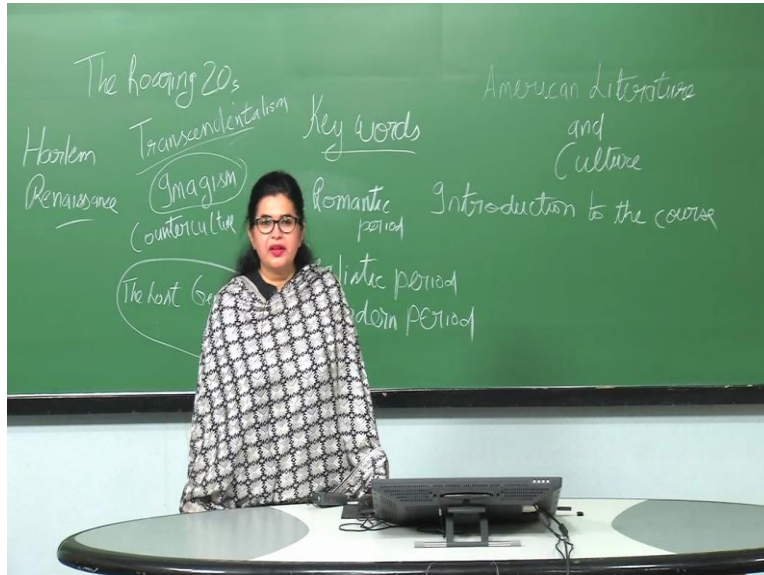


**American Literature & Culture**  
**Prof. Aysha Iqbal Vishwamohan**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Science**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Mod 01 Lecture Number 01**  
**Introduction to the course on American Literature & Culture (Lecture 1)**

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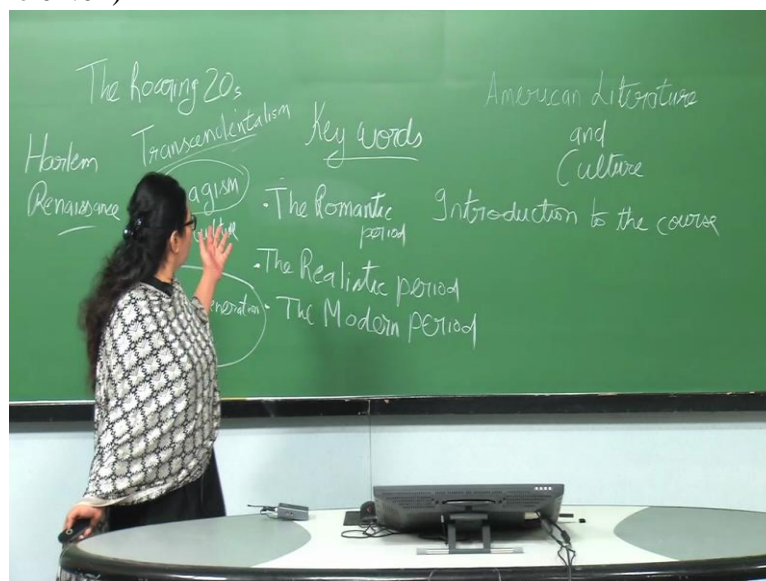
Good morning, so welcome to the course American Literature and Culture. I am Aysha Iqbal Vishwamohan and we will be doing a lot of American Literature as the course suggests and how this literature has been grounded and also is grounded in American socio-political and cultural life. So literature will be fore-grounded but also we will also understand how important or how necessary the winds of cultural change have been in order to shape American literature as it happens in the literature of every nation, every country.

About the course, now I know that you are registered for the course so you already have some idea what the course is all about so let me just repeat. The course or the objective of the course, the aim of the course is to inculcate an appreciation of American texts, and here I am talking about see whenever I say American literature I am going to include or as they say I am going to cover some or certain specific authors and texts. Please remember that literature of any country, especially of United States of America, it's so vast, so huge, it's practically impossible to include every major trend and every major author. Learning, as you must know, is a constant process.

Here I am just giving you as the course, or as the title of the course suggests an introduction to the course. While we are doing the course, I will be talking about various cultural influences various political movements I will also be talking about other works of literature, the great works of literature. My request would be that all of you must start looking up these things. It's a perhaps you are doing it as part of your course, you are already a student somewhere, you are and American Literature is part of your course. Perhaps you are doing this out of interest. You just want to know something more about American studies and literature and culture. This is an excellent opportunity to know, to get an entry point into this vast domain.

So coming back to what this course aims to do, the idea is to inculcate an appreciation of specific American authors and texts. There will be some attention paid to the literary history of the United States and also the literary culture of America. All texts are by some of the most prominent twentieth century American writers, fiction writers, dramatists, short story writers and also some poetry.

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Now when I say twentieth century as you can see right here, now we are looking at these keywords here. These words will or these terms will keep occurring or they will recur frequently throughout the course.

Now when we talk about now let's look at a term like the transcendentalism, Ok, this is not strictly speaking a twentieth century phenomenon. So you will be getting introduced to the

major writers of the twentieth century as well as a few important writers from the preceding century as well. Therefore, now this is the focus of this course.

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This is where the focus, or the major concentration of the course lies, the Romantic Period which is strictly speaking the nineteenth century. We are not talking about the British Romantic Period; please understand that we are talking about the American Romantic Period, literary Romantic period. The Realistic Period which is more or less, twentieth century, the Modern of course the twentieth century and then more contemporary literature also but the focus is on these three periods. So twentieth century American writers, yes but there will also be some weight given to the nineteenth century literature as well.

Now coming to the question that who is this course meant for? Who are the target audience? Please remember the course can be enjoyed by anyone who is interested in literature. It will help you at the end of the course you will and this I am very certain that at the end of this, the course will help you appreciate great works of American literature. You will understand to interpret the literary text in a much better way. You will read between the lines, you will understand how certain writers used certain specific words to convey a specific meaning, how to appreciate poetry, how to appreciate drama so all these, you know, what are stage directions and all, so if you are into literature, even if you are not a student at the moment you will understand or you will, I am very sure, benefit from the course.

Specifically the course is for those who are currently pursuing degrees in literature especially who are pursuing a course, a major course in American literature. it will also help those who

wish to appear for competitive exams such as lets think of GRE or JRF and here you will find many or you know, references where you can benefit from this particular course to appear for competitive exams focused on literature NET, UGC and all, we know how, what are the kinds of you know, specific questions that come for these exams and I am very sure that this course will help you. If not, I mean please let me make it very clear this is not a course that will help you succeed so this is not a coaching course or this is not a guarantee that you will clear your GRE or JRF but it will help. It's it will definitely be of benefit to you.

I have taken certain canonical text from American literature which I feel would be of immense use to you as students of literature and also as educated readers of literature. So what is a canon? A canon very simply put is a word that has stood the test of time. It was relevant then when it was first written and it is relevant today. I am telling you all this just so that we are very clear about what is the nature of the course. So canonical works that are included in this course, *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James, *An American Tragedy* by Dreiser, *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway, *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton and we have the plays *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman, *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller, so I am just giving you some of the texts here.

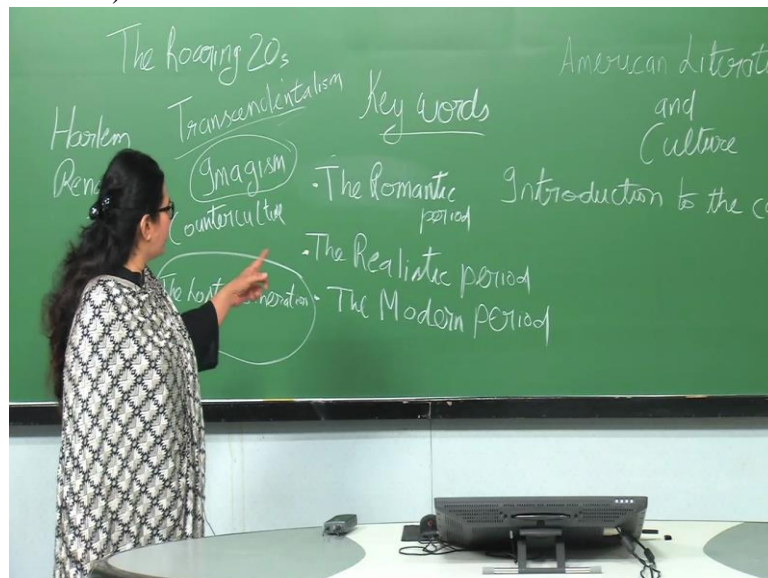
If you go to the website, NPTEL website I am very sure that under the course description all these works are mentioned. We are also going to look at select works by Flannery O'Connor, Edgar Allan Poe and also very recent work of a non-fiction by Christopher Hitchens, so what I am trying to say is that there has been lot of attention paid to the structure of the course. Ok. We have works that are important, works that have provocative, works that have stood the test of time, plays which are performed over and again, books which are novels which are still relevant, writers who have been a major influence on all succeeding generations of writers so that's what we are taking.

So we are not just looking at some writer who has won the latest Pulitzer. You know Pulitzer is an important award. That is the highest achievement in literature in America. So this is not the intention, this is not what my intention is. I mean, we are looking at those authors whose works have survived. They are not forgotten, even though they were written hundred and fifty years ago. That's the idea.

So, this as I already mentioned before, this is an entry point to the vast domain of American literature, so please try to understand that this is what we are doing, that we are going to look at certain canonical writers and if you are interested in more literature then it is up to you and there will be other courses also soon that will be more focused and specific on certain specific may be a period, Ok, so the Romantic American literature, the transcendentalists, all these things are but this, all these things I am taking but this is a course that is more interested in providing an overview to American Literature.

Let me now having told you what is there, let me also tell you what is not there. So you wouldn't find works by Asian Americans or African Americans or Latin Americans, in other words the multi-cultural aspect of American Literature is not a part of this course. However let me assure you there will be another course for that and we have to always remember the canvas of American Literature is extremely huge. So whatever I have just mentioned, Asian American, Latin American, Afro American every area is a course in itself. And I am very sure that you will be having specific courses in these specific territories very soon, Ok. But for the moment, this is what the focus or the interest of the course is, so this is what we are going to do.

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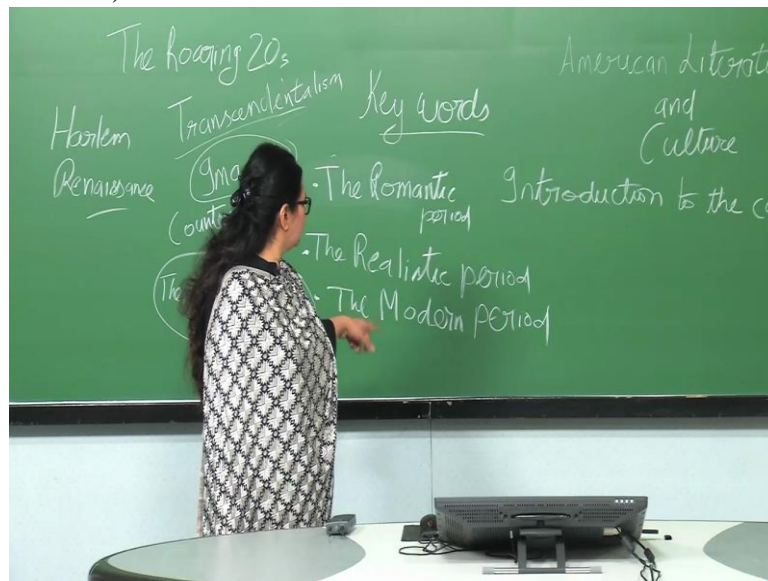
So the Romantic period in American Literature, the Realistic Period, the Modern Period you will be during the course of our interaction, you will be finding me talking a lot about the Roaring Twenties, the Transcendentalism, movements literary movements like Imagism, Counter Culture, The Lost Generation, Harlem Renaissance all these things will be mentioned. So please try to benefit from these concepts, these terms. Do your own study as

well. So don't just depend on this course, you are and I am urging you, I am encouraging you to do a lot of your own reading or self-study.

Every time you come across a word or a concept that you don't understand please look it up. That's the best way to keep your learning ongoing and increasing. Let me also reiterate that we acknowledge that to understand America, one has to understand the immigrant voices and culture. So no one is saying that those literatures are not important. We have to after all understand that. Today slightly more than one third of Americans are of African, Asian, Hispanic, East and South Asian origins. All these literature are extremely important.

They are adding to the canvas of American Literature, that canon of American Literature. These are important. We have to recognize and respect that. So there will be different courses soon but right now what we have is an overview of the core American, the canonical American text especially from these periods, the Romantic, the Realistic, the Modern Period.

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For the sake of convenience let me tell you we divide American literary period into the colonial period when America was still a colony, Ok. It was ruled by the British people. So the colonial period is between 1607 and 1775, then you have the early national period, Ok we are talking about independence of America so that early national period falls between 1775 and 1865. You have the Romantic period between 1828 and 1865.

You have the Realistic Period 1865 to 1914 then you have the Modern literature, the Modernist Period between 1914 to 1939 and then you have the contemporary period, 1939 and it's important that the beginning of the Second World War so 1939 to present and that's what is contemporary literature. In America, and of course you can talk go on and on about post-Modern and post post-Modern literature. So every country has that and so does America. These boundaries are just for our own understanding. The let me tell you, there is nothing hard and fast about the periods that I have mentioned. Everything merges into something else. But remember for the sake of convenience this is the way we divide the major epics.

Now as I was telling you before, in this course we are concerned with the Romantic Period also understood as the coming of age of a specific kind of American Literature. American Literature came of age. It became important. It reached peak of its achievement so this is the period the major writers are Emerson, Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The Romantic Period is also well-known as the age of transcendentalism and as you know this is a philosophical and literary movement particularly associated with Emerson and was centered in the New England region of America.

I would suggest that you always keep a map of America, of the United States of America if you are interested in learning more and better, then it would be of immense value if you do these things and you will enjoy the course much more if you know these things that where was the specific region located in, what is the literary and may be the cultural influence or importance of this region in a particular period.

The Realistic Period 1865 to 1914, the beginning of the First World War, it's marked by the novelists like Mark Twain, the writer of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, then you have William Dean Howells, Bret Harte and Edith Wharton, Henry James and Theodore Dreiser so that those are the realists and we would be doing their works also. You have to remember that the novels of many of these realistic writers were rooted in their milieu, in their region, in their socio-cultural milieu so for example Mark Twain is the author or the writer of the Mississippi region where as Edith Wharton is more centered on New York so a when we do *The Age of Innocence* you will understand this better. The Modern Literature, this is marked by the period between the two wars 1914 and 1939.

Also at this point let me introduce you to something called Poetry Magazine. This was founded by Harriet Monroe in 1912 in Chicago. The magazine published new and experimental writers who were interested in bringing out certain innovations in poetry. The prominent among these poets are Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore and E.E. Cummings. So these are the modernists, these are the modern poets. Many of these poets, they were interested in imagism and this poetry is called as imagist poetry. And Ezra Pound, another great poet of this tradition, he once wrote to Monroe that this is the sort of American stuff that I can show here in Paris without it being ridiculed.

That is the importance of imagism. For Pound this kind of poetry was objective, no slither, direct, no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won't permit examination, straight talk, straight as the Greek this is what poetry should be according to Pound; so therefore the importance of the modernism or the Modernist Poetry and Imagist Movement. We have to understand that this is the period and Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost can be recognized as the pioneers of American Renaissance in this period.

Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters, these people took poetry forward in quest of change and freedom. So these were the poets who not only expressed themselves differently but they also saw life from a very different perspective. I am talking about Modernism, the great modernists of fiction are Sinclair Lewis, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe just to name a few.

We have to also know what is the and what was the Roaring Twenties. We are talking about the 1920s and this period is also popularly called the Jazz Age. Remember the Jazz Age was a cultural period and movement that took place in America during the 1920s. This is a period when both new styles of music and dance emerged, the Jazz kind of music. It is largely credited to African-Americans employing new musical techniques with traditional African traditional music. Jazz soon expanded to America's white middle class also and today is one of the most popular forms of music.



This is also the period which is also called the Harlem Renaissance. During this period Harlem, Ok this is a part of New York City, it is sub-borough and where it became a period, a sort of Renaissance, for whom; especially for the black writers, artists, musicians, photographers, poets and scholars. So these people live there, for example the Afro-American citizens, they started asserting their identity and the movement is popularly called the Harlem Renaissance. And later on this movement also influenced the white people ok but that is something that we will see later on.

So you have to remember while talking about Harlem Renaissance, that many of the writers they had come from the south, the south of the United States and why were they migrating? They were fleeing the oppressive caste system that was so prevalent in the south and the idea was or the intention was to find a place where they could freely express their talents. Some of the important artists whose works achieved recognition included Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, then Countee Cullen and Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer, Walter White and James Weldon Johnson. W. E. B. Du Bois emerged as one of the most talented artists to leave the south. These are the names that you should be familiar with. Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Walter White, James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois b o i s.

This is also the period which is popularly known as The Lost Generation. Now The Lost Generation, the term was introduced by Gertrude Stein, a modernist American writer who made Paris her permanent home. The story is, and this is the story that Hemingway tells us in his great book A Moveable Feast. Gertrude Stein's mechanic, car mechanic was upset when his young employee did not do the work satisfactorily on Stein's car. And the mechanic said that the young were all a lost generation, difficult to prepare for work or focus. So this is where the term originated. This is how the term originated. So Hemingway, the friend of Gertrude Stein, they were friends for quite a while.

He made it a popular concept when he included it as an epigraph in his novel The Sun Also Rises. That is the novel we are going to do. The Lost Generation therefore really referred to that group of men and women who came of age during the First World War and who felt disillusioned in this unfamiliar post-war world. So disillusionment, anxiety, angst these are

the terms that you would be coming across very frequently when we talk about *The Sun Also Rises*.

As you know *The Lost Generation* was a group of American Writers most of whom immigrated to Europe and worked there from the end of the First World War until The Great Depression, so America was filled with cynical people who were facing less than certain future. Many of these writers felt that their home and life could never be repaired and that the United States that they knew was gone completely, a civilization which was over, gone with the wind.

So we learn all these things and much more in this course. So what I was trying to do is to give you an overview of what are the things you can expect from this course. That's not all, of course. We will be doing a great deal more of Modernist Literature and also the contemporary period, the Romantics, so all these things are a major part of this course.

Now coming to the mode of evaluation, at the end of every major text you will be given regular assignments which you should be completing and submitting online. So that's going to be a part of your assessment. At the end of the course there will be a proctored and semester exam. Please keep looking at the websites and read the mails with attention because many of the dates will be communicated to you online and they will be displayed on the website so please be attentive to these things.

This is the most important thing, regularly submitting the assignments. Many a time, we feel or we face problems because candidates, participants fail to submit assignments on time. Ok. You must do your best. If you want to earn your certificate, please, please make sure that you are attentive. You are attending the lectures. You are looking at the lectures, learning something from them and also submitting the assignments. Questions will be multiple-choice types Ok and you will soon realize that how important or how beneficial these kinds of questions would be in order to crystallize your learning.

So this is what I had to, I wanted to tell you about the course. And I do look forward, all of us at NPTEL; we all look forward to having you with us for this course, so all the best and I welcome you all. Thank you very much.

