

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
Prof. H S Komalesha
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur

Lecture - 30
American Poetry

Hello there, I hope all of you are doing well today. How is your experience with European Poetry? You have had a couple of dates with European poetry in the last two classes and I gather you have really enjoyed your journey with European poetry. So, in this class we are going to continue our journey along the lines of contemporary world poetry by picking up a meeting with American poetry, that is why this is a rendezvous meeting point with American poetry. This disclaimer goes well for this class as well: Remember, in a span of 25-30 minutes we will not be able to do justice to an entire gamut of American poetry.

So, here too as we have done in European poetry, and Indian poetry we pick up a few writers, and a couple of interesting poetry movements that have happened in the literary landscape of America. And then try to introduce as briefly, but as significantly as possible at least a few well-known American poets, at least one or two important poetry movements that flowered in the landscape of American literature.

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Before that, before we go deep into American poetry, I want to read a very small poem, this poem is called "America, I Sing You Back" by Allison Adelle Hedge.

She is a professor of creative writing and am I invoking this particular poem because (recall intertextuality which was discussed in one of our earlier classes), this poem beautifully demonstrates the spirit of intertextuality and interacts with two of the most brilliant poets of American poetry in an extraordinary way. In fact, it interacts with them in a very meaningful way; "America, I Sing You Back", of course, this is an excerpt from a longish poem "America, I Sing You Back."

"America, I sing back.

Sing back what sung you in.

Sing back the moment you

cherished breath.

Sing you home into yourself and

back to reason."

In fact, it works more like a lullaby. So, the entire poem acts as some kind of mother and the mother is lulling America back to sleep and sleep that nurtures the spirit, the sleep that nurtures the body of the baby.

And this poem beautifully interacts with two other poems and two other poets that have played a major role in furthering American poetry which we are going to discuss in subsequent classes. And the poet says that this poem is an extension of those two poems we are going to discuss in a short while.

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Native American Poetry

- Native American poetry existed in the oral tradition and was mostly sung
- American literature was born out of English explorations and settlements
- It was as late as the 17th c that the extant form of American poetry came into being
- Chief Seattle's speech is a significant Native American literary output, though not a poem, it is noted for its lyricality and poetic imageries. To get the essence of it, let's read some excerpts from the poem...

The slide features a light blue background with a red hand-drawn border. Decorative elements include a stack of books, a Native American figure, and a cloud. A man with glasses and a light blue shirt is visible in the bottom right corner of the slide.

We have discussed that poetry in almost all parts of the globe has its origin in oral tradition which is true for American poetry as well. Native American poetry also began in the oral tradition and of course, like its counterparts elsewhere, it was part of rituals, it was part of a song it was part of the celebration of life.

So, you can say that American literature is born out of this native American poetry plus English poetry because remember these are a result of English exploration and settlements.

The entire American literature is a result of English exploration and settlements therefore, you also find a lot of resemblance to British poetry here. We will not be going into detail here, but what is important, especially in Native American poetry is “Chief Seattle’s Speech” which has now acquired an iconic status for the extraordinary perspective it takes on nature, ecology, and the world around.

So, very quickly let us take a look at this. In fact, the background is simple, when the government of America wanted to purchase the native land this is how the chief of the Red Indian tribe seem to have remarked.

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He is really puzzled; how can he sell his land because his relationship with the land is not one of commercial, which I do not think any American would understand because their ethos is different. So, look at what he says:

“You ask me to sell the land how can you buy or sell the sky the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. Yet we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us?

That the dead among the white man forget their birthplace when they live to walk among the stars. Because it is believed that in white mythology after death person finds his or her place in the sky.”

Whereas in the Red Indian tradition in this tribal tradition they do not go anywhere, they return to the earth that is what Chief Seattle says here, our dead never forget this beautiful earth because she is the redman’s mother. We are part of the earth and she is part of us.





“The scented flowers are our sisters: the horned beasts, the horse, majestic eagles these are all our brothers. The fields, the warm body of the foal, and the man, all belong to the same family.” So, today we come to read, that it is not exactly in the traditional sense of poetry nevertheless it is remarkable the speech for its highly lyrical imaginative, and creative qualities. So, this becomes an integral part of native American literature today.

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The sparkling water that runs in the rivers and streams is not only water; it is the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you these lands, you must remember that they are sacred, and teach your children that they are, and that every ghostly reflection in the clear waters of the lakes speaks of the lives and memories of the life of my people. The murmur of the stream is the voice of my father's father.

[...]

We know that the white man does not understand our ways.








Well, it goes on like that please read this if you ever find some time, please read it at your leisure.

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17th Century American Poetry

- 17th c. American writers included explorers, settlers, and colonials who "took up the pen for utilitarian purposes", and were not literary or professional writers
- Poetry is considered the best literary output of the century. Other literary forms included travel literature, histories, diaries, etc.
- The early 17th c saw the publication of works by Captain John Smith, the writer who contributed most to the beginning of American Literature





So, you have again 17th-century American poetry and which includes writings by explorers, settlers, and the colonials who "took up the pen for utilitarian purposes". Remember the entire land of America is quite new, it is a settler's land.


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18th Century American Poetry

✿ American poetry developed hand-in-hand with British poetry.




✿ Traces of romanticism can be found in the 18th c. American poetry.



✿ Satire was the other form of poetry.

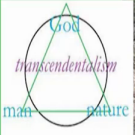
The 18th c. American poetry was marked by intellectual currents like Transcendentalism, Realism, and towards the end of the century Naturalism

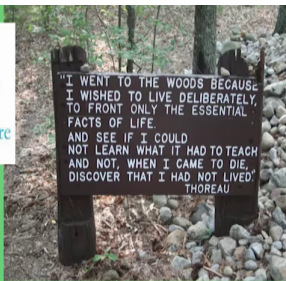


Therefore, it is still at its early stage, it is true for 18th-century American poetry as well. In fact, it is just trying to find its footing therefore, you have some experimentations here, whoever experimented they were heavily influenced by romantic poetry. Therefore, you find thick shades of romanticism in the poetry of 18th century American literature, in 18th-century American poetry.


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Transcendentalism





- ✓ American transcendentalism was an early 19th century political, philosophical, and literary movement.
- ✓ It focused on individualism, the spiritual being, and the belief that God resides in every object of nature including human beings.
- ✓ Ralf Waldo Emerson in his essay "Nature", first articulated his philosophy of Transcendentalism and emphasized on "American voice"



So, from here we come to a major poetry movement that flowered in the soil of American-Transcendentalism. In fact, transcendentalism finds its best expression in American poetry whereas, the seed of transcendental philosophy is in the essays and philosophical writings of

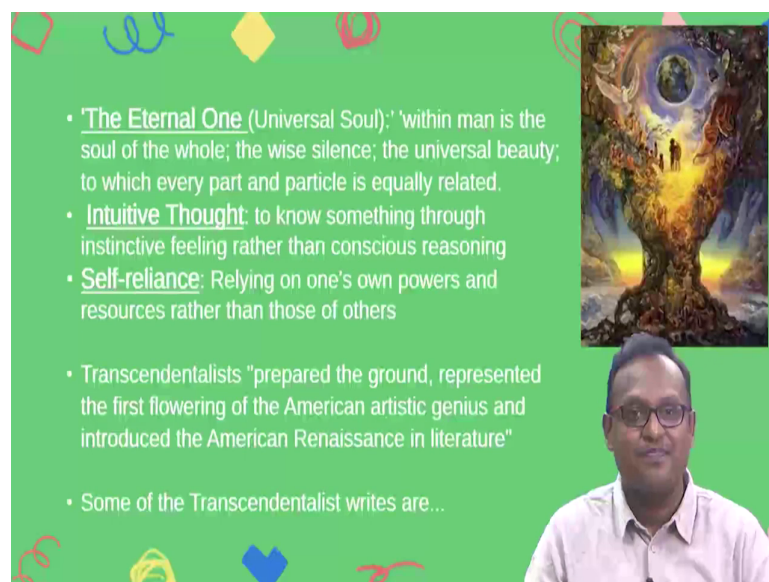
one of the influential critics, one of the influential philosophers called Ralf Waldo Emerson. Especially in his essay called “Nature” he articulates the philosophy of transcendentalism and emphasizes it as the true native American voice.

So, what does this transcendentalism mean? In fact, the picture that you see, is an imagined transcendentalism as a kind of a triad, on the top of the triangle you have God and here you have man and nature. So, transcendentalism is a deep reflection on the engagement of human beings with God on the one hand and nature on the other, or a kind of trilateral interaction you can say.

So, transcendentalism blooms in an interaction between God, human beings, and nature, and here it focuses on individualism as such. And somewhere in the early part of the 19th century, something like 18s, the 20s, and 30s it begins and goes on till the 60s roughly speaking.

But during these couple of decades, it produced some extraordinary poets, extraordinary philosophers who took this philosophy altogether into a different domain and some of them even practiced it to the core.

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- The Eternal One (Universal Soul): 'within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty; to which every part and particle is equally related.
- Intuitive Thought: to know something through instinctive feeling rather than conscious reasoning
- Self-reliance: Relying on one's own powers and resources rather than those of others
- Transcendentalists "prepared the ground, represented the first flowering of the American artistic genius and introduced the American Renaissance in literature"
- Some of the Transcendentalist writes are...

So, let us take a quick look at what the philosophy of transcendentalism highlights on. They have, of course, we cannot reduce it we are not trying to give a reductivist approach here, but transcendentalism talks off the eternal one, which you can call as universal soul.

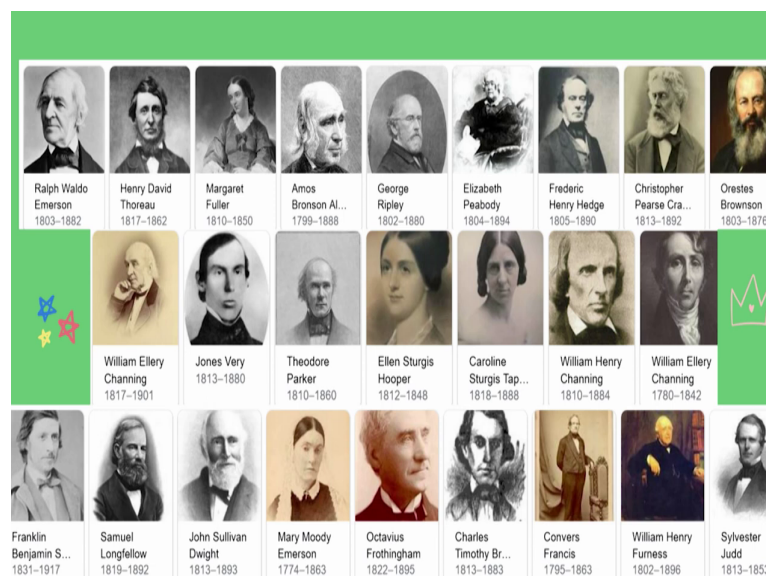
So, as Emerson says ‘within human being is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty; to which every part and particle is equally related. It is like looking at the entire macro within the micro, the entire macro can be seen within the micro.

So, the human beings as a microcosmos and within human beings an entire world blooms, and once when we start realizing that then, of course, our approach towards the world changes. They believed in more than logical reason more than logic and reason and rationalization, they believed in intuitive thought. They felt that human beings can develop an instinctive feeling and learn many things through that than through conscious reasoning.

And the third important tenet of transcendentalism is self-reliance relying on one’s own resources rather than depending on others at the most we need to depend on nature to a minimum extent possible.

But we have to live a life of self-reliance, of course, when our Prime Minister talks of Atmanirbhar you can find some roots of self-reliance even there. Of course, self-reliance itself is a kind of a concept and you find echoes of Indian Upanishads in that, those transcendentalists have openly declared their filiation towards Indian philosophy. Therefore, it is an open secret that they are influenced by the grand and egalitarian traditions of Indian Upanishads.

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If you want to take a quick look at some of the transcendental writers, here is a beautiful collage of these writers beginning with Emerson, you have Henry Thoreau. In fact, Henry David Thoreau took transcendentalism altogether to a new level, he almost gave up his life in the so-called civilized world and went and lived on a pond. I mean near a lake and completely in nature for many years.

He wanted to explore the concept in its practical dimension and you have very many other writers who explore this, just take a quicker take, and maybe you can identify some of these writers and if they are interested you can explore their writings further.

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Walt Whitman

"America's poet ... He is America."- Ezra Pound

Walt Whitman is America's world poet—a latter-day successor to Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare!

- He was a poet, essayist, and journalist
- He is credited as the father of free verse
- His poetic temperament lies in the transition between transcendentalism and realism;
- "In the faces of men and women I see God."

Leaves of Grass (1855, 1891), celebrates democracy, nature, love, friendship and death

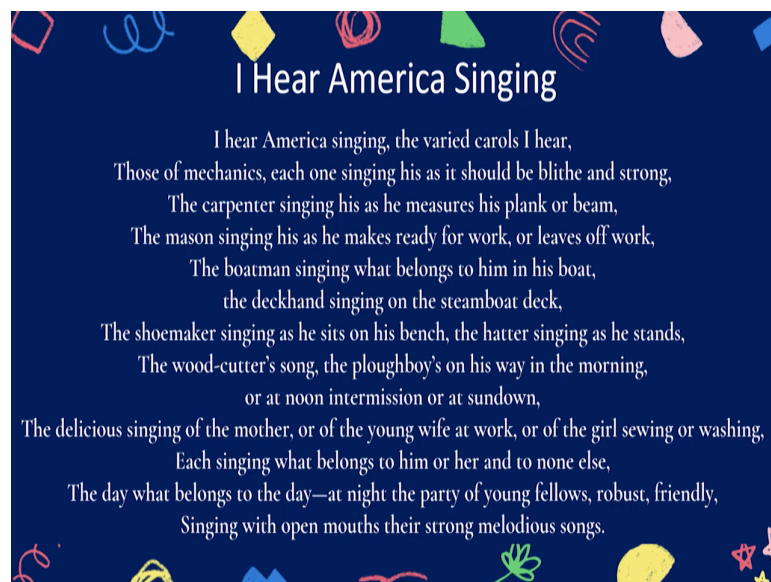
From transcendentalism let us come to Walt Whitman. In fact, he embodies the true spirit of transcendentalism and that is the reason why another modernist poet in immigrant or an expatriate poet Ezra Pound calls Walt Whitman America's poet. In fact, he even goes on to equate America with Walt Whitman, what a tall statement - Walt Whitman is America.

So, come to think of it, it is a very tall statement. And that is the reason why he is rightfully called a successor to extraordinary writers such as Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Valmiki, Vyasa, and others. He was a poet, essayist, journalist, and it's even attributed that free verse is quite popular among the modernists even today, he is credited to have popularized the free verse.

As we discussed his poetic temperament lies in the transition, in the interactions between transcendentalism and realism. It is a kind of a bridge between transcendentalism and realism, that is why he goes on to the extent of saying that “in the faces of men and women I see God.” Of course, the tenet of transcendentalism can well be expressed using this.

Walt Whitman’s poetic genius flowered in “Leaves of Grass”, which he seem to have composed sometime in the 1850s. And to this day it is sometimes called the bible of poetic democracy. *Leaves of Grass* is an extraordinary collection of poetry that celebrates nature, love, friendship, democracy, governance, and death.

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Let us dip into the poetry of Walt Whitman, “I Hear America Singing”. In fact, many consider this as an unofficial National Anthem of America, “I Hear America Singing” and in fact, right in the very beginning of this class, you remember I said this particular poem has intertextual connections with two other poems. This is one of the poems, “I Hear America Singing.”

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,

Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be is blithe and strong,

The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,

The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work.”

Look how different professions are invoked here and through this remember it is in the 1850s, this is when America is finding the so-called American dream that you and I talk of today or that contemporary Americans talk of today.

It finds its nascent aspiration in this song and through this song, this is precisely like work is worship, we have heard this phrase right. So, this poem is trying to build the national character, a national characteristics feature of the United States of America. So, that is the reason why almost all professions are invoked especially, all the subaltern professions, all the working-class people are called by their profession.

And so as if through singing their own songs through singing, I mean each profession is a song and together they are constituting a kind of a carol which talks of the American carol, something like that metaphorically speaking. So, there is a woodcutter, there is a shoemaker, there is a boatman, there is a mason, a carpenter, all of them come together and through their work they worship.

And through their song they celebrate and create together the dream of America, the American Dream that came to be popularized in the 20th century.

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Harlem Renaissance (1918-40)

A socio-cultural and political uprising that challenged the white supremacy and reinforced African American identity.

| WHEN? WHERE? | WHY? | POETS |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">It took place in the early 20th centuryHarlem, a district of New York city, was the cultural and social hub of the awakening, however, its impact was felt in the entire U.S and worldwide | <ul style="list-style-type: none">To celebrate African American culture through creative arts"It was characterized by a wave of African American writing, art, and music that reconceptualized white people's idea of "the Negro""It tried to break free of "Victorian moral standards and ideas about social class that enforced white supremacy" | <p>W.E.B. Du Bois, Carl Sandburg, Claude Mackay, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Langston Hughes, etc</p> |

From here the transition is towards another very important movement, the poetry movement that happened in the literary landscape of the United States of America, if transcendentalism is one, the Harlem Renaissance can be another one. In fact, it is also significant, because

transcendentalism is a philosophical tenet that finds its expressions in various cultural productions of that time of the white people.

Harlem Renaissance is a kind of an equivalent for the black people, Harlem Renaissance again early part of the 20th century roughly between 1920 and 40, the early part of the 20th century. It is a socio-cultural and political awakening, an uprising that challenged white supremacy and reinforced American, African-American identity. In fact, as a socio political movement that plays a major role in changing the American the notion of America itself.

Because most of these African-Americans were at the receiving end they were treated as second-rate citizens, that is when there were police brutalities on the entire community, systematically a particular race was getting eliminated, psychologically and physically.

That is when Harlem riots took place and out of those riots major philosophical voices emerged, cultural expressions emerged and later they consolidated and resulted in some extraordinary legislation.

Therefore, Harlem is basically a district in New York City, a hub of the entire Renaissance movement. And of course, though it began in a local way the reverberations of the entire movement were felt all across the United States.

Why did this take place? Because of course, one reason is to celebrate African-American culture through creative arts, because until that point of time the African voice was relegated to limbo, African race was almost pushed to the corner.

Therefore, it was characterized by a wave of African American writing and of course, music that reconceptualized the entire notion of Negro that tried to find, that tried to help a black citizen find his or her identity, a newfound identity.


Trying to break itself free of the Victorian moral standards it tried to, of course, downplay the racial supremacy and fought for the equality of all the races, some of the important voices in this Renaissance are Du Bois and Sandburg and you have Langston Hughes and others. So, now let us go on to explore one of the major poets who played a major role, who played a very significant role in the Harlem Renaissance.

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The acclaimed leader of the Harlem Renaissance

Langston Hughes

- ✓ Hughes was a poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist
- ✓ He was one of the earliest innovators of the literary art form called jazz poetry
- ✓ He was influenced by Whitman's poetry

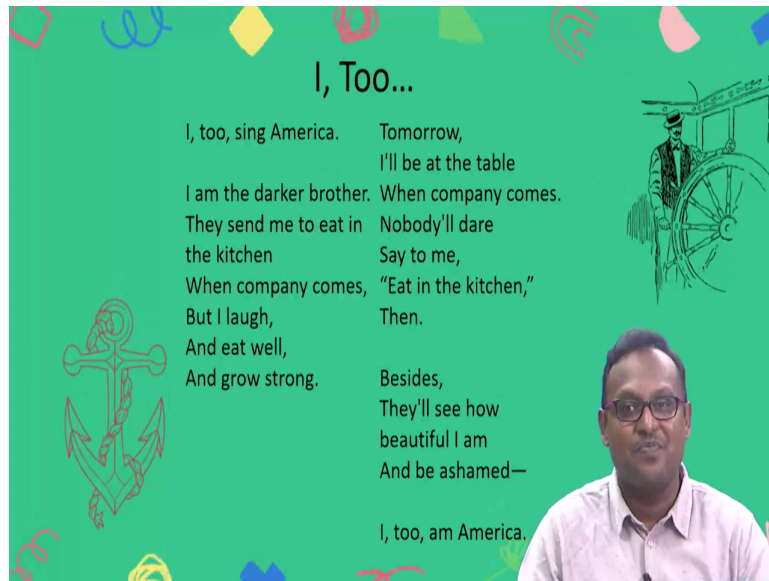


"We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either."

This is Langston Hughes: Langston Hughes like many of his fellow activists was a social activist, a novelist, a playwright, and a poet. More than anything else he was an acclaimed leader of the Harlem Renaissance and it is said that he was greatly influenced by Whitman's poetry, this is also seen in one of his poems. In fact, again in a very intertextual manner Langston Hughes reconstructs or interacts in a very beautiful way with the poem of Langston Hughes that we just read.

So, look how boldly Langston Hughes asserts, we younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark skin dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. Look at the assertion, look at a claim to a new identity without any inhibitions, this is this becomes evident in his remarkable poem "I Too".

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And now look how this poem interacts with Walt Whitman's poem that we just read a few minutes ago.

"I Too ; I, too, sing America."

Right in the very first line the connection is set with the poetry of America and rightfully of course, you can call Langston Hughes a successor of Walt Whitman's legacy of finding or establishing human order without any injustice, kind of equality across the races, across the sexes and across social classes. So, he is a successor to the rich legacy of Walt Whitman.

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in

the kitchen

when company comes,

but I laugh,

and eat well,

and grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I will be at the table

when company comes.

Nobody will dare

say to me,

“Eat in the kitchen,”

Then.

Besides,

they will see how

beautiful I am

and be ashamed-

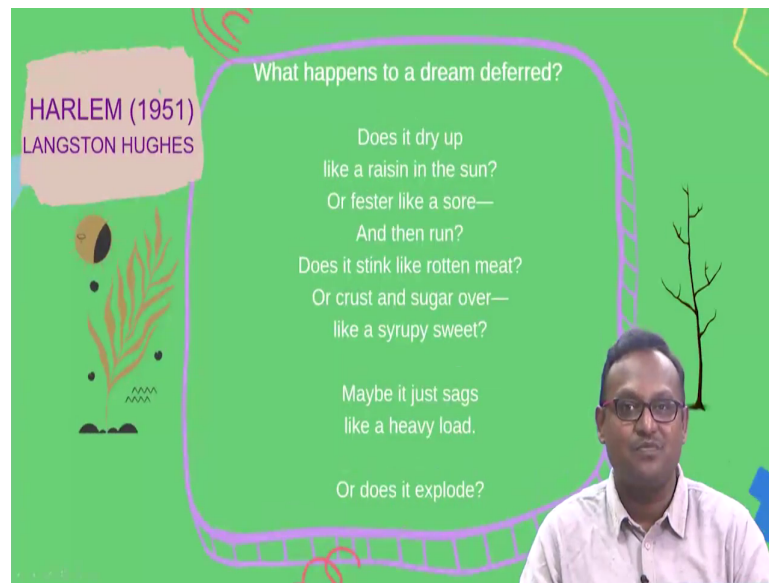
I, too, am America.”

Now, look at the growth here, initially yes it is true that they pushed this darker brother and they were ashamed of accommodating him or calling him a fellow citizen.

Therefore, when somebody came they pushed the darker brother to the kitchen and said you eat there, but this guy eats well there and now he has grown stronger. And tomorrow that is when he says even when the company comes, I am going to eat at the table then nobody dare push me out because I will have grown, I will have grown and that is why he says I too am America.

So, “consider me, I am the darker brother, but I too am America”. It is not just those workforces, those workmen that belong to different professions which basically they are white. So, not just those guys we too are a part of America. Now, look how beautifully he redraws the identity of America in a very self-effacing way, but in a very affirmative way.

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We have another very important poem, “What Happens to a Dream Deferred?” of course, this talks of a Harlem renaissance, that is why it is called “What Happens to a Dream Deferred?”

So, the dream here can be a metaphor for the dream of the Harlem Renaissance, wherein they wanted to establish a society free of racial discrimination where they wanted to create equal opportunities for the black people, where they wanted to treat them on par with the whites so that is the dream.

Unfortunately, the dream was not realized the Harlem riots took place in the 20s, 30s and 40s, but even in the 50s, there is no hope anywhere. So, like it said dream deferred, is dream postponed. So, he asks this question in a very poignant way, what happens to a dream deferred.

“Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

and then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?”

Now, look how beautifully this poem is an example for simile. In fact, the entire poem derives its strength on the figure of speech called simile, we have discussed that. Look how they are comparing, does it dry up like a raisin, like a sore, like rotten meat, it is a beautiful poem based on simile. So, a perfect example where simile runs the show.

So, he is asking this what happens to that dream, when you postpone a dream does it dry up or does it fester like a sore like pus coming out does it happen or does it stink like a rotten meat.

If you do not nurture your dreams what happens or does it become a droopy, losing all its juice or does it sag like a heavy load. Maybe there is an alternative perspective if a dream is not realized it creates a heavy burden on us, because constantly we keep worrying about it that is why it becomes a heavy load.

Does it become a heavy load? And finally, before it ends look at the twist; or does it explode? Look at the tectonic shift in the voice. Look at this, because how long can you wait, you would dream, but if you constantly keep on postponing an extraordinary dream then people also run out of their patience. Does it explode? This explosion has reference to the Harlem riots that took place in the 30s and the 40s as well.

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**HARLEM
LANGSTON
HUGHES**

I have a Dream...

What happens to the hope and vision of a community when it is continuously deferred?

- ✓ The poem is written in the aftermath of the 1935 and 1943 Harlem riots – segregation, injustice and police brutality
- ✓ Threatens the American Dream and leads to its explosion!
- ✓ I have a Dream Speech: Martin Luther King Jr., during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963
- ✓ The US Government enacts The Civil Rights Act in 1964: prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex or national origin (Presidents: J F Kennedy & Lyndon B Johnson)

The slide features a blue background with a large, stylized purple outline of a speech bubble. To the left of the text is a small illustration of a plant with a yellow sun-like circle above it. To the right is a simple black silhouette of a tree. In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset showing a man with glasses and a light blue shirt speaking.

And this is an important poem because you find shades of this poem in the extraordinary speech that you will have heard of that Martin Luther King gave in 1963, “I too have a dream; I have a Dream .” You must have read that speech, Martin Luther King Junior's speech.

In fact, if you have not and if you want to learn to give impressive speeches this is one of the classic examples. Please read that speech and see how powerful the entire speech is and you find resonances of his poetry in this speech.

It is been 1963, more than a decade has passed since Langston Hughes has written that poem and you find echoes of that poem in this particular speech, a brilliant speech.

And this is how when, what happens to that hope and vision of a community when you constantly go on putting it off, when you constantly go on because of the lack of the necessary political will when you go on postponing a communities aspiration when you go on oppressing a community then what happens to that collective dream?

Well, it just took about a decade. Finally, thanks to the efforts of John F Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, the US Government enacts the Civil Rights Act in 1964. a couple of decades later the US Government sees a light in the argument of these Harlem Renaissance thinkers and enacts a law.

And thereby ensures at least legally that there is no discrimination as far as the blacks and the whites are concerned, there is an equal opportunity for everybody. So, this is why I say that I mean, this is the voice, this is the power of poetry.

When poetry sings with such kind of conviction, it has the ability to make a government bend and then listen to it that is the power of poetry, that is the power of literature.

It has the ability to create not just beautiful words, but a series of writers, a series of activists; see this is now to look at how Walt Whitman's that particular song influenced Langston Hughes and how Langston Hughes' this particular song influenced philosophers and politicians such as Martin Luther King and John F Kennedy. And how an entire government had to listen to the aspirations put forward so eloquently through that poem. So, I hope you have enjoyed American poetry like you have enjoyed European poetry, like you have enjoyed Indian poetry, like you have enjoyed other poets and their poetry. So, with this, we have almost come to an end to our discussions on poetry.

And if you have any questions, if you have any concerns more than that if you wish to respond even if you wish to let us know how you have enjoyed these classes, please use the official space you can also use the Facebook forum that we have created for you and tell us how you have enjoyed this. It would be an extraordinary feedback. So, in the next class, we plan to begin our discussions on fiction, another important form of literature or an element of literature fiction. Until then, take care, bye.