

American Literature & Culture
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Mod 12 Lecture Number 45
Hart Crane The Bridge (Lecture 39)

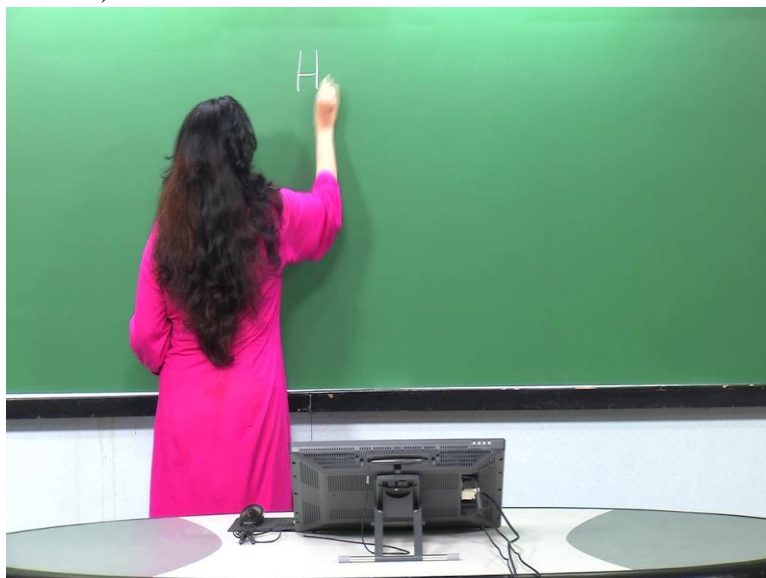
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(Professor – student conversation starts)

Professor: So Hart Crane's The Bridge, a 1930 poem

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Professor: but we are not doing the entire poem of course, only the section or segment on the Brooklyn Bridge. It's a poem which he intended to write as an American epic. 1930, now 1930 has its own value

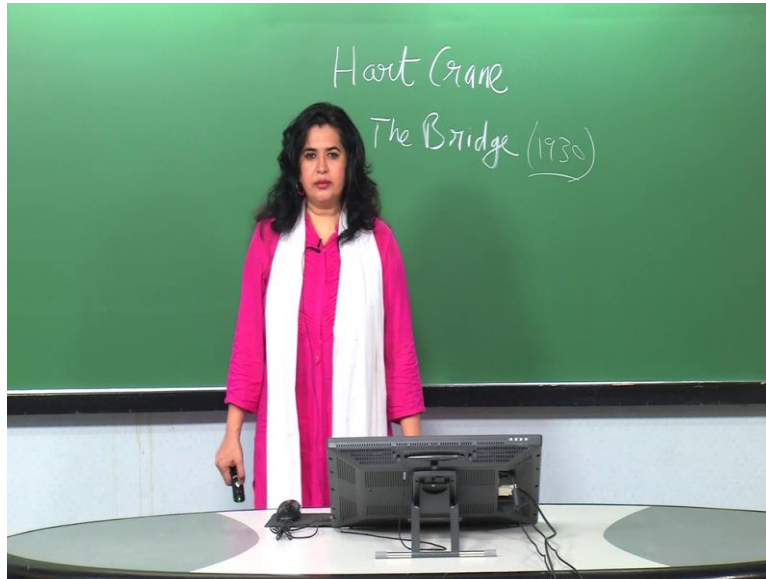
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Professor: within the schematic of modernist literature. We have been talking of several works of literature that were published during this period, the second half or second decade of the twentieth century and particularly think of *The Sun also Rises*, that we have already done and also we have been to *The Great Gatsby* also in 1925. So this is an addition to that corpora of the so-called modernism. Yeah so this is in continuation with the modernist movement in literature.

You should remember that not just in America but also in Europe, there were several writers who were experimenting with particularly with different kinds of styles, techniques and also themes. James Joyce, you have heard of James Joyce, you have heard of people like Virginia Woolf and also they were the modernists, yeah, they and also Kafka. So these are the modernists and *The Bridge* is in, a very important addition to the entire corpus of modernist literature. And it occupies a very important part in American canon.

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Now what is this bridge? We are talking about; the reference is to Brooklyn Bridge which was completed in 1883. It took almost one and half decades for completion and there are several important features associated with Brooklyn Bridge. I am sure you will find the history of Brooklyn bridge somewhere if you do enough reading on the, on the history of this, of this extremely significant monument. It is almost like a national monument of America. Now before we start talking about what is the significance of Brooklyn Bridge and Hart Crane's poem, let us understand what is modernist poetry. What do we understand by modernism and particularly modernist poetry? Now modernist poetry if you remember is known for its symbolism.

You have been doing lot of modernist poetry. Think of Pound, think of Eliot, yeah those are the modernists. So along with that, we will also talk about other important modernist poets as well but immediately you can think of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. So known for symbolism and also known for experimentation and innovation with language. Poet has experimented a lot with the language. It's very obscure. Modernism, one of the defining feature of modernism is its obscurity. Obscurism of modernist poetry, obscurity of thought and of course it is written in free verse so total rejection of the traditional concept of meter.

This is something that has been going on, even in Eliot and Pound you will find rejection of the conventional meter and Hart Crane continues the tradition. Now some of the important themes or recurring themes of modernist poetry like war, erosion of humanity or humanitarian consideration, you have read T. S. Eliot's The Wasteland and you will know

how he talks about disintegration of moral, spiritual and moral condition of the Western civilization. That's what he talks about and then some of the people who are in the same style were, apart from Eliot and Pound you had W. H. Auden, Spender, Stephen Spender and also W. B. Yeats, so all these people belong to the tradition of modernist poetry.

Now *The Bridge* was first published as we were talking about, in 1930 and it's Crane's first and only attempt at the long poem. All other poems were like short lyrics. It has status as either an epic or a series of lyrical poems. Now it is a series of lyrical poems and what Crane aspired to do was to write an American epic of national, epic proportion of national importance, yeah. It has been contested. Now Hart Crane is considered a great poet by several people and we will talk about that also, critics' reception to Hart Crane but there are also, if you look up the net, you will find that his position is not really as secure as the greatest of American poets. For example you have done , you are at least aware of people like Walt Whitman or Emily Dickenson so these are unchallenged but in Hart Crane's case, always his status always remains a contentious issue Ok, is he a great poet or not? But the poem definitely is worth consideration.

Many people tend to read it as a kind of hybrid indicative of something called the modernist epic. Now it's a contradictory term. Epic has to be the traditional, you know, Milton has written an epic. You know which, what I am talking about, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are epics. Those are epics but what is modern, what is a modernist epic? Now that's what we are going to think about and Hart Crane who lived between 1899 and 1932, he was born in Ohio and he shifted to New York, he lived for quite a while in Brooklyn region. So interestingly he lived in an apartment which overlooked the bridge, Ok and we know; when was the bridge completed?

Student: 1883

Professor: 18

Student: 1883,

Professor: 1833, yeah so by the time he was at the peak of his powers, creative powers, the bridge was almost, was there but it was a new structure, something which was quite a novelty for the American people. So he was fascinated by the technology and also by, because see we are talking about modernism and the implicit symbols in various things, day-to-day objects so he would look at the bridge from his window and a key feature now, Hart Crane's

homosexuality which is a fact but which he couldn't reveal, of course we are talking about the early 30s and he died and we are talking about early 1930s and he died in 1932, so he was a homosexual but he couldn't come out in the open about it.

So there was a lot of tension and conflict within him. Critics have tried to read those kinds of connotations in his poetry also, especially in *The Bridge*. He was away, he was in Mexico on a fellowship, he won the Guggenheim Fellowship and he was doing some kind of a project research, something related to creative writing and all, he was working, he was doing some, you know, writing work in Mexico and while returning from Mexico to the United States, something snapped inside him. Because see he felt that he had been leading a life of duplicity for very long time and he was unable to come to terms with that kind of life. So he just threw himself overboard. Ok, so he died, he committed suicide, Ok while he was on his way back to America from Mexico. So that's the tragic end of Hart Crane.

Now this is the first edition of *The Bridge* and you can look at beautiful bridge which is now such an iconic symbol of America. Crane labels to Brooklyn Bridge a prelude see the poem is called *The Bridge* but we are particularly looking at to Brooklyn Bridge which is a short lyric from the bigger poem *The Bridge*. So to Brooklyn Bridge and he called it a proem, which is interesting. What is it? A prologue plus poem. He referred to Brooklyn Bridge as a proem which gives you an entry point to the major themes of *The Bridge*. The intention was to create an epic that captures the myth of American experience.

Now that's a tall ambition, to capture the myth of American experience. Very soon you will do what is myth and we will also talk about American experience; America being such a wide and varied land, it has to be extremely wide and varied and he aspired to capture that experience in this epic. Now I keep referring to Malcolm Bradbury who is an authority on modernism. And Malcolm Bradbury says that if modernism means the ruffling of the hard, naturalistic surface by a state of multiplicity of consciousness, then Walter Pater that is the Renaissance, that is the English poet and Aesthete in the 1870s in England and other thinkers in Europe were talking of quickened multiplied consciousness.

So heightened sense of multiplicity of consciousness, that's how we have to understand modernism, sense of modernism and when we apply all this to Hart Crane you will

understand that there is a sense of multiplicity of consciousness. So his thought processes are not unidirectional or centered on a single focused theme. There is sense of, underlying sense of multiplicity of consciousness. Therefore it is so difficult to understand. I don't know if you have even attempted to read it. You try to read the poem; you will find that it is very difficult to understand what he is trying to say.

Ok, we are aware that in modernist poetry and I am leading you towards Hart Crane's consciousness. so we know that urban landscapes are often seen as harsh and fractured, that are discordant and that are odds with nature. That is your modernist poetry. Again I will give you example how Eliot has portrayed London in *The Wasteland*, 1922 and Dylan Thomas has also portrayed London in very negative terms Ok, in *Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire*. So these are the modernist poets who have had a very, you know, the desire was to return to the rural, the pastoral but not in Hart Crane.

So this is where he differs. So Eliot and Dylan Thomas, people like them may bemoan the loss of innocence and may bemoan the loss of pastorality Ok and destruction of rural landscape and natural landscape but in Hart Crane, urban and industrialization is celebrated. This is here; this is the point where he differs radically from people like Eliot. For Eliot there is no positive element to be found in London. There is moral and spiritual disintegration all over. So he is very derisive of progress, of that kind of progress, Ok but not Hart Crane. In Eliot's hands, *The Bridge* would have turned out to be a very different kind of poem but here he celebrates the construction of this. And I mean when we talk, let's even look at the title *The Bridge*, what does, when you hear the word like *The Bridge*, what does it connote? What does it suggest?

Student: Connecting

Professor: Yes, the idea of connectivity. He tries to bring in lots of elements of connectivity. Connecting tradition with the modern, Ok, connecting straight people, the so called straight people with homosexuals, so the idea of inclusivity and connectivity remains, Ok. But then you have to go through the entire poem and not just look at one single lyric. Yeah, so the idea is that the majestic arcs of the bridge, they mirror the arc, this is how the, he refers to sea gull's wings at the beginning of the poem and its cables, as you know, the construction of, the structure of Brooklyn bridge, it is made of suspension and wires and cables and all that, they

are the choiring for him, they are the choiring strings of a great harp. There is symphony implicit in *The Bridge*.

Crane also shows us the bridge as an altar, a man-made wonder, whose curviship lends a myth to God and this is what he says, that it is a kind of a modern miracle. It's an altar to God. It's almost like a prayer. Ok. This is the way he saw the bridge. Again we have to understand that he celebrates the disasters as well as achievements of modern, urban life. We see, in the poem he talks about bored office workers in plummeting elevators so not on the bridge but in office, the offices, the various offices. Eliot talks of the same thing, Ok Eliot also has similar concerns that people are living in a state of limbo and envy, bored people, people are, that disconnect people have with other people, so this is what he talks about.

Crane also refers to boredom, modern day boredom, monotonous of life. He also talks of cinema audiences enthralled but however unsatisfied by the panoramic slates of the silver screen. So this is also one of the things that he mentions in the opening lines. And he also talks of the suicide of the person who leaps from the parapet of the bridge with his shrill shirt ballooning; so all these images are there in the poem. We are talking of the bored office workers, we are talking, so work doesn't excite people, entertainment as symbolized, as given to us by cinema, that doesn't excite people because cinema is also becoming monotonous and also suicide, the bridge gives place or some kind of space to people not just for progress but also for destruction. So he, the view is extremely panoramic.

Now some of the greatest modernists of all times, and I am just repeating something that I am sure all of you know but I want you to anyway look at these names. Take a moment, look at these names. I am very sure you are aware and at least familiar; you have a nodding familiarity with all these people. So you have to situate Hart Crane within this tradition. They were the, they were also the people who were writing various kinds of genres. There was Brecht who was doing drama, there was, there were people like Hilda Doolittle known for imagist poetry, then you have people like D. H. Lawrence, he is a modernist novelist who experimented with his stream of consciousness as well as the themes.

So we are talking, we are situating Hart Crane within this tradition of modernism. So Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka these are all Europeans, Rilke poems I am sure you are

aware of, Ezra Pound, William Faulkner and Steven (()) who is an Aesthete, you know W.B. Yeats, Arthur Rimbaud, Strindberg the playwright, Pirandello's work, Wallace Stevens, Eugene O'Neill, Brecht, William Carlos Williams he is an American poet, Amy Lowell, Hilda Doolittle, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore is also an imagist, a modernist poet, e e cummings perhaps you are familiar with e e cummings who would always write in lower caps and then of course you have people like Auden and Eliot and Stein and also our very own Hemingway, people like Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

So writers, authors of Lost Generation, they are all, they belong to the tradition of modernism and of course, James Joyce in Ireland and Virginia Woolf in England, so these, this is the time when Hart Crane is also writing. If you want to situate him, if you want to compare him with the rest of the other great writers, yeah, I think there is a great study, you can compare with great contemporaries like these ones, these people.

Now The Bridge comprises of 15 lyric poems of varying lengths and scope. The poem we are interested in is a short lyrical ode and idea is to give an, it sounds as an introduction to the larger poem, The Bridge and also an introduction to New York's, or New York's city's urban landscape which remains a dominant presence throughout the work and he is very affectionate. He has great sympathy for the urban predicament unlike the Eliots of the world. Now as we know in Modernism, this is something that you already know, the salient features of modernism, we talk of the absence of any higher authority, breakdown of a central figure, privileging of the individual over the wider society, so here I want you to consider how the poet looks at, looks at this great structure and privileges a common man over everything else, Ok, over wider society. So yes, New York is a great city but then he talks about individual, the common people also and celebrates them.

The breakdown of social order and tradition, isolation of the individual, of course impossibility of genuine communication, these and metro as an example of their sterility of spiritual conditions, all these things are there, this is a, these are all modernist features. However Crane differs in the sense that he has lots of regards for development and city, the city scrapers, the cityscapes of New York and the urban situation. So he is not the kind of person who is going to be dismissive of any kind of development.

Ok this is something that you have to, yes he is a modernist but at the same time he has his own take on modernism and industrialization and urbanization. Yeah, he lived for some time at a and that's his address, 110 Columbia Heights which was in Brooklyn and from where he had an excellent view of the bridge. So he would often, as I was telling you, would look out of his window and look at the bridge while writing the poem. a word or two about the bridge, it is the longest or at least at that point it was the longest suspension bridge in the world. It was an engineering marvel, considered as an engineering marvel. Many people would, many poets, poets being such sensitive creatures, they would have dismissed it off like, you know, it's ugly. To another eye, a pair of ugly, pair of eyes it would have appeared as a very ugly structure but not to him. For him, the bridge provides a symbol for possibility of redeeming the modern world by the sheer power of its ability to connect people.

This is the famous Promenade where people walk all on the Brooklyn Bridge. This is something you must have seen very frequently in films also. Now as a work of canon, I was telling you that the bridge has a very or even had a very mixed response when it was first published. But now over the years, people have revisited the poem and most importantly someone called Harold Bloom, whom I am sure you are aware of, he is also the author of the seminal book called *The Western Canon*. I strongly recommend that if you are not familiar with it, please, he has done lot of work on Shakespeare also, that's another, different matter but *The Western Canon*, if you want to know, if you are really deep into literature then you should, you must go through *The Western Canon* and Harold Bloom places Crane in his pantheon of the best modernist American poets of the twentieth century. He looks at *The Bridge* as Crane's most significant achievement, almost on par with *The Wasteland*.

This, I am quoting Crane and he says

The Bridge is symphonic in including all the strands:

and this is the, this is what when we talk about American epic capturing the mythical American experience so it, through its various poems he tries to capture the American experience and what, the major themes being Columbus and its discovery of America, conquest of water, land, land, Pocahontas situations also the natives, native Americans, the subways, the office and according to Crane *The Bridge*, in becoming a ship, a world, a woman, a tremendous harp as it does finally, seems to really have a career. Bridge is a

character by itself. It is everything to everyone. It is a beautiful woman, it is a symphony, it's microcosm of the entire world. This is bridge, the bridge from yet another angle.

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Student: How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
Over the chained bay waters Liberty—

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
—Till elevators drop us from our day...

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Professor: So this is the bridge and read this, carry on

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Student: I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

And Thee, across the harbor, silver paced
As though the sun took step of thee yet left
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

Professor: Yeah

Student: Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft

A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning,
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,
A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene;
All afternoon the cloud flown derricks turn...
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

And obscure as that heaven of the Jews,
Thy guerdon ... Accolade thou dost bestow
Of anonymity time cannot raise:
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,
(How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)
Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,
Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry,

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
Beading thy path—condense eternity:
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

Under thy shadow by the piers I waited
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
The City's fiery parcels all undone,
Already snow submerges an iron year...

O Sleepless as the river under thee,

Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curvship lend a myth to God.

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Professor: The only way, the only approach is that don't try to find explanation for each and every line. It is a very, very, it is a poem that is an individual's response to a great structure, Ok and what, yeah so these words, every word has something else, it doesn't mean what it seems to be. Ok he is not using the word suicide or death at all; you have to just understand connotations of these. You have done lot of semiotics in this course and in other courses also so you should understand the denotations, the connotations so every word has a meaning which is not really the direct meaning, the surface meaning.

It is something else. It goes deeper into it, very modernist, very obscure and I think he has done it very intentionally. Ok. He doesn't want, I mean there is a lover's cry, a pariah on the bridge, who could it be? A marginalized person in the city, perhaps the dispossessed, Ok perhaps an immigrant, perhaps even a homosexual like Crane himself, so pariah, someone who is ostracized. A lover's cry, someone who wants to be embraced, Ok but he is not going to tell you all these things at, you know in a very direct way. Even Eliot's *The Wasteland* is much more accessible as compared to this.

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Student: The last stanza very similar to The Ode to the West Wind

Professor: Yes

Student: There he is

Professor: I die, fall, yes.

Student: Yeah, here it is the bridge.

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Professor: Yes. As we all know that it is not a bridge. It is not just a bridge and not just a scientific or architectural marvel but it is also a part of very significant, and it has become a very significant cultural phenomenon especially for the Americans. So there is this book by David McCullough. It's called The Great Bridge which looks at the epic story of the construction of the bridge. Ok so it is also an important book and then as we know, alright

this is Arthur Miller's 1956 play, *A View from the Bridge*, something that you are already familiar with.

The bridge has found a place in several important films that have been culturally very significant and *Annie Hall*, 1977 film being one of that. *Once Upon a Time in America*, here again you see glimpses of the bridge and very significantly look at it, the way on the poster of the film, it is an iconic, it has an iconic kind of presence here. So Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* which foregrounds the bridge, *The Broken Tower* is Crane's last published work and it is a film by James Franco.

Ok it is a very James Franco kind of avante gardish film. James Franco, if you know, he is not just a very popular actor and he has acted in all these very commercial films like this *Spiderman* series of course but he is at the same time, he experiments a lot with his image and the kind of work that he does. So you know that he has played the role of bisexual and homosexual in 3 films, one is *Howl* where he played the poet Allen Ginsberg and also *Milk* and then this is *Broken Tower* based on Crane's last poem where he plays Hart Crane himself.

As I was telling you, you know it is useless to attempt to have a word interpretation of the poem but I just wanted to give you a very holistic picture of the cultural significance of this poem. Ok, why it is important, why is it a part of the canon and one important thing is of course that it is; the bridge itself is of such monumental importance to Americans and the country. So therefore a poem about the bridge has to be extremely significant and of course today it is a part of the canon.

It's a unique poem; I mean you don't find poems written about an architectural marvel like this. I mean, this is not a, let's say, a building that has been dedicated to lovers, Ok we talk of the *Taj Mahal* which is a symbol of love, Ok. This is, there is no romantic story connected to the bridge. It was a bridge, that's it; nothing more, nothing less. But then the very fact that it has inspired something so profound in a poet and also in films and also in several plays that explains the significance of the structure itself. Alright then, thank you very much.

(Professor – student conversation ends)