

# UNIT I

# 1

## LITERARY TERMS PART I

### Unit Structure

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 American Dream
- 1.4 Confessional Poetry
- 1.5 African American Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century
- 1.6 Questions
- 1.7 Suggested Reading

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### 1.1 OBJECTIVES

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The study of this unit will enable you to understand the concepts of:

- American Dream
- Confessional Poetry
- African American Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

You will also understand the significance of these concepts and their impact on American Literature.

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### 1.2 INTRODUCTION

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In the study of literature, it is essential to have a fair knowledge and understanding of various literary concepts, terms, movements and schools of thought. Therefore, in this unit, we are going to learn the concept of American Dream, an influential poetic movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century i.e. Confessional Poetry, and the poetry of the African Americans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America with an emphasis on their characteristic features and their reflection in the literary works of the period.

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### 1.3 THE AMERICAN DREAM

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The American Dream is the belief that any individual, regardless of the circumstances of their birth or the social class into which they were born, can achieve success, and where upward mobility is possible for everyone in a society with very few impediments. Rooted in the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that "all men are created equal" with the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", the American Dream is based on the ideals of liberty, democracy, rights of an individual, opportunity and equality. It can be achieved through hard work and the courage to take risks rather than through chance or social class.

James Truslow Adams, a writer and historian, coined the term 'American Dream' in his best-selling book *Epic of America*, written in the year 1931. According to Adams, the American dream is-

"that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."

Thus, the American Dream is the ideal that grants every individual an opportunity to pursue their own idea of happiness, consequently setting up a society that was extremely lucrative for those aspiring for a better life. This allure of a successful life has drawn millions of immigrants to the shores of America as a result of which America developed mostly as a nation of immigrants who created a nation where becoming an American, and passing on that citizenship to your children did not necessarily require being the child of an American. This idea also served as a compelling vision for other nations.

The notion of the American Dream is generally characterized by equal opportunity and the pursuit of material prosperity. Yet, others perceive the American Dream with less focus on financial gain and more emphasis on living a simple, fulfilling life.

The concept of the American Dream is a recurring theme in American Literature and has been used repeatedly in popular discourse. The employment of the American Dream in American literature can be traced ranging from *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin to Mark Twain's seminal work, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Other significant texts dealing with this concept are Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Hunter S. Thompson, Edward Albee, John Steinbeck, Langston Hughes, and Giannina Braschi are other writers who have thematically dealt with this concept. Some social critics, however, believe that the American Dream is beyond the grasp of the poor working class, who have to work multiple jobs just to ensure their and their family's survival. This dark, underbelly of the American Dream is discussed in Arthur Miller's Pulitzer winning play, *Death of a Salesman*, in which the play's protagonist, a salesman named Willy Loman, is on a quest for the American Dream and failing miserably, chooses to end his life.

Thus, the American Dream is a recurring theme in American Literature.

Confessional Poetry is the poetry of the personal or “I”. This style of writing emerged in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. It is associated with poets who redefined American poetry in the generation following World War II, such as Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsburg and W. D. Snodgrass. According to I. Ousby, “Confessionalism” or confessional poetry focuses upon, “extreme moments of individual experience, the psyche, and personal trauma, including previously and occasionally still [taboo](#) matters such as [mental illness](#), sexuality, and [suicide](#), often set in relation to broader social themes.”

The term “confessional” was first used by M. L. Rosenthal in the year 1959 in “Poetry as Confession”, a review of Robert Lowell's collection of poems, *Life Studies*, which was a highly personal account of Lowell's life and familial ties, and which left a significant impact on American Poetry.

The content of confessional poems is autobiographical and is marked by its exploration of subject matter that was considered taboo at that time. This includes topics such as mental illnesses, sexuality and suicide. Private experiences and feelings about death, trauma and depression and relationships were also addressed in this type of poetry. Anne Sexton, in particular, was interested in the psychological aspect of poetry, having started writing at the suggestion of her therapist. The confessional poets did not merely record their emotions on paper; Craft and construction were very important to their work. Though their treatment of the poetic self has been groundbreaking and may have shocked some of its readers, these poets maintained a very high level of craftsmanship by paying careful attention to and use of prosody.

The key texts of the American “confessional” school of poetry include Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*, W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's needle* and Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. One of the most well-known poems by a confessional poet is “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath. The poem is addressed to her abusive father and contains references to the Holocaust. Interestingly, it employs a sing-song rhythm that echoes the nursery rhymes of childhood, making the poem eerily spooky yet rendering it beautifully at the same time. John Berryman's *Dream Songs* is another seminal work in confessional poetry. It consists of 385 poems about a character named Henry and his friend, Mr. Bones. Majority of the poems contain elements of Berryman's own life and traumas, such as his father's suicide.

The tradition of confessional poetry has been a major influence on generations of writers and continues to this day. The poetry of the seventies and eighties continued to extrapolate and build upon the themes that were pioneered by the confessional movement. These post-confessional poems include Robert Pinsky's collection *History of My Heart*, Bill Knott's poem “The Closet” and Donald Hall's *Kicking the Leaves*. The content that the confessional poets explored laid the

groundwork for most of the poetry that is created in Fine Arts programs all over the world today. The poets of this movement wrote unflinchingly about difficult, tabooed topics thus, effectively employing an individual's freedom of speech. In contemporary poetry, many poets are adopting the same mindset. These poets include Marie Howe, Sharon Olds, Judith Harris and Jon Pineda. Popular confessional writing of today includes 'Post Secret', a project which encourages individuals to submit an anonymous confessional postcard which is posted on their website as one of their Sunday Secrets. Thus, the influence of confessional poetry has had a spillover effect resulting in a rising popularity of writing memoirs about overcoming traumatic experiences and mental illnesses.

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## 1.5 AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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African American literature is "the body of literature written by Americans of African descent." History of African Americans depicts their enslavement by rich plantation owners since their arrival on the American soil where they were treated as subhuman and incapable of thinking rationally or even feeling. Thus, in the early days of slavery and colonization, we find certain slave writing. African American literary tradition, however, began to take root in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century when black writers such as Fredrick Douglass and Phillis Wheatley, who were former slaves, were noticed by the larger white audience. Since then, African American writing has flourished, developing its own characteristics and unique features. Their poetry gives voice to various themes such as, oppression, humanity, freedom and the emergence of the unique African American culture. It also deals with issues such as racism, religion, slavery, equality and social struggle.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African American poetry saw an unprecedented flowering of literary expression. Famously known as the 'Harlem Renaissance' or the New Negro Movement', it was an artistic, cultural and intellectual movement which bloomed in the predominantly black neighborhood of the Harlem district in New York. With this revolutionary movement, which spanned the entire 1920s, the old African American attitude which was one of self-pity and apology was replaced by growing racial awareness amongst the African American community with rising pride in their race and their culture. Their poetry represented the idea of the New Negro who by employing his intellect and producing literature, art, and music would challenge racism and stereotypes, and promote racial equality and development of their race through social integration. Thus, it served the purpose of feeling pride in one's racial ancestry and creating art and literature in an attempt to uplift the race.

Instead of borrowing 'white' art forms and literary structures, the African American poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century developed their own unique style by experimenting with traditional musical forms such as 'Jazz' and 'Blues' and formulating the new form 'Jazz Poetry' to render the Black narrative.

Langston Hughes in his seminal work, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), aptly captures this prevailing phenomenon. He asserts,

"We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

The famous poets of this period are Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Imamu Amiri Baraka, Audre Lorde and Rita Dove among others. Their poetry was largely concerned with the questions of black identity. Langston Hughes' poem, "I too Sing America" which is a response to Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" is a perfect example of this feature of African American Poetry.

Though many of the Harlem Renaissance writers wrote with an aim to lead the community out of cultural bondage, the poets of the 1930's turned their attention to the heritage of the African "folk" community. This attitude is reflected in Margaret Walker's "For My People" which expresses an ideal community "pulsing in our spirits and our blood."

The post World War era saw the rise of Black Arts Movement, where a group of younger poets converged to create an overwhelming amount of African American verses that were politically charged and demanded a drastic change in the legal and social status of the African Americans. It concurred with the Civil Rights movement and united the African American poets around the dream of freedom and equality. With the development of a strong Black Nationalist political movement, exemplified by Malcolm X who became the subject of more poems by African American writers than any other individual, many of the universalist poets turned their attention to a poetry that would directly address the African American community's concerns in a specifically black voice. They attacked all aspects of white middle class values and rejected western poetic conventions. Their poetic technique focused on free verse, typographical stylistics and linguistic experimentation. The significant contributors of this movement are LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Larry Neal, Robert Hayden, Henry Dumas, Nikki Giovanni, Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks, among others. This movement is also known as "The Furious Flower" Movement, borrowing the term from Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Second Sermon on the Warpland" which implies "furious flower" as a metaphor for "the aesthetic chronicle of African American poetry".

By the end of the twentieth century, African American poetry is undergoing a renewing phase which some critics call "The Third Renaissance" wherein the millennial generation of the African Americans calls for humanism and a society that cherishes socio- political, linguistic and cultural freedom and brotherhood.

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## 1.6 QUESTIONS

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1. What is the American Dream? Discuss its characteristic features.
2. Elaborate upon the influence of the American Dream on American literature.
3. Define the term 'American Dream'. Explain how it is a recurring theme in American literature.
4. What is meant by Confessional Poetry? Discuss in detail its characteristic features.
5. Confessional poetry is also known as the poetry of "I". Elucidate.
6. Elaborate upon the characteristic elements in Confessional Poetry.
7. Give an overview of the African American Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
8. African American poetry is the poetry of racial struggle and search for identity. Comment.
9. What are the characteristic features of the African American Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?
10. Discuss in detail the major milestones of the African American Poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## 1.7 SUGGESTED READING

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## LITERARY TERMS PART II

### Unit Structure

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Expressionism in American Drama
- 2.4 African American Drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century
- 2.5 Broadway and Off Broadway Theatre
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Reading

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### 2.1 OBJECTIVES

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The study of this unit will enable you to understand the following concepts and movements:

- Expressionism in American Drama
- African American Drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century
- Broadway and Off Broadway Theatre

You will also understand the significance of these concepts/ movements and their impact on American Literature.

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### 2.2 INTRODUCTION

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In the study of literature, it is essential to have a fair knowledge and understanding of various literary concepts, terms, movements and schools of thought. Therefore, in this unit, we are going to learn the concept of Expressionism in American Drama, the drama of the African Americans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America, and the Broadway and the Off-Broadway Theatre, with an emphasis on their characteristic features and their reflection in the literary works of the period.

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### 2.3 EXPRESSIONISM IN AMERICAN DRAMA

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Expressionism is a modernist movement which developed in European drama and theatre, especially in Germany, during the early 1900s and then spread to the United States of America in the later decades. It is an artistic style which arose as a revolt against the artistic features and literary tradition of realism and attempted to focus on subjective emotions and individual responses the inner state of the subject, rather than depicting the objective reality. According to the expressionists, reality is “not something out there” but is a creation of the human mind. Therefore, they aimed to



show the inner state of the subject through direct expressions of thoughts and, more importantly, emotions. This is achieved through exaggeration, distortion, primitivism and fantasy and through vivid, jarring and violent employment of formal dramatic elements. The prominent European propagators of expressionist movement are poets such as Gottfried Benn and Georg Trakl, painters like Gottfried Benn and Georg Trakl and prose writers such as Franz Kafka.

The most prominent and influential form of expressionist writing is drama. Among the most famous expressionist dramatists are Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, and the early productions of Bertolt Brecht. These dramatists represented anonymous human types rather than individual characters, and replaced the plot with renderings of intense and rapidly oscillating emotional states in episodic form. The dialogue was often distorted and chipped into exclamatory and seemingly unintelligible sentences or phrases, and they used masks and abstract, expansive stage sets. They also used modern devices such as the revolving stage and light and sound special effects.

This mode of expressionist drama had a significant influence on the American theater. The first American play to successfully employ this mode is "On Trial" by Elmer Rice, produced in 1914. The other major proponents of the expressionistic style are Eugene O'Neill, Sophie Treadwell, Lajos Egri and John Howard Lawson. Eugene O'Neill's play "The Emperor Jones" (1920) revolves around the racial memories of a scared African American protagonist in a sequence of episodes which are highly symbolic in nature. His other plays "The Hairy Ape" and "The Great God Brown" are deeply expressionistic in nature. Elmer Rice's second play, "The Adding Machine" (1923), with the help of highly unrealistic means, presents the picture of a mechanical, barren and a terrifying world as perceived by Mr. Zero, who is just a tiny cog in huge capitalist setup. These plays often depict the experiences of a person who is isolated and terrified by the industrial, capitalistic and urban society which is falling apart into complete chaos. The exaggerated emotions expressed in their works are frustration, anxiety, disgust, violence, ugliness and a crude banality in response to modern life. Thus, the focus is not on beauty but on emotional response to the external world. The characteristics of expressionistic drama are as follows:

- Depiction of the inner consciousness of an individual through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism and fantasy.
- Experimentation with new forms and style, and use of symbolism and dream-like, nightmarish elements to portray the dehumanizing aspects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century society.
- A strong critique against social injustices, materialistic attitudes and the capitalistic system.
- Abstract and unlocalised setting which is highly distorted like a nightmare and is deeply symbolic.

- The plot and structure of the play is broken into disjointed and fragmented episodes.
- Nameless and impersonal characters without individual identity that stereotypes a particular class or social group.
- The dialogue is extremely fragmented, disjointed and clipped. It is also known as 'telegram style'

Expressionism was stamped out of Germany in the 1930s by the Nazis, but it flourished in American art and literature. Its effects, direct or indirect, can be recognized on the plays such as Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth" and Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman". It has also left a strong influence on the Theater of the Absurd, the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and other Beat writers, the prose fiction of Samuel Beckett, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon, and on numerous films even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## 2.4 AFRICAN AMERICAN DRAMA OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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The origins of African American Theatre can be traced back to the religious rituals and forms of secular entertainment which the black slaves brought along from their ancestral African homeland. After the Civil War, "the minstrel shows" performed by the blacks of the early 19th century are described to be the roots of black theatre. However, these minstrel shows, which are also known as "Ethiopian minstrelsy", were initially written, produced and performed for the white audiences. These plays stereotyped African Americans as lazy, moral-less and smutty creatures who could not be considered human and depicted extremely degrading portraits of the community.

However, by the beginning of the 20th century, African Americans started producing black musicals, most of which were written, produced, and acted entirely by blacks. James Brown's "King Shotaway" (1823) is the first known play by an African American. "The Escape" or "A Leap for Freedom" (1858) by William Wells Brown was the first black play to be published, but the first true success of a black dramatist was the play "Rachel" (1916) by Angelina W. Grimké.

The African American theatre grew rapidly and prospered during the Harlem Renaissance of the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cities like Chicago, New York, and Washington D.C. saw the emergence of small experimental groups and black theatre companies. Paul Robeson was established as America's leading black actor on account of one such theatre company named The Ethiopian Art Theatre. The play, "Appearances" (1925) by Garland Anderson became the first play by a black author to be produced on Broadway. However, it wasn't until Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* (1935), which won huge critical acclaim, that the black theatre produced a mainstream Broadway hit. The Federal Theatre Project was established in the same year in an attempt to provide a

training ground for the African American enthusiasts and by the late 1930s, black community theatres began to appear, bringing forth fresh and talented dramatists such as Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. In the next decade, this black theatre found its stronghold in The American Negro Theatre and the Negro Playwrights' Company.

After World War II, the African American theatre became more progressive, revolutionary and almost militant in its reflection of the ideals of the black revolution. It aimed at establishing an African American literary culture and style which was poles apart from the white literary traditions. They formed councils for the abolishment of racial stereotypes in theatre and for integration of black playwrights and dramatists into mainstream American dramaturgy. The plays during this period, such as Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1959) and numerous others, focused upon the African American community's struggle for identity in a society that dehumanized and demeaned them.

The New Black Theatre, which emerged in the 1960s, was angrier and more defiant than its forerunners. The strongest proponent of this theatre movement was LeRoi Jones, who later changed his name to Amiri Baraka. His plays, such as "Slaveship" and the award-winning "Dutchman" (1964), depict an extremely fuming portrayal of the exploitation of the African American community by the hands of the whites and urge these subalterns to rise and revolt against the injustices that they have suffered. The Black Arts Repertory Theatre founded by him in Harlem in 1965 gave inspiration to many black playwrights and was instrumental in creating a strong "black aesthetic" on the American dramatic scene.

This tradition was carried forward and further strengthened by dramatists such as August Wilson, George Wolfe and Suzan-Lori Parks, in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Contemporary African American playwrights have expanded the boundaries of the African American dramatic landscape, by addressing the convoluted issues such as black feminism, constructions of masculinity, black "authenticity" and essentialized notions of race-gender, and the subject formation of gay/lesbian in a culture which is at times "Negrophobic" and homophobic.

**The major characteristics of the African American Drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century are as follows:**

- These plays and dramatic pieces demonstrate deep social consciousness. They are forceful anti-slavery tracts and bring to light the pressing social issues that concern the black community.
- They were instrumental in unifying the African American community and boosting their confidence and self-respect by offering dramatic biographies of prominent African Americans and other hitherto unknown lives of significant contributors to the black cause.
- They raise a strong voice against racism and aim to promote pride in one's racial identity and culture.

- Provide a realistic portrayal of the socio-political, cultural and racial realities of their time thus, creating a strong foundation for the community's resistance to their oppression.

In conclusion, The African American Drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> century traces the entire gamut of the African experience in America, right from their traumatic uprooting from Africa, humiliating slave auctions to the anti-slavery movement, the Civil War, migration to the North, Harlem and finally the Civil Rights Movement.

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## **2.5 BROADWAY AND OFF- BROADWAY THEATRE**

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### **2.5.1. Broadway Theatre:**

The Broadway Theatre, commonly referred to as Broadway, is the name given to the theatrical performances showcased in the 41 professional theatres located along the oldest North-South Street in New York city, i.e. the Broadway Street, in Midtown Manhattan. The section of Broadway between 42<sup>nd</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> streets, including the Times Square, where these theatres with the capacity of 500 seats or more, are located is considered as the home of the American theatre industry. It is famously referred to as the 'Theatre District' or 'The Great White Way' in reference to the thousands of light bulbs on the marquees of theatres and advertisement billboards that light up the night sky every day. With the exception of the West End theatre in London, Broadway theatre is widely recognized to embody the highest level of commercial theatre in the English-speaking world.

The Broadway Theatre began sometime during the 1750s when actor-managers Walter Murray and Thomas Kean established a resident theatre company in New York which performed ballad operas. By the 1830s, Broadway and Prince Street had become New York's premiere nightspots for theatre lovers. Majority of the Broadway shows performed were musicals. However, as the Second World War approached, many of the Broadway dramas focused their attention towards rising Nazism in Europe and the American policy of non-intervention. It was after the Great Depression that Broadway stepped into its golden age, surviving the challenge projected by the arrival of the motion picture which featured famous stars and comedians, and was inexpensive. Broadway shows are one of world's most popular tourist attractions today.

### **The major characteristics of Broadway Theatre are:**

- The 41 theatres which fall into the category of 'Broadway Theatre' have the seating capacity of 500 or more.
- Majority of the plays performed are musicals and often rely on casting of well-known performers and movie/ television actors to draw a larger and new audience.
- Most of the Broadway shows have open-ended runs i.e. the length of their presentation is not set beforehand as they are commercial

productions designed with the intention of making a profit for the producers and investors.

- Since, most of the productions are popular and extremely profitable, they run for years and close only when they stop drawing an audience.
- *The Phantom of the Opera* is the longest running musical in the history of Broadway. It was opened in 1988 and is still running today, having given more than 12,000 extremely popular performances.
- The other famous and long-running Broadway shows are *The Lion King*, *Cats*, *Les Miserables*, *Mamma Mia*, *Beauty and the Beast* among others.
- Producing a Broadway musical is an expensive and a risking venture. The production cost of a typical musical is at least 10 million dollars and the tickets also cost about one eighth of that amount. Thus, Broadway musical tickets are extremely expensive and have at times been critiqued for being elitist.
- It is a popular belief that the theatrical productions on Broadway are the best in the entire world. Every year, the prestigious Tony Awards are awarded to the best Broadway shows.

### **2.5.2. Off- Broadway Theatre:**

The Off-Broadway Theatre refers to the professional theatre venues on the side streets adjacent to the Broadway Street in New York City with a seating capacity between 100 and 499. These production houses which are smaller than Broadway theatres have been in existence since the mid-twentieth century and serve as an alternative to the commercially- oriented musicals and shows on Broadway. These theatres rose to prominence and thrived after the success of the director Jose' Quintero's plays in 1952. In the next few decades, Off-Broadway gave a platform and trained many famous theatrical talents such as Director Joseph Papp, who later established 'The Public Theatre', a complex of various theatres dedicated to experimental plays. Many prize-winning American playwrights such as Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Carles Gordone, Lanford Wilson and others, began their careers off-Broadway and then were subsequently produced on Broadway. It also identified and trained numerous noted performers, lighting technicians, costume designers and set designers. The most famous off-Broadway theatre groups are The Negro Ensemble Company, Manhattan Theatre Club, La Mama Experimental Theatre Company, The Open Theatre and The Roundabout.

#### **The major characteristics of Off-Broadway Theatre are:**

- They have the seating capacity between 100 and 499 and are located on the side streets adjacent to Broadway.
- These theatres are smaller than Broadway theatres and perform alternative drama.

- Most of the Off-Broadway plays are experimental in nature and are produced on a lower budget. This gives them the freedom to experiment with style and structure and are much more imaginative than Broadway, the producers often rely on commercially safe entertainment on account of high production costs, neglecting the more serious drama, in the process.
- These theatres are an important phenomenon as they offer a creative outlet to upcoming writers, musicians, directors, actors etc.
- Give a voice to contemporary social, political, racial and economic issues that riddle the society but are ignored by the commercially oriented Broadway plays and musicals.
- Many of the off-Broadway shows have eventually moved from Off-Broadway houses to Broadway, such as *Grease*, *A Chorus Line*, *Doubt*, *I Am My Own Wife*, *The Normal Heart*, and *Coastal Disturbances* among others.

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## 2.6 QUESTIONS

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1. What is meant by Expressionism? Discuss its characteristic features.
2. Elaborate upon the influence of the expressionist movement on American drama.
3. What are the major characteristics of the expressionist movement in American Drama? Explain with examples.
4. Give an overview of the African American Drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
5. African American Theatre is the drama of racial struggle and search for identity. Comment.
6. What are the characteristic features of the African American Drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?
7. Discuss in detail the major milestones of the African American Drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
8. What is meant by Broadway Theatre? Discuss in detail its characteristic features.
9. Explain the term Off-Broadway Theatre? Elaborate upon its major features.
10. Write a detailed comparative note on Broadway and Off-Broadway Theatre.

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## 2.7 SUGGESTED READING

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### CRITICAL STUDY OF ARTHUR MILLER'S 'DEATH OF A SALESMAN' PART I

#### Unit Structure

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction to Drama
- 3.3 Introduction to American Drama
- 3.4 Origin of American Drama: From 1600 to 1700
- 3.5 From 18th century to beginning of 19th century
- 3.6 Modern Drama
- 3.7 Arthur Miller as a Contemporary Playwright
- 3.8 Biography of Arthur Miller
- 3.9 Critical Analysis of the Play, *Death of a Salesman*
- 3.10 Setting of the Play:
- 3.11 Summary of the play
- 3.12 Summing Up
- 3.13 Questions
- 3.14 Suggested Readings

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#### 3.1 OBJECTIVES

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This unit discusses the introduction to Drama, Introduction to American Drama, Origin of American Drama: From 1600 to 1700, American Drama From 18th century to beginning of 19th century, Modern Drama, Arthur Miller as a Contemporary Playwright, Biography of Arthur Miller, Critical analysis of the play, *Death of a Salesman*.

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#### 3.2 INTRODUCTION TO DRAMA

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Drama is a literary genre or style of writing which has fictional or non-fictional representation of some actions through dialogue and performance on stage. Drama is also known as a type of play written for television, radio, and film along with theatre. A dramatic piece of literature is usually called a play and the person who writes drama is known as a 'dramatist' or 'playwright'. Three major types of drama are Comedy, Tragedy and Melodrama.

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#### 3.3 INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN DRAMA

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The plays written by American writers in the English language for performance are known as American Drama. American drama begins with the emergence of American colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and

continues to the present times. In the beginning of American drama, most of the American plays were written under the influence of British drama, and reason was clearly rooted in colonialism. In fact, British collection overshadows the American stage for a longer period of time. From 1828 to 1836, American drama begins to distinguish from British plays under the presidency of Andrew Jackson.

America was newly established country which had different problems and values in the society. Whereas British society was already a flourished one and playwrights based their writings on the manners, attitudes and representation of the elite class society. Despite of this conflict between American egalitarian ideas and British values American writers were imitating British models until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the opinion of some critics, American drama was born probably during or after the World War I (1914-1918).

Towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century American playwrights started a new epoch in the direction of realism, illuminating the hardships of life and composing more credible characters. Realism persisted in American plays in forms, comedy and tragedy as a predominant trend of 20<sup>th</sup> century. American drama reached to its great heights with the commencement of psychological realism and their searing investigation of characters' inner lives. With the advancement of technology and age, the subjects and themes for drama extended to race, gender, sexuality and death.

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### **3.4 ORIGIN OF AMERICAN DRAMA: FROM 1600 TO 1700**

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The living conditions in American colonies were formidable because of settlements and migration before mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and it had reflected in the literature of the age. 'Ye Bare and Ye Cubb' a 1665 play is considered as the first English language play from the colonies is lost and the oldest surviving American play is 'Androborus' by Robert Hunter (1714). It was written to attack political enemies and entrenched a tradition of American drama. In 1760s, a group of British playwrights emerged as 'The American Group' who wrote plays and submitted to actors for performance. In 1767, 'The Prince of Parthia', a tragedy written by Thomas Godfrey is considered as the first professional play written by an American. But it was again patterned on British plays.

When the American Revolution (1775-1783) started, most of the professional actors shifted to Jamaica and there was not much literary production. During the war time, mostly satirical plays were written, either to support British control of colonies or to attack it. British soldiers produced some of pro- British plays for instance, 'The Battle of Brooklyn' (1776) which was written anonymously to support British government and presented generals as drunks, cowards and lechers including George Washington. John Burgoyne, a British general wrote "The Blockade" (1775) in which he ridiculed American soldiers. In response to this play, in 1776 "The Blockheads; or Affrighted Officers" was written by an anonymous playwright in whom British soldiers were depicted as terrified

of Americans. It is assumed that this play was written by Mercy Otis Warren, who created many other satires on British soldiers. For a longer period, she remained the voice of American revolution as in her play “The Group” (1775), a play that describes Britain as ‘Blunderland’, as a mother who eats her children. Most of the plays were focused on the subject of colonial effects.

In 1787, when the constitution of U.S was being written, Royall Tyler wrote “The Contrast” one of the finest American plays of 18<sup>th</sup> century. But this play was modelled on British playwright, Richard Sheridan’s “The School of Scandal” (1777). “The Contrast” compares British and American values and ultimately advocates American veracity over British hypocrisy. Another play of the time, “Slaves in Algiers or A Struggle for Freedom” (1794) is a melodramatic comedy by Susanna Rowson. It was the first American play by a woman to reach the professional stage. The conflict and resolution in this play marked a step forward towards a new form of drama, melodrama. This form became popular in 19<sup>th</sup> century in American drama.

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### **3.5 FROM 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TO THE BEGINNING OF 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

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From 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, many plays were adapted or translated from German, French and British plays. Collection of American plays even in 19<sup>th</sup> century was still limited. Most of American plays were still modelled on British plays only their subject matter patterned on superficially American episodes or themes. Like British drama, many American plays demonstrated the impact of romanticism, a European literary and artistic movement on writings of the age. Along with this form, melodrama with its efflux emotion became an extensive dramatic form in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gothic melodrama and melodrama with tragic endings came into view regularly in American theatre. William Dunlap was the first eminent writer of melodrama who translated several German plays for American theatres. Dunlap wrote *Andre* (1798), a native tragedy that lacked the quality to gather attention so he rewrote it in 1803 as “*Glory of Colombia*”.

Early 19<sup>th</sup> century marked number of changes in American literature. Primarily religious literature was written in 17<sup>th</sup> century whereas literature of 18<sup>th</sup> century dedicated to politics. The literature of 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the final emergence and spirit of romanticism. After Dunlap’s writings American drama moved with two outstanding writers, James Nelson Baker and John Howard Payne. Baker’s only five plays have survived out of ten plays. . Baker’s

“*The Indian Princess* (1808), an exploration of Native American characters and themes, was the first professionally produced of this kind. Another play, “*Superstition*” (1824), A romantic tragedy by Baker, discussed about conflicts between Native Americans and White settlers.

On the other hand John H. Payne, mostly wrote on foreign themes and established himself as an actor, the playwright and also associated with theatre. Some of the plays by him are Charles-II, Thespian Mirror and Julie or The Wanderer.

In second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American drama began to change in subjects, themes and nature so became more apparent after 1830. In 1820s an African American acting group called as the African Theatre which was established by William Henry Brown. This group produced plays by Shakespeare as well as African Americans for e.g., "The Drama of King Shotaway" (1823) by Brown. It was the time when the playwrights were writing about racial, social, and economic tensions in American society.

The play "The Nigger" by Edward Sheldon was based on the theme of racial tension. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, drama which was declining from past few years had revived with George Bernard Shaw, an Irish playwright and Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright. A wave of writing good plays came to America too and playwrights began to move in the direction of above writers with interests in psychological realism and social drama.

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### **3.6 MODERN DRAMA**

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Modern drama emerged after a long process of slow evaluation in various forms and themes and after the amalgamation of various schools. Few dramatists like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Eugene O' Neil had contributed in the development of Modern drama. American theatre after 1916, reached new heights with the use of psychological realism, and by experimentation in both content and production. With the age, drama became a mouth piece of social issues such as Civil Rights and AIDS crisis and individual's stance on these issues.

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### **3.7 ARTHUR MILLER AS A CONTEMPORARY PLAYWRIGHT**

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Arthur Miller is a renowned American playwright and altering figure of contemporary American drama. There are almost 35 stage plays to his credits of which include, Death of a Salesman (1949), All my Sons (1947), The Crucible (1953) and The Price (1968). He also wrote many screenplays, radio plays and essays.

Arthur Miller writes about society and individual dealing with all kinds of social issues. He holds the view that society is inside a man and a man is inside a society. His dramas are a fusion of social and psychological issues. Miller has reinforced social criticism to the form of drama and based his plays on various contemporary themes such as social accountability, American dream, personal relationship etc. His dramas deal primarily with man's relationship with his family and society.

The prominent theme in his play is a relationship between man's identity and the image that the society demands. All the major protagonists in his

plays involved in strife in the society that result from his acceptance or rejection of an image that is the product of his society's values. A critic Harold Clurman in his book, "The Portable Arthur Miller" writes:

The basic health of Miller's play, not to be categorized as edifying in something Europeans crave as much as a man in the desert craves water.

While they appreciate and applaud Miller's criticism of America, what stirs them subliminally is precisely the vigorous, courageous, optimistic moral concern which is one of the most enduring contributions of our American heritage.

Arthur Miller is considered as a social and moralist realist of his times and along with this form. He also tried poetic form of theatre in his plays such as in "Death of a Salesman". In his plays, a hybridity can be seen of social, tragic and the psychological. He infuses the subjective and objective between outside experience and convincing emotional life. Realism revived in the hands of Arthur Miller and this is his great contribution in American drama. He makes a balance in his writings, by displaying aspects of psychology on one hand and rhetoric on the other. The place of Arthur Miller in American drama is described by Alan S. Dower in his book, the American Theatre. He writes:

Miller is still one of our most important playwrights with three good plays and one extremely fine one to his credit. To have written Death of a Salesman is an achievement of such significance that Arthur Miller can be allowed a slip or even a fall.

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### **3.8 BIOGRAPHY OF ARTHUR MILLER**

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Arthur Miller was born in Harlem on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1915, to Isidore and Augusta Miller, who were Polish immigrants. After coming to America, Arthur Miller's father established a prosperous business of clothing. The family was living with prosperity till they fall into despair because of Wall Street Crash of 1929. In 1929 Miller family moved to Brooklyn to overcome their financial crisis. In 1933 Miller graduated from high school and for higher education applied to Cornell University and University of Michigan, but both refused him for admission. Before the University of Michigan accepted his admission, he tried variant jobs including hosting a radio programme. In 1939, after he left University of Michigan, Arthur Miller wrote many plays for Federal Theatre, which was famous to give assignments to new writers, actors and directors.

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### **3.9 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY, *DEATH OF A SALESMAN***

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Death of a Salesman (1949) by Arthur Miller is a masterpiece in American drama. When he wrote this play, he named it as "The Inside of His Head" but before publication he changed the name of this play to "Death of a Salesman" as he described that he was not satisfied with the previous one. The title reflects to the literal and metaphorical death of a salesman Willy

Loman and it comes from a line in the play; a character is said to die “the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers” on his way to make another sale- a good death for a salesman.

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### 3.10 SETTING OF THE PLAY

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The play has an advanced setting. In spite of the fact that the play is set in 1949, however the seasons of the play change between a point in 1942 and some other time in 1928. However, the move of time is extraordinarily dealt with and made persuading through flashbacks. Miller as a child of Great Depression sensationalizes the awful long stretches of the Second World War. The move of the play makes place to a great extent inside the Loman home in Brooklyn, however different places in New York and Boston are utilized also, including lodgings, Willy's office, an eatery, and Willy's gravesite. Along these lines, the setting of the tragedy contrasts from the setting of a traditional tragedy. The setting of the play is certifiably not a regal castle however the place of poor Willy.

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### 3.11 SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

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The play, *Death of a Salesman* occurs in two acts, act one contains eleven scenes and act two consists of fourteen scenes and play ends with a requiem. The acts of the play covers 24-hour period and the requiem is set few days later. The play is set in New York City in the late 1940s. The actions in act-I take place in Brooklyn, at the Loman house and in act-II occur in Manhattan at a restaurant and office building.

The play opens with Willy Lowman, the main protagonist of the play who is a traveling salesman for thirty-four years for the Wagner Company. He harboured a perception that he is a vital being to his company and implanted over- reaching goals in his mind. Even though Willy worked hard, his dream to reach at the top position in his company and to become rich remained unattainable. The disillusionment and disappointment of his life compelled him to suicide and made him a tragic-figure. Linda is Willy's wife and they have two sons, Biff a thirty-four year-old and Happy thirty-two year- old. Biff after trying his career in East returned home to make his fortune.

Throughout the play, story oscillates between reality and memories, at times Willy even speaks to the characters from the past. Willy recalls earlier times, his optimism about future, his good relations with his sons, and even his affair with a lady. The memories of his brother Ben also disturbed him. Ben is dead now, he travelled to Africa as a young man and became very rich and successful. Willy takes Ben's success as a constant reminder to “make something” of himself.

Linda Loman explains her sons about Willy's state of mind and his strange struggle with depression. Linda brings to light that Willy is borrowing money from a neighbour Charles and attempted suicide. She requests her sons to revive their relationship with their father Willy. Biff and Happy discusses to take financial aid from an old employer, Bill Oliver as they



decided to start a new business of sports goods. Biff visited Bill Oliver who refuses to meet him and he comes away empty-handed. On the other side, Willy requested Howard, his boss to give him some work in local area as he cannot drive off much but he dismisses him from the job by saying that he is a threat to the company.

Biff and Happy arrive at Frank's Chop House, a restaurant where Biff, Happy and Willy decides to have dinner to celebrate new beginning of Biff's business and Willy also joins them after few minutes. Willy's disappointment results in an argument with Biff where Biff insulted him and leaves the place followed by Happy. Willy thinks that this rough behaviour of Biff is an outcome of discovery of his affair with another lady few years back.

Willy in pain comes back to home and starts feeling detached from the real world. In his distress he plants seeds in the backyard of his home in a hope of building a garden. He also has an imaginary conversation with his brother Ben, which forces him to feel discontented in his own life.

Few minutes later, when Willy enters the house, he again has heated tiff over some difference of opinion with Biff. Biff move out of the house for the betterment of the family but he leaves the room with tears in in eyes and this makes Willy to think unworthy of him. He decides to execute his plan of suicide as he believes that his death can bring insurance money to family which they need for living and other prospects. When everyone in the house gone to bed, Willy leaves the house and intentionally hit his car, causes a car accident which kills him.

In the requiem of the play, family of Willy Loman and his neighbour Charley with his son Bernard gathers around Willy's grave. Biff remarks that his father "had the wrong dream" but Happy ignoring the reality counts his merits and advocates his father's goals. Willy's wife Linda is the only one who is deeply lamenting his death, but also endorses the fact that family is "free" from a lot of obligations with the money they get from his insurance.

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### 3.12 SUMMING UP

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In this unit, we have studied the literary genre drama and dramatic structure of American literature starting from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to 'modern drama'. Arthur Miller excelled as a renowned playwright of modern age who writes about social problems and realism to paint a better picture of industrial age in America. In his play *Death of a Salesman*, he depicted how the wrong perceptions associated with 'Success Myth' and 'American Dream' can be proved disastrous for the society which ends up in tragedy of the protagonist Willy Loman. The play dramatizes the pathetic struggle between what has been and what is essential to be. It is a tragedy of an individual in highly developed capitalist and technocratic society.



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### 3.13 QUESTIONS

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1. How does 'modern drama' evolved in American literature?
2. Critically examine *Death of a Salesman*.
3. Discuss Arthur Miller as a contemporary playwright.

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### 3.14 SUGGESTED READINGS:

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1. *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Grade, Decadence E Kitch*. Bloomington. Indiana University Press. 1977.
2. Esther Merle Jackson "Death of a Salesman" Tragic Myth in the Modern Theatre" in *Death of a Salesman: Critical Interpretations*. Horold Bloom, ed New York Chelsa House Publishers. 1988.
3. *Modern American Drama, 1945-1990* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,1992)
4. Miller Arthur ' *Introduction to the Collected Plays*'. New Delhi: Allied., 1975

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### CRITICAL STUDY OF ARTHUR MILLER'S 'DEATH OF A SALESMAN' PART II

#### Unit Structure

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Character Analysis
- 4.3 Major Themes of the Play
- 4.4 Arthur Miller's Concept of tragedy
- 4.5 Death of a Salesman as a tragedy and Willy Loman as a tragic hero
- 4.6 Summing Up
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Readings

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#### 4.1 OBJECTIVES

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This unit discusses the characters of the play, major themes of the play, Arthur Miller's concept tragedy, Death of the Salesman as a tragedy and Willy Loman as a tragic hero.

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#### 4.2 CHARACTER ANALYSIS

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##### Willy Loman:

Willy Loman is a sixty-one-years old travelling salesman who has worked for Wagner firm and lives in New York City. He struggles to keep his hold on the present circumstances and reality as his 'dreams' makes him disillusioned in life. When he was a teenager, his father abandoned him and left his home. During a trip in search of his father Willy met a successful travelling salesman and aspires to become one in order to attain financial success and reputation in the society. Willy builds a wall of lies around him and goes to an extent that he begins to tell lies his family about his salary. While working as a salesman he frequently stays away from his home and turned towards other women named Miss Frances in Boston. When his elder son Biff discovered his affair, he left his home and their relationship changed forever. Towards the end of the play, Willy becomes a tragic- hero who sacrifices his life for the sake of his family. He commits suicide so that his family can get his insurance money and to set them free from due bills.

### **Linda Loman:**

Linda is the wife of Willy and mother of Biff and Happy. She is the mouthpiece of Arthur Miller in the play to highlight certain faults in the American social structure. She loves his husband and sons in spite of all their difficulties. She acts as a biggest supporter and defender of Willy and a focused lady who helps him to believe all his illusions. She bridges the rough relations between Willy and his sons, and tells her sons "attention, attention must finally be paid to this man." She is a simple person who is caught in complex struggle between illusion and reality where she cannot support or reject one. Willy's death brings pain to Linda and she is the only one who thinks high of him.

### **Biff Loman:**

Biff is Willy and Linda Loman's elder son who is 34 years old when the play begins. He was a football player in his high school and won several scholarships but from last fourteen years has been "unable to find himself" and just returned from west to make himself a successful individual. In his youth, he idolized his father and worked hard to please him. His conflict with his father Willy, driven by the fact that one should be truthful. He himself is a failure who rejects Willy's values but has not developed his own until the end of the play. He believes that his father's death is a consequence of his "wrong dreams. All, all wrong" He is the only character in the play who has hope and strength to accept the reality.

### **Happy Loman:**

Happy is the younger son of Willy and Linda who is 32-year- old and works in a department store and stays in his own apartment in another section of city. He shares his father's characteristics and a womanizer. He is not true to anyone in his life and finds pleasure in sexual and financial satisfaction. Even after Willy's death he is same. He admires his father and decides to fulfil his dream of becoming a successful salesman. He is a weak individual who never realises Willy's values as false and refuse to recognize reality. Throughout the play, Willy's attention is more on Biff and less on Happy. Happy is continually saying in flashback scenes that "I'm losing weight, you notice, Pop?" This statement is Happy's attempt to attain some recognition. He feels that he is neglected child who is overshadowed by a talented brother Biff.

### **Charley:**

Charley is Willy's neighbour and a successful salesman. He represents a touch of realism in the play. His life stands as a contradiction to everything that Willy believes in. He is a practical man who does not believe in personal attractiveness and well-liked by everyone. Willy borrows money from him every month and shows it as his salary to his family. He is kind to Willy and even offers him a good job which Willy rejects. He asks Willy many times during the play: "Willy, when are you going to grow up?" as he thinks that Willy behaves like a kid who is

ignoring the reality and like to stay in dream world. He is the realist and shows the fallacy of Willy's ideas.

**Bernard:**

Bernard is Charley's son and a successful lawyer. He is Biff's childhood friend who idolizing Biff in his youth but later on he understands a real picture of world and learn values and becomes a successful family man. The character of Bernard is in contrast with Biff.

**Ben:**

Ben is Willy's elder brother, who is dead now and acts as a symbol of complete success that Willy can only dream about and vent out for Willy's frustrations as he appears only when Willy face problems with the present world. He is ideal for Willy, even though he is also antithesis of Willy's life. He achieved his success on his own that Willy can only dream about. He travelled to Africa in his youth and became rich when he was just twenty-one. He seems to have no time for emotions and personal life but these qualities are attributed to him by Willy.

**Howard Wagner:**

Howard is the son of former owner of the Wagner Company. He dismisses Willy from his job for his poor performance. He is the symbol of capitalism and modernism in the American society.

**Miss Frances:**

Many years ago, Willy has an affair with this woman in Boston. The affair can be seen as an ego booster and not as a strong desire on Willy's part for an illicit affair.

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### **4.3 THEMES OF THE PLAY**

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Themes are underlying ideas and beliefs that writers explicit in their texts as in poetry, fiction and play. Theme of the play helps the readers to understand between the lines or hidden meaning in his piece of art. There are several themes in the play Death of a Salesman, such as American Dream and Disillusionment, Illusion versus Reality, Betrayal, and Nature versus Man-Made Environment. These themes have been discussed below;

**American Dream and Disillusionment:**

The play is best known for its theme of hollowness and unattainability of the American Dream. The American Dream is an ideology of United States in 19th century that believes in equal opportunities for everyone and through hard work any one can attain prosperity and success as well as upward social mobility for himself or for his family. Throughout the play, Willy adheres this American Dream 'ethos' that germinate wrong seeds in his mind to acquire more in life. He misunderstands the concept of American Dream. He thinks if his brother Ben, his neighbour Charley and

Charley's son Bernard can achieve success financially he also can but he wants to be on the top without working hard. He conceives a notion that 'well-liked' and 'personal attractiveness' can bring respect and financial success. For him, American Dream works in two parts, financial success and acknowledgement of that success in the society. Willy mistakenly identifies his own worth and value through the social respect of others in society, and he also inculcates same ideology in his sons, Biff and Happy.

### **Illusion versus Reality:**

Arthur Miller fabricated the structure of the play with shifts from flashbacks (play of memories) into the present real life. Willy Lowman's issues of dream and truth are complex and confused together which he tries to control and turn according to his own advantage. For instance, he borrows money from his neighbour Charley and shows that amount to his family as his salary. He never tells his true financial state to his family. A standout amongst the most critical deceptions, which frequently fuels Willy's anxiety and his son Biff's hatred, is Willy's fidelity to his wife Linda. Rather than recognizing reality and his responsibility Willy regards his disloyalty and makes up a story to tell his son when he discovers his father's affair. Willy and Biff come into conflict after this incidence. Biff says his father has all wrong dreams and he rejects reality.

In fact, the whole Lowman family lives under a haze of hallucination and self-misleading state. They keep secrets from one another and never talk transparently about the family's brokenness and proceeds to act as a happy family. While Linda Lowman knows the truth about her husband, his habits of telling lies, his suicide endeavours, his depression, but she keeps on carrying on wrong beliefs of Willy as a devoted wife. He never raises a question on Willy for anything or never tries to make him understand the reality of things.

Charley and his son Bernard are in contrast with Lowman family. They live a practical life and live a happier and successful life.

### **Betrayal:**

When Willy and his brother Ben, were young, they were abandoned by their father who left his family and moved to Alaska. This was the first act of betrayal in Willy's life when his father rejected all his duties towards his family to achieve success in his life. After his father, Willy's elder brother Ben who was father-figure for him after his father. Ben also left Willy to travel to Africa who made his fortune there and later on died. Willy likewise feels deceived by his brother Ben, as he opines that Ben had some secrets to success which he never shared with him. Willy's father and Ben choose to live a life of adventure and wealth instead of family associations. These betrayals in his early years had n impact on him which leads to his betrayal of his own family in various structures. Willy becomes a travelling salesman and spends most of his time away from his family. He was absent when his sons needed him the most. In fact he betrays his wife Linda, who was so sincere to him in all respects.

In the end of the play, Willy showcases betrayal of his family when he commits suicide and rejects all his responsibilities.

### **Nature versus Man-Made Environment:**

Arthur Miller presents the catastrophes of modernism and harsh realities of artificial world of Capitalism where a human being has no value but money has. Howard fires Willy from his company when he realises that Willy is no longer useful for the company. Willy loves nature and country life which gives him a sense of freedom. He loves flute music. His travelling as a salesman keeps him close to nature and makes him happy. Whenever he feels distress from outside world, he spends some time in his garden and plant seeds and attains peace. Though he enjoys being close to nature his hallucination pulled him towards man-made world where he is striving for success and respect.

Biff and Happy are two aspects of Willy's personality. Biff finds refuge in natural world as he works on ranches before coming home. Happy on the other hand likes to stay in city life and wants to be a part of modern world like his father.

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## **4.4 ARTHUR MILLER'S CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY**

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In *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller displays a tragedy which is not quite the same as the established conventional or Shakespearean tragedies. Based on some capricious standards Miller creates a tragedy, which is related to present day in regards of the style just as the topic. The play is fundamentally connected to Miller's exposition "Tragedy and the common man", the Miller's concept in which he rethinks our thought of a tragedy. He demonstrates that a typical man additionally can be the hero of a tragedy and his sufferings likewise connect our heart.

In Aristotle's order of preference, "thought" (or idea) comes at number three (after plot and character). Miller has already made out the difference between the Greek drama of destiny and the modern social drama (of which he himself is also a practitioner). He begins the argument by claiming that the "assumption - or presumption" - behind his plays is that "life has meaning." He brings in Plato also to support his contention. His plea is that "Plato, by banning artists from citizenship in his ideal republic, expressed at least a partial truth; the intention behind a work of art and its effects upon the public are not always the same." He finally believes that "every play means something - even the play which denies all meaning to existence." In his view, "the Idea' of a play is its measure of value and importance and beauty, and that a play, which appears merely to exist to one side of 'ideas' is an aesthetic nullity." Hence Miller insists that "idea is very important to me as a dramatist."

Miller's concept of drama has no place with the past ages tragedy that is the established one or the Shakespearean. Miller says tragedy can have a place with any age. Be that as it may, with the difference in time the topic and the style likewise ought to be changed to satisfy the interest of the age.

Arthur Miller does the very thing in the play. As we experience the play we see that he doesn't violate the properties of the general punctuation of a tragedy. The all-inclusive properties of a tragedy incorporate the introduction of a genuine activity that is finished in itself and fit for bringing out pity and fear so as to deliver purgation in the group of readers or audience. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* satisfies these prerequisites however in some unpredictable ways. The playwright likewise keeps up different properties, for example, the plot, character, thought, diction, song and spectacle. Taking up the question of meaning or message in drama, Miller does not agree with those of his contemporaries who would not like a play, which would yield a "distinct meaning reducible to a sentence." He is against their preference for so-called "poetic" drama, "whose ultimate thought or meaning is elusive, a drama which, appears not to have been composed or constructed, but which somehow comes to life on a stage and then flickers away." In his view, the critics, demand that a play be praised for its "high seriousness" and their demand at the same time that a "play be praised for not trying to teach" are highly contradictory, betraying only a confusion of their principles. Miller is very clear in his mind. To him, there is no such thing as complete detachment, and there is no such thing as a "meaningless" play. As he puts it, "The very conception of a dramatic theme inevitable means that certain aspects of life are selected and others left out, and to imagine that a play can be written disinterestedly is to believe that one can make love disinterestedly."

Here, Miller rejects Keatsian kind of aestheticism, of art for art's sake, where there is a basic quarrel admitted between literature and philosophy. In his view, there is no such quarrel. The only thing is that the philosophic or social meaning must be embodied in art form. Also, that a literary work's merit is to be judged, not on the basis of its message (social or philosophical), but on the quality of its art. As he puts it, "The debatable question is never whether a play ought to teach but whether it is art, and in this connection the basic criterion - purely technical consideration to one side - is the passion with which the teaching is made. I hasten to add the obvious - that a work cannot be judged by the validity of its teaching. But it is entirely misleading to state that there is some profound conflict between art and the philosophically or socially meaningful theme."

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#### **4.5 DEATH OF A SALESMAN AS A TRAGEDY AND WILLY LOMAN AS A TRAGIC HERO**

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The most imperative factor in which the play varies from the traditional tragedy is the introduction of the tragic hero. As per Miller a "Common man" can be an able subject for tragedy, as worship of disastrous activity isn't just for the lords or the royal yet in addition a property all things considered. Willy, a normal man, is made the legend of the disaster. As a legend, he doesn't completely fit into the customary example, yet in certain regards he turns out as an appalling saint.

At first, Willy isn't completely great or altogether awful. He loves his family without a doubt and furthermore needs to see his children in



extraordinary positions. And yet he has a mystery connection with a lady. Along these lines he joins both the great and terrible characteristics. The extramarital undertaking is unquestionably a cutting edge issue.

### **Not noble but rather human:**

Willy has not unquestionably that honourable birth to put him on equivalent balance with so many legends as Oedipus or Hamlet, yet at the same time readers react to the sufferings of Willy as to Oedipus, Hamlet, Othello and Lear. We react to them not in view of their introduction to the world, but since we discover a connection among them and us and can share our mankind.

### **Tragic Flaw:**

Like a conventional tragic hero, Willy additionally has a heart-breaking vice, which brings upon his ruin. His fault is recognized as his fixation on his fantasy. He generally shows his inclination to confront esteem and takes it conceded for any sort of achievement in this world. This wrong origination drives him to the demonstration of suicide. His "hubris", his presumption, lay in his reasoning that he could achieve the best in that society. He has turned out to be such a great amount of part of the arrangement of false incentive in a materialistic world that he dare not stoop to consider himself separated from it. He is all the time endeavouring to turn into a piece of his general public. Despite the fact that it rejects him, he will not change his view and proceeds with his battle upstream. His reluctance to submit latently to the set up request and qualities brings him down. He has a set thought in his psyche about how he needs to be and the manner in which he needs his youngsters to be and he doesn't go past it. At an early age he got an opportunity to change and end up like his sibling Ben, however decided not to. In this way, Willy bites the dust on account of his appalling imperfections.

### **Tragic feeling:**

It is an easily proven wrong issue whether the fall of Willy stimulates our pity and dread or not. About awful inclination Miller says "tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity". Like the traditional tragedy, the play additionally stimulates our sentiments of pity and dread. We can't however feel sorry for Willy. He wasn't right in his way to deal with the life and his capacity. Be that as it may, his blame does not merit so brutal a discipline. We additionally turned out to be dreadful subsequent to seeing the awfulness of Willy. Willy not just speaks to the post-sorrow American white collar class society, however in a bigger sense he is 'Everyman'. No one can escape from day to day life or from the certain disappointments of life. After the successful display of the play in 'China', Miller himself said that 'Willy is all over the place'. Audience feel for Willy in excess of an established legend, since he is a customary individual like the majority of us. Most of human beings share his sentiments and comprehend his issues. Along these lines, the deplorability of Willy excites our pity and dread in us.

These contemplations consider Miller's "Death of a Salesman" as a modern tragedy.

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## 4.6 SUMMING UP

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In this unit, we have discussed the major characters of the play and tried to read between the lines and their psyche. The major themes of the play have been studied that reflect the main ideas to understand the working of the characters. Arthur Miller's concept of tragedy and its variation from Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. The play shows the tragedy of 'Common Man' which appeals to larger audience even today. Miller based his play on failure of American Dream and success myth harboured and displayed by Willy Loman, tragic hero of the play. The play succeeds to arise catharsis among audience with the fall of a common salesman Willy Loman in contemporary American society.

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## 4.7 QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss the character analysis of Linda Loman.
2. What are the main themes of the play, *Death of the Salesman*?
3. How is Willy Loman a tragic Hero in *Death of a Salesman*?
4. Find out the main components that makes Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as a 'Modern Tragedy', different from conventional one.

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## 4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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1. Ayres, C.E., 'The Industrial Way of Life', American Quarterley, Vol. 1, No. 4, Winter 1949.
2. Miller Arthur 'Tragedy and the Common Man'. The New York Times, 1949.
3. Miller Arthur '*The Nature of Tragedy*' New York Herald Tribune, 1949
4. Williams Raymond, *Modern Tragedy*, Stanford University Press, 1966.

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### CRITICAL STUDY OF JAMES BALDWIN'S BLUES FOR MISTER CHARLIE

#### Unit Structure

- 5.1 Objective and Background
- 5.2 Information about the author
- 5.3 Significance of the Title
- 5.4 Analysis of Plot structure
- 5.5 Major Themes
- 5.6 Major Characters
- 5.7 Critical Analysis
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 Bibliography

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#### 5.1 OBJECTIVE AND BACKGROUND

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The play *Blues for Mister Charlie* was written by James Baldwin, who was an outspoken opponent of racism in the United States. It was first written in 1964, and it was afterward performed in the same year. It is based on the true story of Emmett Till's murder in Mississippi, in the United States of America, which was shown in the film.

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#### 5.2 INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In addition to being a novelist, playwright, essayist, and social activist, James Baldwin has written several forceful critiques of racial, sexual, and class bias in American culture that have garnered widespread attention. He has six novels to his credit, as well as various collections of essays, short tales, and poems, all of which have been published.

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#### 5.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

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Mr. Baldwin's feelings about the story are also conveyed in the title. The Negro refers to the white guy as "Mister Charlie," which means "Mister Charlie." His piece is a blues song concerning both the moral dilemmas of white people and the misery and pain experienced by black people. This argument is delivered in a very direct manner approximately halfway through the play. Rev. Meridian Henry, the calm, respectable pastor of a black church in a small Southern town, dares to ask Parnell, the only decent white man in town, the difficult question: Have they been friends because Parnell considers Meridian to be his favorite Uncle Tom? The answer is yes. The minister goes on to suggest that it is preferable for the

white man, rather than the black guy, to confront reality. Richard Henry, the pastor's son, and how he was slain by a poor, foolish redneck are the subjects of Mr. Baldwin's novel, which is written in a free-form style that bounces back and forth between the present and the past. Even though Mr. Baldwin spends a significant portion of his last act in a courtroom, he seems unconcerned with proper courtroom decorum. Additionally, throughout the play, he avoids using traditional tactics of realism and suspense to create tension and intrigue.

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## 5.4 ANALYSIS OF PLOT STRUCTURE

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After recovering from his drug addiction and seeking to start a new life after returning home, Richard Henry is murdered. The plot revolves around Richard Henry's murderer, who is blackmailing his way back to his hometown. A few days after his return, he is attacked and killed by Lyle Britten, an anti-immigrant white zealot who accuses him of 'not knowing his position.'

### Act One:

A court trial and drama by Britten sets the stage for the rest of the play, in which an all-white jury is charged with delivering justice while also making a remark about black living in contemporary America, which is cheap and pointless. Educating his black students is the focus of the first act of this three-part play, which begins with Reverend Meridian Henry. He is striving to educate black pupils about tolerance and acceptance in everyday life. At that moment, Parnell James enters and informs the Reverend that Lyle Britain has been apprehended by the police and charged with the murder of Richard Henry. The Reverend leaves immediately to alert Lyle Britten of the situation, and when he has left, the students engage in a discussion about the lives of black people in South America and the difficulties they face daily.

Next, Lyle and his wife Jo, a market storekeeper who is anxious about her husband Lyle and his impending prison sentence, as well as an incident that occurred many years ago, appear on the screen together.

As an alternative to apologizing, Jo considers the murder to have been an unintended mistake, believing that Lyle may have acted in self-defense. Both the husband and wife are unapologetic about their actions.

The next scenario is a flashback in which Richard is having a disagreement with his grandmother regarding his mother's death. Neither Richard nor his grandmother, Henry, believe that her mother was forced down the stairs; nonetheless, Richard believes that she did so on her own.

The incident makes Richard feel apprehensive, and he decides to defend himself by carrying a gun, over the advice of his grandma. He meets up with his old buddies Pete and Juanita at Papa D's Bar for a drink. After bragging to his companions about his previous physical contact with white women, his radical nature is revealed. He also gives them some photographs, but his friends are concerned for his safety. While he informs

Juanita of his drug-related exploits, he maintains that he is now completely drug-free. Richard then leaves the building and goes outside to meet Lyle. The flashback comes to a close when Richard goes home and informs his father, Reverend Henry, that he has chosen to hand over the pistol he had been holding onto. He returns to the church to inform Reverend Henry that Lyle must be arrested, but he also pleads with him to free him as soon as possible after the arrest.

### **Act Two:**

In the next scene, the action moves to Jo Britten's house, where a big gathering of white city dwellers has gathered. The recent unrest in the town, which has been attributed to black people, is a major topic of discussion among the participants. All of the white people in the community are outraged that he should be covering up the trial of a black felon in his capacity as editor of the local newspaper. People continue to have doubts about Parnell, and some even criticize him by arguing that the jury should be composed entirely of black people because the convict is black.

The case's potential is discussed by Britten and Parnell after everyone has left the room. While Lyle is taking a bath, Jo inquires about her husband's secret affair with Willa Mae, who is also taking a bath. She was the widow of old Bill, a black laborer who had been murdered by Lyle many years previously but had managed to evade capture and prosecution. Parnell is insistent about not bringing it up in conversation. She then inquires as to whether or not Parnell has any feelings for any black woman in his life, to which he responds in the positive. As a result, Jo begins to question whether Lyle loved Willa Mae and murdered her husband as a result of their relationship. She has strong suspicions that her husband was also involved in Richard's death. He will always be able to murder the other if he is successful in murdering the first. However, they keep bringing up Willa Mae whenever they come down to the market with him and his child.

When the plot suddenly rushes back to Richard entering Britten's store against his friend Lorenzo's wishes, the audience is taken back to the beginning of the story. When he placed an order for two Cocks, he requests change on a twenty-dollar bill. Lyle is injured after Richard physically shoves him to the ground, despite Lorenzo's best efforts to bring him back to the car. As he walks away, Lyle begins hurling threats at him from behind him. The memory comes to a stop there, but Lyle goes on to explain the events surrounding Richard's death. Everyone was perplexed by this mystery because no one knew what caused Richards' death.

### **Act Three:**

Following Richards' death, the third act opens in a courtroom with Lyle, who has been there for three months. All of the members of the jury are clothed in white, and there are also witnesses present in the jury box. Richard and Jo are both on the stand, but Jo tells a different story about

what transpired in the store and how Richard attempted to sexually abuse her.

According to Papa Di, one night as he was closing his tavern, he happened to notice Richard and Lyle living together as friends. Lorenzo also provides a straightforward account of what he observed in the store, but he also attempts to rationalize Richards' actions by claiming that he has lately stopped taking illegal narcotics. Lorenzo also refused to accept any naked photos of white women in Richard's hands, which he felt were inappropriate. Juanita, another acquaintance, also appears in court to defend Richard's good name and reputation.

Both Mother Henry and Reverend Henry remained silent about Richard's gun, and while Kern Gents mentions Reverend Henry assisting his son in developing good character, he has not corroborated Jo's version of the story because he knows it doesn't matter and would cause him to become an outcast because of it.

In the end, as expected, the jury finds Lyle not guilty of the charges against him. According to a new flashback introduced to the plot, Lyle shoots and kills a silent, unarmed Richard when he refuses to apologize for the altercation in the store. He then arranges his body in an accident-like fashion, much as he had described to Parnell in court, to demonstrate his point. Reverend Henry likewise refuses to accept responsibility for his son's death, and Lyle joins him in this refusal. Finally, in the third act, everyone, including the black males, departs to take part in a protest march, and they are all depressed about it. Parnell decides to accompany them as well.

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## 5.5 MAJOR THEMES

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The fundamental themes of this play revolve around operative racism, and before *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, no other dramatist had approached the issue of racism through literature in this manner. Even before the play was delivered, some audience members expressed concern that the content was too radical and harsh to be performed in public. In addition to having a novel structure that has been called radical in literature, it is through this play that the Black Nationalistic Theatre makes its debut in the annals of American history. It was written during one of the most turbulent periods in the history of race relations in the United States. African Americans endured the same prejudice after more than 300 years of resistance and multiple emancipation efforts. They were denied civil rights and were denied a conventional way of life in the United States.

Beginning in the early 1960s, thousands of individuals marched and protested against racial discrimination in the workplace, education, and the use of public funds and facilities in the United States. Real victims of Race Americans' attacks and killings of Black Americans and their White allies were Black children and women, not Race Americans themselves. Radical White supremacists were equally enraged by black children and churches as they were by white people. When African Americans and Whites



engage in a hostile manner, riots erupt in virtually every major American city, including New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia.

It is James Baldwin's primary goal to educate and inspire compassion for the plight of African-Americans among a predominantly white readership through his writings. It dramatically demonstrates how racism interferes with the administration of justice, as seen in the Emmett Till case. The theme of justice is also prominent in the drama. It begins with the murder of a black man by a white man and concludes with the trial of that white man. It was also discovered that Lyle had committed another murder in the past, which was witnessed by his wife, who blames it on her husband's affair with the man's wife. In the case, Parnell, a friend of the deceased man's father, and Lyle are both weak and hesitant because they don't want their friend to go to prison, and they don't want people to blame them for standing up for a dead useless black man against living innocent white people. Lyle is ultimately exonerated of the murder of Richard, after years of investigation.

Additionally, religion is a significant problem and character in the play as well. A clergyman, the murdered man's father has always promoted nonviolent protest in the face of racism and racial hatred, but he now fears the judicial system and wants to fight for Black people's rights in America, which is a difficult task. According to several of the characters, religion is failing Black people, and it is not supporting them in gaining equality in human rights or in achieving justice. Parnell argues via the characters in *Meridian* that the Church and religion alone are insufficient to address the issue of racism. It is necessary to fight for one's rights even when one is not religious, as *Meridian* illustrates after the play when he enters the church with a gun.

It is via the play's racial problem that Baldwin demonstrates his keen understanding of "how established cultural beliefs play out in individual's lives and then sell out in their own," as well as his "extraordinary perception of the complexities and inconsistencies of human motivations." A second attempt is made by him to define the relationship that exists between racial politics and cultural institutions. The church is regarded as an African American institution at the courthouse, which serves as a site of the condensation of white social authority, as well as at the generic convenience store, which serves as a gathering place for the community. The drama, set in the Black and White American South, also explores the subject of how much individual perspective matters. By using a situation in which justice and truth are malleable concepts that are dependent on perception for their validity and are supported by recognizable cultural institutions such as the Church, the Courts, and even the convenience store, the story makes a statement about what racial politics is all about. Attempts are made to obscure how knowledge and power are both autonomous and closely related in the working of polar organizations through the use of direct racial depictions in the drama. Mr. Charlie's Blues is a brilliant depiction of a perception of reality that transcends the confines of society. It is the belief that social reality does indeed define the individual experience both inside and outside the body, as well as the



suggestion that social reality penetrates and perhaps even dominates the individual existential reality of the human experience, that helps to strengthen color politics in society.

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## 5.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS:

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1. After his son is slain by a gang member, Meridian Henry becomes a priest and civil rights activist who adopts and adapts Martin Luther King's idea of nonviolent protest. He also comes to loathe crime after this experience. However, Meridian's peaceful approach to civil rights is compelled to be reconsidered as a result of his demonstration, which is ineffective in convincing his white allies to abandon their white supremacy.
2. Meridian's son, Richard Henry, is assassinated, and his life is analyzed through the prism of flashbacks, including his attempts to become a musician in New York, as well as his struggle with addiction to prescription drugs. He exemplifies the traditional divide that exists between whites and blacks, as whites regard him as a threat to white domination, while blacks perceive him as a rejection of white authority.
3. Lyle Britten is being investigated as a possible suspect in the assassination of Richard Henry. Before the play begins, he is depicted as low-class and stupid, but he also takes great delight in being a racist and having sex with a black lady to demonstrate his power and domination over the other characters. The court examines him in chronological order, and Richards' defiance of the social order pushes him to his demise, culminating in Richards's horrendous death at the hands of the authorities.
4. Jo Britten is Lyle's more educated and elegant wife, and she is the protagonist of the film. Even before Richards comes, she is well aware that her husband is a racist and that he has murdered some African-Americans in the past. In the background, she protects and supports her husband, while simultaneously lying about the events leading up to Richards' murder and her husband's acquittal in the case.

He is the editor of the local newspaper; he is wealthy and of the upper class; nonetheless, he has no desire for racial equality and holds a liberal perspective on society. 5. Parnell James In addition to being Meridian and Lyle's friend, he is also interested in finding Richard's assailant and bringing him to justice. However, he is unwilling to divulge evidence that calls into serious question Lyle's claims of innocence.

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## 5.7 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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In his novels and plays, James Arthur Baldwin (1924-1987) explored themes of race and sexuality that were important to him as an African American writer.

There are two stories in the play. The first follows Richard, a young black citizen and musician, as he travels back to his birthplace to recover from his drug-related troubles and to be released from prison. The second follows Richard as he returns to his birthplace to recover from his drug-related troubles and to be released from prison. The story's drama begins when he meets Lyle, the owner of a white nationalist store in the neighborhood.

In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, the theme of racism in the United States is explored in depth. Mr. Charlie is a slang term for white people that is commonly used by Black people. Also, it is inspired by the trial of a murderer that took place in Mississippi in 1955, and it is often considered a modern tragedy of racial prejudice and hatred. The preface to the novel indicates that the action takes place in "Plague Town, United States of America." Racism and Christian religious supremacy are present in this context, and the disease is also used as a weapon to destroy all human bonds and attachments to one's race.

A white and black family finds themselves entangled in the horrible border situation, but the drama also confronts racial injustice and the issues that Christianity was facing at the time.

Furthermore, the stage, given the playwright's setting, offers a crucial comment on the relationship between blacks and whites in the United States. The set is a metaphor for "White Town" and "Black Town," with an aisle separating the two towns in the show. The play begins with a bipolar point of view and a very forceful manifestation of the division, which is expressed in several exchanges. At various times, these two sections are also used as a church and a courtroom. The drama does not develop a relationship between blacks and whites as a result; rather, by depicting them as two opposed groups, it serves to perpetuate the irreversible state of affairs.

Beginning in a fundamentally dysfunctional society in which a white man comes close to getting away with murdering a black man without facing any consequences from the law, the court system, society, or religion is where the action takes place. The first time Richard returns to his hometown in the southern United States, he understands his social standing and informs his grandmother that "My Mama's dead because my father has no power." White males are given the right by society to rape and kill black women, and black women have no redress. As a result, when Richard questions Lyle's authority and power, he is assassinated as a result of his defiance.

Another type of marginalization that is present in the play is that of sex.' The White community is fascinated with the sexuality of black people over the course of the play. This fear of sexual issues and guilt, according to the author, frequently results in misunderstandings and conflict. To give an example, in the first act, when the white inhabitants of the town gather at Lyle's house, they regard black men as a sexual threat to their white female counterparts, which is incorrect. After an initial period of tension,

the relationship between these two opposed individuals progressively deteriorated, ending in a violent fight in which Richard defeated Lyle and subsequently sought retaliation with a gun, ultimately killing Richard.

The second story is set in the present tense, and it revolves around the impending murder trial in which Lyle is accused of the murder of Richard, who is the main character. In the beginning, Meridian, Richard's father, and Parnell James, a white but liberal businessman who also happens to be the editor of the local newspaper, file a lawsuit against each other. He is also a close friend of Lyle's family and an outspoken supporter of black civil rights. After the trial, Lyle is acquitted because his wife Jo submitted false testimony accusing Richard of attempting to rape her, which Parnell was unable to refute when on the witness stand.

Because it begins and ends with the murder of Richard, the play's structure is circular; flashbacks are used to explain the circumstances surrounding his death. This is something that many critics believe. This framework enables a great deal of attention to be paid to a variety of themes, including racism, prejudice, and religion. The title of the play brings the audience up to date on the authors' current point of view. When the negro calls the white guy Mr. Charlie, he is telling the story of white men's morals as well as the humiliation, pain, agony, and belittlement that Negro experiences near the end of the play. Mr. Charlie is a slang word for the white man.

Sex and power are recurring themes in the novel, which are important to understand. The use of sexuality to assert and enforce dominance is common. When Richard comes from New York and meets racism, he says the following about White males:

*'They can rape and murder our women with no repercussions for us, but if we touch one of their dried pale-assed women, we'll have our overnights removed.'*

Aside from that, Richard attempts to disrupt society's power structure by sleeping with white women whom he views to be the property of the white guy. He also writes about his countless interactions with white women, in which he compares their lack of respect during sex to the lack of dignity that black people are subjected to in the United States. He goes on to make fun of Lyle by bragging about how he and Lyle's wife could have better sex. Having lost his mind, Richard is disturbing the social order that distinguishes whites and black people by believing that he is equal to and even superior in some ways to, white males in areas like sex. Lyle also uses sex to retain his white male control over the females. His sense of power and authority over them prompts him to take advantage of his position by having sex with black prostitutes and rapping black females on the streets.

According to Baldwin, the topic concept for the play was initially suggested to him in 1958 by Alia, who was both a novelist and a filmmaker at the time. Only after the assassination of Medgar Evers, a well-known civil rights activist and one of his friends, in 1963, has he

decided to complete the play. Baldwin witnessed these executions in terrible darkness, and he described the play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* as "one man's need to bear witness to the actuality and power of light" at the outset of the play.

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## 5.8 QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss *Blues for Mr. Charlie* as literature of Protest
2. Analyse the Play from the point of view of racism in America
3. Write a note on the major themes of the play.
4. Discuss the characters of the play concerning the socio-political situation of America.

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## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF LANGSTON HUGHES' POETRY

### Unit Structure

#### 6.0 Objectives

#### 6.1 Langston Hughes – Introduction

##### 6.2.1 Poem: Mother to Son - Summary

##### 6.2.2 Poem: Mother to Son - Critical Analysis

##### 6.3.1 Poem: Deferred Dream - Summary

##### 6.3.2 Poem: Deferred Dream - Critical Analysis

##### 6.4.1 Poem: Democracy - Summary

##### 6.4.2 Poem: Democracy - Critical Analysis

#### 6.5 Let's Sum Up

#### 6.6 Questions

#### 6.7 Suggested Reading

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### 6.0 OBJECTIVES:

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After studying this unit, the learner will be able to describe the contribution of Langston Hughes to the Harlem Renaissance. S/he will be able to summarise the prescribed poems and analyse the themes, style, genre and context of the poems.

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### 6.1 LANGSTON HUGHES – INTRODUCTION

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Langston Hughes aka James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902?-1967) is one of the leading writers and thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance - an artistic movement in the 1920s that celebrated African American life and culture. Hughes was inspired by Harlem - an African American neighbourhood in New York City. His writings were influential not only in American literature but also in American politics. He wrote a variety of works like poetry, novels, plays, essays, and children's books, which reassert racial pride while promoting equality and justice. His works reflect the African American culture, humor, and spirituality.

Hughes began writing poetry at an early age. His poem 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' was written in the summer after his high school graduation. Hughes studied at Columbia University in New York and formed a strong attachment to Harlem. He travelled by taking up work as a steward on a freighter bound for Africa. Hughes' 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' became a manifesto for a new, unique, confident African American literature. In this book, he declared that "We younger

Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual, dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."

Hughes' first collection of poetry, 'The Weary Blues' was published in 1926, while 'Fine Clothes to the Jew' was published in 1927. The latter featured the lives of poor African Americans including drunks and prostitutes. Hughes' poems display a radical leftist shift and political tone in the 1930s. He was accused of being a Communist and made to testify by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Hughes' works deal with a wide variety of themes like African American cultural pride, music, dignity, survival, collective memory and the American identity. The themes are drawn from his personal life, his travels, his involvement in radical and protest movements, his interest in Africa and South America as well as the Caribbean.

Hughes' works 'A Pictorial History of the Negro in America', 'The Poetry of the Negro' and 'The Book of Negro Folklore' captured the African American literature and culture. The play 'Mulatto' was a stage adaptation of one of his short stories. He also created memorable characters like Jesse B. Semple through his columns in the Chicago Defender and the New York Post. Hughes was active in social and political causes. His poetry became a tool for cultural protest. He was involved with the Black Panther Party as well as the Black Power Movement.

Along with other young artists of the Harlem Renaissance like Wallace Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston, Hughes participated in publishing the first issue of the magazine 'Fire!!' The magazine was aimed at giving a frank, uncensored voice to issues like sex and race. Only one issue of the magazine was published.

Hughes revolutionised poetry by using language that reflected how the African Americans spoke. His language is simple and accessible to all and captures the rhythms of African American speech. His poems also show a strong influence of jazz and blues music, bebop, gospel and Harlem slang. They reflect the oral and improvisational tradition of African American poetry. He combined a cosmopolitan outlook with a deep sense of pride in his racial roots.

Hughes wrote his autobiography in two parts 'The Big Sea' and 'I Wonder as I Wander.' He was awarded an honorary D. Litt by Lincoln University.

### **6.2.1 Poem: Mother to Son – Summary:**

The poem consists of advice that a mother gives to her son. She tells him that her life has been very different from a crystal stair. She describes her life as having been difficult, like a staircase with tacks, splinters, missing boards and bare patches where the carpet has worn out. She narrates to her son how she has continued climbing, turning corners and reaching landings. She has even climbed in the dark when there was no light. She advises her son not to turn back in his own life. She tells him not to stop and sit down when progress becomes difficult. She finally exhorts him not

to fall because she herself is still climbing. She repeats that her life has been very unlike a crystal stair.

### 6.2.2 Poem: Mother to Son - Critical Analysis:

'Mother to Son' is a dramatic monologue. The I-persona or speaker in the poem is a mother who is giving advice to her son about life. She shares her experiences of survival in order to encourage her son to keep on progressing in life.

Hope and determination are thus important themes of this poem. The mother emphasises the importance of constantly moving forward or progressing in life. This poem is based on the idea of hope and encouragement to constantly engage with life, despite the fact that life is full of difficulties and obstacles. She inspires her son to never give up by putting forth the example of her own journey through life.

The poem acquires a deeper meaning when it is understood in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, a literary movement which celebrated African American culture and identity. The mother can be seen to represent the African American community and her journey becomes symbolic of the challenges and obstacles faced by the community in its struggle for equality and acceptance. It becomes a message of hope for future progress from one generation of African Americans to the next generation.

The central image in the poem is a staircase, or rather two contrasting staircases. The staircase naturally symbolises upward movement, thereby reflecting the desire of the African American community for economic progress and upward social mobility. It could also be taken to represent the American dream of equal access to the unalienable rights of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'

The mother begins her monologue by describing how her life has not been easy. She uses the metaphor of a crystal stair, a negative comparison, stating that her life has not been a crystal stair. The crystal stair here symbolises the dreams and ideals of freedom, equality, progress and wealth cherished by the African American community. The next few lines bring in a contrasting image, the dilapidated staircase that the mother has actually been climbing.

This actual staircase is far from ideal and is not in the best condition. "*It's had tacks in it,/And splinters.*" The metaphor of the staircase is extended throughout the poem, explaining the challenges and obstacles the mother has faced. The line, "*Life for me ain't been no crystal stair*" is repeated throughout the poem. It acts as a sort of refrain, adding emphasis to the difficult experiences faced by the mother.

The further description of the staircase, with boards torn up and the worn out patches of carpet, seems to indicate that the mother has battled against poverty. The staircase was neither safe nor pleasant to navigate; a direct reference to the first generation of African Americans struggling to achieve their civil rights.



The dark spots on the stairs indicate despair or difficult circumstances; the low moments of the struggle. The landings could stand for the limited progress achieved by the African Americans.

The mother's repetition of "*I'se been a-climbin*" indicates determination and perseverance in the face of opposition. She represents the unquenchable spirit for progress that inspired the African Americans. She exhorts her son to never stop i.e. lose hope or give up the struggle and concludes by stating that she herself is still climbing. The message that she gives the African American youth, is not one of passive idealism but of active, realistic struggle.

The poem makes use of the dialect spoken by African Americans in Harlem, thereby lending the poem both authenticity and a beautiful rhythm, distinct from that of standard English. E.g. "*Cause you find it's kinder hard.*" The colloquial language seems natural for the speaker of the poem, an African American woman who has lived in poverty and difficult circumstances. The poem does not have a formal rhyme scheme and the lines are of unequal length, so it can be called free verse.

The poem contains an allusion to a Biblical image: Jacob's Ladder. Jacob sees in a dream a vision of a celestial stairway upon which angels climb and descend between earth and heaven. God promised the ladder to the Israelites. This story became an inspiration for the African Americans in their quest for liberation and salvation through faith. The traditional spiritual (song) 'We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder' was widely popular among the African Americans.

Apart from spirituals, Hughes' style was heavily influenced by jazz and blues. The use of repetition and the improvisatory rhythm of this poem reflect these influences.

'Mother to Son' is one of Hughes' early works; it has, therefore, been interpreted as a metapoem. The son is understood to symbolise Hughes himself, faced with the difficulties of capturing African American culture through his poetry. The mother appears to give him the message of perseverance, and of the need to depict the reality of the African Americans with its 'tacks and splinters'.

In another longer poem titled 'The Negro Mother', Hughes presents a similar dramatic monologue with an old woman addressing her scattered children. This mother represents the racial matriarch or the voice of African American history, reminding the youth of their legacy and inspiring them to continue.

### 6.3.1 Poem: Deferred Dream – Summary:

This poem, taken from a collection of poems titled 'Harlem' is a very short piece. The I-persona is asking a series of questions about dreams that are deferred i.e. not fulfilled. He wonders what is the outcome of such deferred dreams. He tries to describe them through a series of comparisons - a raisin in the sun, a wound that is infected and oozing, rotten meat and

an extremely sugary sweet. He also compares it to a burden that is intolerable. Finally he questions whether deferred dreams explode.

### 6.3.2 Poem: Deferred Dream - Critical Analysis:

Langston Hughes poetry becomes a vehicle to depict the history and tradition, the hopes and dreams, the struggle and disappointments of the African American community. A leading poet of the Harlem Renaissance, his poetry is characterised by deceptively simple language and vivid use of imagery and symbols.

'Deferred Dream' represents the plight of the African American community after the Great Depression. The dream in the title refers to the dream of African Americans that they would find an equal place in American society, that their children would get access to a comfortable life, education and the scope for socio-economic progress. The dream also signifies the American Dream, the belief that America offers equal opportunities to all its citizens and that anyone who is capable and hardworking can rise to success.

Through this poem, Hughes attempts "to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America". He questions why the dream has still remained a dream for the African Americans and wonders about the consequences of unfulfilled dreams.

The opening line of the poem is a question; it states the central theme of the poem which is developed through the subsequent lines. The poet asks a series of questions, which actually posit alternative answers to the question in the first line.

The first image Hughes uses to describe deferred dreams is that of a raisin. He uses a simile to bring out how over time, dreams can become dry, shrivelled and lifeless. He indirectly evokes the image of a juicy grape to symbolise how the dream was initially fresh and full of life until it was dried up by disappointment. Lorraine Hansberry alluded to this poem when she gave her play the title 'A Raisin in the Sun'. The play describes the efforts of an African American family to realise the American Dream.

The next question brings out a more painful simile. It compares an unfulfilled dream to a wound that is infected and oozing. He thus evokes the sense of the African American community as a body which has been hurt by the discrimination and neglect, leading to a festering wound. Unlike the dried, dead raisin in the previous line, the unfulfilled dream takes on a painful, even hazardous life.

The image of an open sore is both shocking and disgusting, forcing readers to recognise the pain and harshness of the African American experience.

Hughes further compares the dream to rotten, stinking meat; another disgusting image. Meat stands for sustenance and nourishment, but rotten meat is useless for consumption. It becomes offensive to the senses. This

image seems to extend the pain of the previous image. It again highlights that the realities faced by the African American community are unpalatable, even disgusting. The readers are forced to acknowledge the stink of discrimination rising from the unfulfilled dreams.

The poet presents yet another alternative, comparing the deferred dream to a sweet that will "crust and sugar over". This extends the food imagery of the previous line, however, both the foods are distinctly unpalatable. Excessive sugar will make the sweet cloying and unpleasant, though not inedible or harmful like rotten meat.

The sweetness stands for idealism, the belief in the American dream of equality and success. Unreasonable belief in the dream led to a deep sense of disappointment and betrayal among the African American youth, who were denied the promised reconstruction, integration, and equal opportunities.

The next simile, comparing an unfulfilled dream to a burden is the only line in the poem that is a statement and not a question. The burden represents the economic and emotional hardships faced by the African Americans. It also reminds the reader of the responsibility of American society to grant equality to everyone. The unfulfilled dreams of African Americans have become a burden, not only on their own community, but on American society as a whole.

The final line, which is in italics, poses a question as to whether mass disillusionment can devolve into violence. The explosion seems to be the natural consequence of the frustration faced by the African American youth. It serves as a clear warning to American society that neglecting the dreams of its members can have potentially disastrous effects. 'Deferred Dream' reflects the leftist leanings observed in many of Hughes' works.

The poem has a clear rhetorical structure, describing the disappointment, pain and disillusionment of the African American community, and visualising the possible outcome of their dissatisfaction.

The poem consists of a series of questions that convey a tone of dissatisfaction. Some lines rhyme e.g. "sun/run, meat/sweet, load/explode", but there is no pattern to the rhyme or rhythm. The poem is extremely economical in its use of words; the images are suggestive, evocative and symbolic. The poet uses anaphora when words are repeated to create a rhythm and form e.g.

*"Does it dry up...*

*Does it stink....*

*Or does it ....."*

#### **6.4.1 Poem: Democracy – Summary:**

The I-persona begins by stating that democracy will not be achieved in the near future, or ever, if the tools used for achieving it are fear and

compromise. He asserts his right, like that of any other person, to independence and to own the land he stands on. The I-persona states that he is tired of people who advocate patience and non-interference, with the promise of future hope. He does not want to live on the hope of future benefits and is afraid of never getting freedom as long as he is alive. He compares freedom to a strong seed which is planted in a great need. He concludes the poem by reasserting his Americanness and demanding the same freedom as the whites.

#### 6.4.2 Poem: Democracy - Critical Analysis:

'Democracy' voices the demand of the African American community for true and full participation in the political process. The poem was written at a time when African American men had been given voting rights, yet were unable to vote due to conditions like literacy tests of voters. Women were not allowed to participate in the democratic process.

The speaker in the poem states that true democracy cannot co-exist with compromise and fear. Such a democracy cannot be effective in the short run or in the long run. He points out that in a democracy, freedom should be unconditional. It is ironic that he denies the existence of true democracy in America, a nation that defines itself as the champion of democracy.

The second stanza is a clear and direct assertion of being equal to the whites. "*To stand on my own two feet*" represents the desire for independence and economic self-sufficiency. Standing could also refer to taking a stand i.e. the freedom to formulate one's own political opinions and choices. The speaker demands equal rights as the whites in terms of owning the land i.e. the right to property. Owning the land could also refer to the notion of American identity; the African Americans were not allowed to claim America as "their" land.

The third stanza brings out a sense of frustration and disappointment, which is also reflected in Hughes' poem 'Deferred Dream'. The poet disagrees with the people who advocate patience and promise future hope. He does not believe that the conditions will improve in the long run or that the future of the African American community is rosy. Reiterating the refusal to compromise in the earlier stanza, he refuses to barter the present rights for dreams of the future.

Hughes uses the powerful metaphor of "bread" to underline the urgency of their demand for freedom. Bread is a basic necessity; it symbolises sustenance and nourishment. However, bread is of no use to a dead person. He uses this metaphor to explain how the promise of freedom at a later date carries no meaning in the present.

Using another metaphor, he compares freedom to a strong seed. It is a living force and a dire necessity for everyone. Thus, he emphasises that freedom cannot be denied.

In the final stanza, Hughes reminds the readers that African Americans are also citizens of America and, consequently, they are eligible for all the kinds of freedom that are available to the whites. The words “just as you” reassert that African Americans are not different from the whites and that America should treat them as the same.

The poem is written in free verse. Some lines are rhymed e.g. “*year/fear, say/day, bread/dead, seed/need*”. The poem is concise and yet conveys a wealth of meaning through its powerful imagery. The language is deceptively simple and the tone is one of insistent demand.

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## 6.5 LET’S SUM UP

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Langston Hughes’ poems are powerful political pieces that give voice to the issues of the African Americans. Through ‘Mother to Son’, he celebrates the history of the African American community and describes their experiences of struggle for equal rights. ‘Deferred Dream’ makes striking use of imagery and symbolism to predict the social consequences when an entire community is denied the opportunity to progress. ‘Democracy’ questions the hypocrisy of American society for denying equality to the African Americans while defining itself as a nation built on the ideals of democracy.

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## 6.6 QUESTIONS

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- i) Analyse ‘Mother to Son’ as a dramatic monologue.
- ii) Explain how the mother in ‘Mother to Son’ represents the African American community.
- iii) Identify and explain the themes dealt with in the poem ‘Mother to Son’.
- iv) Comment on how ‘Deferred Dreams’ reflects the potential social consequences of racial discrimination against the African American community.
- v) Analyse the various themes explored through the poem ‘Democracy’.
- vi) Comment on ‘Democracy’ as a poem that asserts the unfulfilled dreams and aspirations of the African Americans.

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## 6.7 SUGGESTED READING

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Hughes, Langston: *Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, USA, 2011)

Gates, Henry Louis and Appiah, Anthony ed: *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (Harper Collins, New York, 2000)

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## UNIT VII

# 7

### CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SYLVIA PLATH'S POEMS

#### Unit Structure

- 7.1 Objectives
- 7.2 About the poet
- 7.3 Mirror
  - 7.3.1 Introduction of the poem Mirror
  - 7.3.2. Summary of the poem Mirror
  - 7.3.3. Analysis of the poem Mirror
  - 7.3.4. Literary Devices used in the poem Mirror
- 7.4 Tulips
  - 7.4.1 Introduction of the poem Tulips
  - 7.4.2. Summary of the poem Tulips
  - 7.4.3. Analysis of the poem Tulips
  - 7.4.4. Literary Devices used in the poem Tulips
- 7.5 “I Am Vertical”
  - 7.5.1 Introduction of the poem I am Vertical
  - 7.5.2. Summary of the poem I am Vertical
  - 7.5.3. Analysis of the poem I am Vertical
  - 7.5.4. Literary Devices used in the poem I am Vertical
- 7.6 Questions
- 7.7 Suggested Reading

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#### 7.1 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we will study three poems by Sylvia Plath-‘Mirror’, “ Tulips’ and ‘I am Vertical’ and see how her poetry is intimately associated with her dark emotional experiences. Students will be acquainted with the profound imagery and the lyrical quality of Plath’s verses that confront the intense feminist despair of the poet which titillate not only traditional ideas about womanhood and motherhood but our ideas of reality itself.

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#### 7.2 ABOUT THE POET

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Sylvia Plath created a great sensation in post-war American poetry with her intensely personal poems that blend her own mental agony at her disturbed marriage, uneasy relations with her parents and her own obsession with death. She triggered the momentum for confessional poetry and won the Pulitzer Prize posthumously. Two of her published works -

*The Colossus and Other Poems* and the Ariel and the Bell Jar are most celebrated. Plath was born in 1932 in Boston and she committed suicide in 1963, just after her separation with her husband and fellow poet Ted Hughes.

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## 7.3 MIRROR

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### 7.3.1 Introduction:

“Mirror” was written in 1961 and compared to Plath’s other poems, is straightforward and easy to understand. It is no doubt a sad and dejected poem representing Plath’s distinctive emotional turbulences but less perplexing and wrenching.

### 7.3.2 Summary:

This is a poem of two stanzas of 9 lines each and is narrated by a mirror that is personified. It is written in free-verse and first person point of view of the mirror. The poem begins with the mirror’s description of itself as “silver and exact”. It does not have any pre-suppositions (“preconceptions”) and whatever it sees, it reflects (“swallows”) immediately without getting influenced by love or hate. The mirror states that it is not “cruel” but is “truthful”. It defines itself as the “eye of a little god, four cornered” emphasising its power to see everything. Most of the time, it reflects the opposite wall which is spotted pink in colour. The mirror says the wall seem to be a part of his heart as it has looked at it for so long but this inseparable connection gets broken by faces and darkness.

Now, the mirror turns into a lake. A woman bends and gazes at her reflection to determine who she really is. Sometimes, she uses ‘liars’ like the candles or the moon to hide her true appearance but the mirror on the water reflect her back faithfully. Because of this truthful representation, the woman cries and makes agitating movements with her hands. The mirror understands its importance to her and her importance to its own existence. Every morning its her face that replaces darkness and over the years the woman has “drowned a young girl” in the surface water mirror of the lake. This brings to our mind the image of Narcissus. Now, her reflection is of an old woman growing older by the day and this reflected image out of the mirror rises towards her like a “terrible fish”.

### 7.3.3 Analysis of the poem:

This short poem explores the perpetual preoccupation of a woman with a mirror. A mirror is of prime importance to a woman as she looks for the mirror to define herself. (“Searching my reaches for what she really is”). A woman essentially constructs her identities and powers with her looks because that is how the society had conventionally been looking at her. She looks at the mirror with her own assumptions about herself which is actually a reflection of the image formed by the society. That is why, when the mirror defines itself in the beginning as “exact” and as without any “preconceptions”, it comes in stark contrast with the woman. Thus, the poem is an explorations of the tragic dilemma of a woman when she



has to grapple age and waning appearance. The poem is narrated by a personified mirror. It produces therefore, an effect of jarring reality and more truthful observation as the mirror is "exact", "truthful" and objective because it does not have any "preconceptions". It is able to realise its own nature, its own monotonous existence by commenting on the wall that it reflects most of the time. Although it does not suggest any moral judgement, it is able to observe and penetrate the psyche of the woman who comes to the mirror every morning looking for her own identities. That is why, critic Jo Gill observes that it is "catoptric" meaning while the mirror describes itself, it actually embodies its own structure with two equal stanzas reflecting each other- symmetrical but opposite.

### 7.3.4 Literary Devices:

Typical of Sylvia Plath's poetry, the poem "Mirror" employs gorgeous imagery. Every description conveys a vivid mental picture. From the "unmist" mirror that "Swallow" everything to the mirror turning into a lake where a young girl is drowning and a fish is rising, the poem remains wonderfully evocative. The image of the "terrible fish" lurks disturbingly in the mind of the readers too.

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## 7.4 TULIPS

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### 7.4.1 Introduction:

"Tulips" was written in 18<sup>th</sup> March, 1961 and was included in "Ariel" which was published after her death in 1965. Ted Hughes informed that the poem was written about a bunches of tulips that Plath received when she was recuperating in the hospital after an appendectomy.

### 7.4.2 Summary:

The "Tulips" is a 63 lines poem of 9 stanzas of seven lines each and is written in free-verse. It is narrated by a woman in first person. She is recovering from an operation in the hospital but the reader is not informed about the name and type of the surgery.

She begins with a note of dissatisfaction as she finds the tulips to be "too excitable" disturbing the inner peace she was having in the whiteness of the hospital. Immediately after describing the tulips as "too excitable", she describes the hospital room in total opposition to the nature of the flowers. It is "winter" in the hospital as everything is white like snow and quite too. She is "learning peacefulness" lying by herself quietly in the hospital bed. She is watching the light lying on the white walls, her bed and her hands. She declares that she is "nobody" and does not have anything to do with 'explosions'. She has surrendered her identity as she has given her "name" and clothes to the nurses, her "history to the anaesthetist" and her "body" to the surgeon.

She then describes her physical position. Her head is upheld between "the pillow and the sheet -cuff" and it is like an eye ball stuck between the eyelids that will not shut. Here, the imagery evokes a sense of pity at the

helplessness of the woman who like the “stupid pupil”, “has to take everything in”. She therefore, then takes in the scene of the nurses passing her. She claims that they do not create any trouble and they pass like “gulls” – all in white and busy doing things. It is not possible for her to tell the numbers of the nurses.

She realises that the nurses handle her gently but her body is like a pebble to them -an inanimate object. They know they have to wear her down body with “bright needles” but it will bring “numbness” -a kind of gentle care. Therefore, the nurses treatment of her is like water tending “to the pebbles it must run over”. She declares that now that she has lost herself, she does not need the “baggage” of her life again. She voices her motherhood too as “baggage”. She looks at her family photograph and finds her husband’s and child’s smiles “catch unto” her “skin”- they are “smiling hooks”.

She says that she has allowed things to slip including her “loving associations” and she feels like a nun-very pure.

She comes back now to the tulips again and says that she did not want any flowers. She just wanted her hands to be utterly empty and lie in complete freedom and peacefulness. She compares this peacefulness with the peacefulness of death.

She complains again and justifies her dislike for the tulips by saying that the redness of the tulips hurts her. She can hear the tulips breathe like an “awful baby” even through the “gift paper”. Besides, the redness of the tulips “corresponds” to her ‘wounds’. They are like “dozen red lead sinkers” around her neck that bog her down.

She feels that nobody watched her before but now she is being watched. She feels suffocated as the tulips eat up her share of oxygen.

Before the tulips came, the air was tranquil but now they have created a “loud noise”. The air whirls around the tulips like a river whirls around a “rust-red engine” that is sunk in it.

Now, she senses that the walls of the room is getting warmer. She says that the tulips should be imprisoned as they are like dangerous animals. Tulips are opening their mouth like the mouth of “some great African Cat”. This opening reminds her of the opening of her own heart. She says her heart opens and closes as it loves her. She now senses her ‘taste “ of water which is “salty” like sea-water and “warm” like the room she is sharing with the tulips. This water comes, she feels from a country which is far away from health.

### 7.4.3 Analysis:

Thematically “Tulips” is a simple poem. It delineates the emotional quandary of a woman in a hospital room who desires the peacefulness of death but the instinctively encouraged towards the painfulness of life symbolised by the glaring blood-red tulips. Structurally, the poem is

based on contrasts- of the whiteness of the hospital room and the bright redness of the tulips- the lightness and purity of death and sinking baggage of life. The woman cherishes the whiteness and sterility of the hospital room as she has an existence devoid of any self and context which she feels is pure as the nun. The poem is a beautiful penetration of a mind infatuated by death.

#### 7.4.4 Literary Devices:

Tulips is one of the most lyrical and mellifluous poems by Sylvia Plath. The power of the imagery is strengthened by the infinitely suggestive metaphors and similes. Every stanza of the poem offers a predominant image that reverberates in the mind of the reader. In the first stanza, it is the "snowed-in" winter-like whiteness of the hospital. The second stanza gives us the comparison of her posture with the "stupid pupil" that has to take everything in and the nurses in their "white caps" are like the "gulls". Then we have the image of the water tending over the "pebbles" and the image of the "nun" in the third and fourth stanza respectively. The fifth and sixth one offer the idea of the peacefulness of the "Communion tablet" and the tulips being the "lead sinkers" around her "neck". Then, we have the image of the "rust-red engine" sunk in a river and the water swirling around it. The image become most powerful and violent in the last stanza when the tulips open their mouth like a "great African cat". Not only these images has a spontaneity but the language has a natural flow that adds to the musical quality of the poem. Richard Grey comments that although the poem is written in free verse, the lines have a subtle iambic base and that raises the seemingly casual and conversational remarks into unforgettable experience.

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### 7.5 "I AM VERTICAL"

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#### 7.5.1 Introduction:

Like the other two prescribed poems, this poem too is written in 1961. All of Plath's poetry is seemingly simple but they display wonderful integrity in terms of theme, structure of the poem and the choice of words and images. This small poem too displays all these distinctive qualities and bring to the reader an intensely depressed mind that prefers death over life.

#### 7.5.2 Summary:

The poem begins in continuation of the title. The starting line will be perplexing to the reader without reading the title. Both the lines together generate two opposite ideas of physical structures. The speaker introduces herself in the title in a very straightforward and unusual way drawing attention to her physical position as human-"I am Vertical". As human, we accept this position without any questioning. The first line of the poem comes in direct opposition to the title. The speaker prefers to be 'horizontal'. This immediately brings into mind the human position while sleeping and the connotation of the final sleep- death. The intensity of the unhappiness of the speaker is unfolded . The simple forthright sentence

structures shows that the speaker has reached an emotionally impassive state where she is not able to feel anything. She prefers death to life. This in contrast, stimulates a deep sense of compassion in the reader. She then compares herself with other vertical objects like the tree. She says that she is not a tree which is rooted in the soil. The tree “sucking up minerals and motherly love” from the soil “gleam” into new “leaf” every spring. She is thus deprived of the gift of renewing and revitalising herself. She feels that she is not beautiful and “spectacularly painted” like the flowers. The flowers are able to attract its “share” of appreciations which she could not do. The flowers are not aware of its own transitory existence – “Unknowing I must soon unpetal”. They just bloom and bless the garden just by being themselves. Here, the speaker contrasts her own consciousness of her existence with the tree and flowers. She says that compared to her a tree is immortal and “flower-head not tall” but “more startling”. The last line of the first stanza again tells what the speaker wishes in straightforward way echoing and opposing the first line of the poem. The speaker wants “the one’s longevity and the other’s daring.” Since the speaker does not have both, she prefers to be horizontal.

Suddenly, in the next stanza, the tone and the language changes as the speaker describes the cool ambience of the night. The straightforward, matter-of-fact descriptions about the speaker gives way to a evocatively romantic language while describing the night and the nature. She says that tonight when she walks among the “infinitesimal light of the stars” while the trees and flowers are “strewing their cool odours”, she realises that none of them are noticing her. Here, she personifies the trees and the flowers as if they are gifted with the power to do so. She says that sometimes she thinks that she resembles them when she is sleeping- when the “thoughts” are “gone dim”. She, then, remains undisturbed by the issues of existences and does not have the ability to think and feel. Besides, she feels that “lying down” or the horizontal position is “more natural” to her. The speaker and sky “are in open conversation”. This is a beautiful line expressing the loneliness and isolation of the speaker from the human world and her sense of connectivity with the inanimate impassive objects. This connection implies the speaker’s desolation and her desire to rise beyond those disturbing thoughts. The very next line proves to the reader that lying “horizontally” imply death as the speaker says – “I shall be useful when I lie down finally”. The last line hints how she will be useful after death. She says in the final line that the trees then “may touch me for once and flowers have time for me”. The “touch” of the trees may mean the subsequent possibility after death that her body decomposes in the soil and she will be able to supply food to them. This brings back the idea of trees “sucking up minerals and motherly love” of the first stanza. Being one with the mother earth after death, she would be able to contribute the beautiful plants and trees for renewal and regeneration.

### 7.5.3 Analysis of the poem:

This small poem of two ten-line stanzas offers succinctly the poignancy of Plath’s poetry. The poem is apparently simple at the levels of its thematic

and linguistic choice. But it creates strong underlying connotations of deeper meanings by bringing into the reader's mind the structure of the world and body position with two simple but opposite words- "vertical" and "horizontal". A discordant note of opposite ideas runs throughout the poem about what the speaker is and what she desires. The problems and issues that the speaker faces are neither listed nor expressed but the reader is made aware of an intensely sensitive mind that is lonely and dejected. Death is captivating for the speaker as it provides hope of being useful and getting her share of recognition.

#### 7.5.4 Literary Devices:

The two stanzas of the poem is stylised differently. The first stanza is written in a conversational, matter of fact style. The second stanza is more lyrical and employs beautiful romantic imagery suggesting the "spectacularly painted" beauty of nature. Metaphors like "infinitesimal light of the stars", and personifications of the natural objects adds the poem its remarkably memorable quality.

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### 7.6 QUESTIONS

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1. Critically appreciate the poem -"mirror"
2. Write a note on the theme of the poem- "mirror"
3. Discuss the effect of the narration of the poem from the mirror's perspective.
4. Write a critical appreciation of the poem "Tulips".
5. Describe the poet's attitude to the tulips .
6. Write a note on the theme of the poem "Tulips".
7. Write a note on the lyrical quality of the poem "Tulips"
8. Write a critical appreciation of the poem "I am Vertical".
9. Remark on the psyche of the speaker as revealed in the poem "I am Vertical".
10. Comment on the stylistic device of the poem "I am Vertical".

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### 7.7 SUGGESTED READING

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- Taylor, Tess (2013). "Reading Sylvia Plath 50 Years After Her Death Is A Different Experience". *NPR*.
- Egeland, M. (2014). Before and After a Poet's Suicide: The Reception of Sylvia Plath. *International Journal Of The Book*, 11(3), 27-36.
- Teresa Calderón Quindós (2007). Standing Unearthed: Construing a Persona Behind Plath's "I Am Vertical". *Janus Head*, 10(1), 157-174. Trivium Publications, Amherst, NY.

- Parvin Ghasemi (2007). Reflections of Self and Other in Sylvia Plath's "Mirror" Imagery. In, Vráňková, K and Koy, Ch. (eds), Dream, Imagination and Reality in Literature. South Bohemian Anglo-American Studies No. 1. České Budějovice: Editio Universitatis Bohemiae Meridionalis, 2007. ISBN 978-80-7394-006-5

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