in time, the two events of the poem (Quince at the clavier and Susanna and the elders in the garden) seem to occur simultaneously. The meaning and emotion emphasized by Stevens in 'Peter Quince' gets further accentuated by the magnificent interplay of rhythm and sound. The poem also abounds in vivid imagery of colour which adds to its beauty. He is deliberate and controlled in his imagery and his symbols.

4.5 KEY WORDS

Sonata: A piece of music for one instrument or for one instrument and a piano, usually divided into three or four parts. For example, Beethoven's piano sonatas; a violin sonata.

Coda: The final passage of a piece of music.

4.6 FURTHER READING

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MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Critically examine Stevens' use of imagery in the poems you have studied in this unit.

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2. Analyse Stevens as a modern poet in light of the poems you have studied.

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3. Discuss Stevens' use of the biblical myth of Susanna in 'Peter Quince at the Clavier'.

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