



COURSE CODE: MAEGD 304

COURSE NAME: AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

**CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND  
ONLINE EDUCATION  
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**ENGLISH  
BLOCK I**



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## **MAEGD 304: American Literature I**

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# BLOCK I

**MODULE I: HISTORY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE**

**UNIT 1: AMERICAN MYTHS OF ORIGIN; THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE; THE FRONTIER PURITANISM, UNITARIANISM, TRANSCENDENTALISM**

**MODULE II: RALPH WALDO EMERSON AND WALT WHITMAN**

**UNIT 2: “THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR”: RELIANCE ON NATURE AND THE INDIVIDUAL SELF; THE AMERICAN GENIUS; DECLARATION OF AMERICAN CULTURAL INDEPENDENCE**

**UNIT 3: WHITMAN: EXCERPTS FROM THE PREFACE TO *LEAVES OF GRASS*: THE ROLE OF THE AMERICAN POET; AN AMERICAN VOICE IN POETRY**

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## COURSE INTRODUCTION

### BLOCK I

**MEG 304: American Literature I** aims to acquaint students with the Americanness of American Literature, by bringing out its goals and anxieties. For this reason, a study of its background - including the early American experience, the settlement of people from Europe, the struggle between European culture and the American environment, and the subsequent search for an American cultural identity – is necessary. Major issues and influences in the shaping of American Literature will be addressed in this Block. For this purpose, seminal texts will be examined in depth to set American literary culture in a context.

**Module I: History of American literature** exclusively deals with the history of New England from early colonial experience. *Unit 1: American myths of origin; the Colonial experience; the frontier Puritanism, Unitarianism, Transcendentalism* deal with the backgrounds to the study of American literature, the key issues that went into the making of an American culture, and the experience which defined it. In the absence of a history, Americans gave themselves a mythology. Instead of looking at history as the record of events, they decided to make it a blueprint for the future. Instead of art imitating life, life would imitate art. This mode of reverse verisimilitude signaled a new approach to reality in American literature called Actualism. They would imagine a state of earliness and write without cultural anxiety vis-à-vis Europe. This is where the American myths of origin helped.

If every American assumed an Adamic role and looked at things in a fresh manner, he/she could go about naming them without worrying about criticism from across the Atlantic. What they lacked in terms of history and culture could be supplied by the imagination. Consequently, what began as a deficit became a matter of plenitude. Since Americans did not have anything apart from nature to write about, they chose to write about their early colonial experience. This, along with Puritanism which more than a religion, had in

fact become a way of life, remains crucial to American literature. Although by the middle of the nineteenth century Puritanism was challenged by Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, its influence remained deeply rooted in the American psyche.

**Module II: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman** introduces Emerson and Whitman as the key thinkers as far as the framing of the American identity is concerned. While Emerson calls for cultural independence for America, Whitman, through his poetics for democracy, shows the way to counter the European cultural heritage. If Europe had its centuries of tradition, America would rely on horizontal growth through the masses partaking of different kinds of experience and knowledge. **Unit 2: “The American Scholar”** will introduce you to Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the major thinkers and writers of America who shaped American literature and culture by his philosophy self-reliance and dreamt of an America free from any past influences. His epoch making work ‘The American Scholar’ is discussed in details covering all the major issues.

**Unit 3: Excerpts from the ‘Preface to Leaves of Grass’** again deals with yet another poet thinker of America Walt Whitman. Called an American voice in poetry, the Preface will acquaint you with Whitman’s philosophy of Poet as the founder of a culturally equal nation where all races can live with peace and happiness.

The learners are requested to read the texts to acquire better understanding of the issues discussed.

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## **MODULE I: HISTORY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE**

## ***UNIT 1: AMERICAN MYTHS OF ORIGIN; THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE; THE FRONTIER PURITANISM, UNITARIANISM, TRANSCENDENTALISM***

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### ***1.0 INTRODUCTION***

It is very difficult to divide the American history into different periods. Though Christopher Columbus is credited with the discovery of America, it was inhabited by the natives preceding any such “discovery.” However, documentation started only when the European settlers came into the New Land. For the purpose of our discussion, however, we may divide the American history into a few periods which will be discussed elaborately. We will also make it a point to analyze the myths that are so inextricable to American life and living

## **1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

The aim of this unit is –

- to introduce the learners of American literature with the origin of America or New England and myths related to its origin
- to enable you to understand the ideological and philosophical background that shaped America
- familiarize you with different phases of American history like the colonial experience, the frontier Puritanism etc.
- to deliberate basic concepts like Unitarianism and Transcendentalism

## **1.2 AMERICAN MYTH OF ORIGIN**

### **1.2.1 THE FRONTIER MYTH**

American Myths of Origin are those that believed to have shaped America the way it is today. America is always seen as a land of opportunity, an untilled land that can be converted into rich with determination and self-reliance. America does not have to see towards anyone for its progress as civilization lies within itself. It is only to explore and exploit.

The Frontier myth or myth of the West is one of the pioneering myths of America in relation to the evolution of American being and culture. Richard Slotkin, in his *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier* defines America "as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top" (Slotkin 5) and relates this "Americanness" to the Myth of the Frontier. Thus conceptually frontier is the place that exists at the edge of a civilization from where America or the new found land had started its journey, particularly during the period of colonization and expansion. The myth of the frontier held promise of wealth in the undiscovered lands and thus encouraged settlement. According to the researchers of frontier myth the individualism, self-reliant haughtiness with which America stands today is primarily because of its relation and linkage to the frontier. Frontier, thus, is the primary source of existence for America.

Frederick Jackson Turner, the most fundamental exponent of frontier concept claimed that modern America is modeled upon the frontier natives with their love for freedom and individualism and shaped the American pioneers the way they are today. These idealized concepts placed the frontier as foundational for American identity. In his epoch making work "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" Turner views how the idea of the frontier shaped the American being and characteristics. He advocates how the frontier is a driving force of American history and how much frontier is inspirational to America in its present status. The believer of frontier myth argue that America will be transformed only by adopting ideologies of frontier, like the farmers of American do, gradually and steadily growing towards development by taking challenges. Moving Eastward towards cities is not a progressive sign of true Americanness. Slotkin too viewed that the myth of the frontier disproved the historical reality that the cities are the means of wealth and development. As the frontier continued to move west it continued to transform the pioneering Americans who went there, and in turn transform the nation. Turner argued that nationalism, democracy and a rejection of European ideals were a result of the frontier. Thus Turner concluded that America was only unique because of its interaction with the frontier and the West as it developed during expansion, "to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics (Turner 37).

Thus the Frontier is not a geographical location for America, rather an ideology that is necessary to be maintained if America really wants to be an independent, self-reliant nation. Throughout the seventeenth to twentieth centuries the American frontier took hold of the American minds, specially when Euro-Americans colonized and expanded across North America. This was the period when frontier was romanticized and idealized in literature and art to form a myth.

### **1.2.2 MYTH OF AMERICAN ADAM**

The concept of America as an 'Adamic' figure or the term 'American Adam' generally refers to the assumption based on the view of European colonists who saw America, the 'New World' as a new Garden of Eden. This myth has areligious interpretation while imagining America as a second Eden, with a

second chance, where past mistakes have no place. The concept is also culturally rooted in its view of American as a "new man" - an innocent Adam in a 'new world' where he is in constant attempt to create itself anew. This Adamic America is dissociated from the historic past and his error and emerging with a new beginning. Symbolically this mythical 'American Adam' is one who can create a future without reference to the past.

R.W.B. Lewis describes the American Adam as "the hero of new adventure . . . an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources". The American Adam is always imagined as that masculine figure who is ready to take any challenge that comes his way. With this view, in 19<sup>th</sup> Century the Adamic Myth has lost much of its religious connotations popular in 18<sup>th</sup> Century and gripped its root in the cultural milieu of America.

The new Adamic myth that became an essential part of Americanness during 19<sup>th</sup> century describes American Adam as an isolated figure demonstrating immense possibilities. Unlike his biblical version, the new Adam is a self made entity, making his way from innocence to experience.

American Renaissance was greatly influenced by the concept of Adam as a figure with American characteristics. The figure is discernable in the American renaissance writers in varied portrayals as the frontiersman, cowboy, gangster etc. In more recent times many US action movies adopted this form.

In the works of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman American Adam got finest representations. In *Nature* Emerson describes this Adam as an authentic man who is free of the constraints of the past and of the limitations imposed by centuries of tradition. He is the embodiment the future and the promise inherent in this American future. However, the innocence of Emerson's American Adam is inevitably shaped and altered by experience. This concept of America and American Adam dissociated from its past with a promising future only is the key idea behind the term 'Party of Hope'.

Another concept is developed by R. W. B. Lewis. He called it the 'Party of Irony'. This concept talks about the paradoxical conflict between innocence with experience. According to this a unique spiritual strength can arise from the

inevitable clash of innocence with experience. This element is apparent in texts of great American authors like Melville and Hawthorne.

Though Thoreau's and Whitman's overly optimistic view could create a strong place for Adam in American history, not all writers agreed with this view. The cause of such disagreement was germinated by the stark realization of writers like Herman Melville who demonstrated that the static moral innocence of the Adam could prove a spiritual liability in the present context which is after all a fallen world, and could even become spiritually destructive. He portrayed this example of the tragic Adam in the character of Captain Ahab of his masterpiece *Moby Dick*. Ahab, in *Moby Dick*, almost functions as the antagonist to Emerson's plain old Adam – He is characterized as a being that is somehow damned in the midst of paradise.

It is apparent that since early renaissance writings the adamic theme dominated many works of 19th century American Literature. However, the precise interpretation of the adamic being is not unitary but versatile and complex. Finally, the idea of the American Adam did not end with the American Renaissance, but continued to be a major theme in more modern works such as Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*.

### ***1.3 COLONIAL EXPERIENCE***

The colonial experience is characterized by a clash of cultures, between the European and Native Americans. Cultural misunderstandings and hostility characterized the encounters between Americans and Europeans since the earliest known contact between the two continents. It is interesting how cultural interactions formed the history of latter day America. The English viewed the local customs as inferior and there was a mode of resistance as well as adaptation by the natives to the modern notions of culture brought forth by the colonial experience. The earliest instance of English settlement, 1607, is when Captain Christopher Newport and approximately a hundred colonists founded Jamestown as the first permanent English-speaking settlement in North America.

The Pilgrims who arrived at Plymouth Rock on the Mayflower in 1620 came to America for reasons quite different from those that motivated the colonists at Jamestown in Virginia. These settlers, like the later Puritan settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, left Europe because of religious persecution. The Pilgrims, so called by William Bradford (1590–1657), later governor of Plymouth Colony, were Separatists. In his *Of Plymouth Plantation*, written between 1630 and 1650 but not published until 1856, Bradford explains why the Pilgrims originally chose to come to America. He says that “the hardness of the place and country” appealed to the Pilgrims because “few in comparison would come to them, and fewer that would bide it out and continue with them.” That is, the separatists, tired of religious disputes, wanted a forbidding place so that only like-minded people would join them, people willing to sacrifice everything in order to be able to practice their religion as they chose. When the Pilgrims arrived in America, they found that it was every bit as wild and forbidding as they might have hoped. According to Bradford, they could see nothing but

. . . a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men—and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not. Neither could they, as it were, go up to the top of Pisgah [the mountain from which Moses saw Canaan, the “Promised Land”] to view from this wilderness a more goodly country to feed their hopes; for which way so ever they turned their eyes (save upward to the heavens) they could have little solace or content in respect of any outward objects (Meyers, 13).

The early settlers were content to build up their trade with the mother country, shipping raw materials and luxury items out of the colonies in exchange for the manufactured articles which the natives had not learned to make for themselves. Owing to this, ports such as Boston, New York and Charleston had prospered. Cultural encounter, whether between rival Europeans or between Europeans and Indians, has been a major arena of cultural and historical studies of the early settlements in New England.

The colonial experience is the source of something which can be without too much straining called a ‘literary tradition’, a traditional belief in certain values and certain types of character, certain symbols and their implications. It has affected Americans- even those who have not been interested in it as an article of faith, but who have been to some extent directed by it towards

metaphors and images which are effective for American audiences because they are rooted in an American mythology. The founders of New England brought not only a highly developed theology, cosmology, logic, psychology and a sophisticated concept of state and society; they also brought the doctrine of word- how the word, spoken or written should be properly managed.

Apart from its puritan beginnings the new culture of America was heterogeneous and multi-ethnic; there was constant immigration and migration for almost three centuries. Mobility or diversity became the controlling factors in the formation of the American cultural identity. The recurring impact of mature cultures on relatively primitive environment and mingling of one with the other provide the key to the making of a new cultural identity and are therefore basic to our understanding of the literature of the new nation upto the nineteenth century. There was wave after wave of horizontal westward movement in America.

### **1.3.1 POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SET UP**

Between 1620 and 1640, Puritans migrated to what is now called Massachusetts. This period is historically termed “the great migration”. Many of the qualities popularly associated with Americans, such as “independence,” “self-reliance,” and “the Protestant work ethic” are direct inheritances from this small group of settlers.

The most important distinguishing feature of the Puritan settlers was their religion. Puritans were members of the Protestant Church of England who wanted to “purify” it of any vestiges of Roman Catholicism, such as priests’ fancy vestments, ornate churches, incense, music, elaborate rituals, and so on. Puritans were Congregationalists; they believed that each congregation must be self-governing. Congregationalism is an important aspect of the Protestant Reformation. Among the things early Protestants, including the Puritans, disliked about Catholicism was the idea that priests and other representatives of the Church hierarchy mediated, or transmitted information, between the individual and God. Protestants believed, instead, in direct relationships between individuals and God. This idea is of profound importance because once it is acknowledged that a lowly peasant, for example, can approach God



independently without the mediation of a priest, it is not far to the evolution of ideas such as individualism, equality, and democracy.

Puritans left Europe for the freedom to practice their religion. However, the Puritan leaders who guided settlers to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629 also believed that they had a chance to establish an entirely new kind of society, based on religious principles, that would prepare the way for the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. Thus, John Winthrop (1606–1676), governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which adjoined the separatist settlement at Plymouth, outlined the Puritan vision for America in *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630):

. . . the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his own people and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness, and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with, we shall find that the God of Israel is among us . . . [and] that men shall say of succeeding plantations [settlements]: the Lord make it like that of New England: for we must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.

Unlike the separatists, who originally wanted to live in seclusion, the Puritans viewed their journey as a very public experiment in theocracy. They viewed the wilderness as dangerous and filled with savage peoples, but they believed it was their duty to clear the land and create a paradise, a Garden of Eden or a New Jerusalem. Like the Jews of the Old Testament, they believed they were God's chosen people whose duty was to prevail. They were never naïve enough to believe that human beings were immune from sin in the New World, but they believed they had the opportunity to establish a church that would serve as the model for congregations in England.

Puritans were not only Congregationalists, they were also Calvinists; they believed in the five central Tenets set forth by the sixteenth-century religious reformer John Calvin. These tenets are often taught to schoolchildren with the help of a mnemonic aid. Each letter of the word TULIP stands for one of the tenets of Calvinism. Karen Meyers explains it thus:

- Total Depravity—the idea that humankind, as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, has been completely corrupted by sin.
- Unconditional Election—also called Predestination—the idea that from the beginning of time God has decided which humans will be saved and which condemned to damnation. Those who will be saved—called the ELECT or

the SAINTS—are selected merely by the whim of God and for no other reason. Nothing the individual did or can do will influence God’s choice.

- Limited Atonement—The idea that Christ’s death on the cross atoned only for the Elect, not for all sinners.
- Irresistible Grace—the idea that when God—in the person of the Holy Spirit—calls to a member of the Elect, that person cannot resist the grace that is offered. Though the person may continue to sin, he or she will be continually drawn by grace to a complete conversion.
- Perseverance of the Saints—the idea that those who are saved are saved forever and cannot be lost.

A successful life, with the primary yardstick being wealth, was perceived as a sign of election. People who were afflicted with poverty and bad luck in life might well fear that they were not members of the elect, whereas those who prospered financially might well believe that they were among the chosen. Puritans, then, tended to overvalue material possessions, even equating it with moral superiority. Puritanism, to the extent that it focused on self-reliance, hard work, and financial success, proved to be fertile ground for the growth of capitalism. Because only church members could vote in Massachusetts, church membership was of overriding importance in the community. In order to join a Puritan congregation, one had to be justified or converted or born again into faith. However, Justification was not sufficient for church membership. To join the Saints, one had to be certified by the minister and the congregation. The prospective church member had to testify to a conversion experience that impressed his or her audience as genuine. Sanctification followed justification and was the continuing proof that the person was, in fact, a member of the elect. It is not difficult to see how this process could encourage righteousness and intolerance, not to mention intrusiveness. It was one’s duty, as it were, to spy on the behaviour of one’s neighbour, lest church membership be bestowed on one undeserving. For many modern readers, the treatment of Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s (1804–1864) *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) constitutes the defining portrait of these aspects of the Puritan character. Hester, convicted of bearing an illegitimate child, is forced to wear a scarlet letter “A” (for adulteress) emblazoned on her chest for all to see—and thus to be the subject of continuous public scrutiny and censure.

From the beginning, colonies such as Virginia and the Carolinas were settled with profit in mind, with early settlers hoping to find precious metals and gemstones for the taking in the new land. Although these dreams were not fulfilled, settlers discovered a different kind of wealth in the vast stretches of virgin soil. In Virginia, tobacco flourished, whereas in the Carolinas and Georgia, rice grew well in the swampy coastal lands. These crops, although profitable, were labour intensive. Originally, large landowners were able to rely on the work of indentured servants. Typically young men, indentured servants would agree to work for a landowner for a period of years—usually six or seven—in return for the price of passage to the New World. When their period of indenture was complete, the freed servant would be given “freedom dues,” usually a plot of land, seed to plant, and perhaps a gun. The first African people to arrive in America landed in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 aboard a Dutch ship; the ship’s owners sold them as indentured servants to settlers in exchange for food and other supplies. For many years, in fact, Africans working in the fields in the American South worked side-by-side with English servants and were given their freedom at the end of their period of indenture just as the English servants were. Intermarriage between whites and blacks, while not common, did occur. Over the next generation, events in England began to reduce the number of indentured servants who made the ocean crossing to come to America. The plague that ravaged England in 1665 killed many and the London fire of 1666 resulted in the need to rebuild the city, which in turn resulted in more jobs for young laborers there. In America, restrictions on available land in some colonies led to unrest among newly freed indentured servants. These factors began to effect a change in attitude of landowners toward their African servants, and by the late seventeenth century the system of enslaving Africans for life that had been employed in the Caribbean for many years, began to be used in America. Massachusetts was the first colony to legalize slavery in 1641 and Georgia the last, in 1750. Slavery, in all its degradation and brutality, did not arise at once in America; gradually, over the years, attitudes evolved and laws and statutes were enacted that gave slave owners greater and greater control over slaves. It was claimed that black skin was inferior to white skin and even the clergy used biblical allusions to justify slavery.

## LET US STOP AND THINK



Samuel Sewall is a figure who stands apart in the white's perception regarding the blacks. Sewall is remembered today for his diary, which is a tremendous resource for understanding the Puritan way of life and the changes that were threatening it at the time, and for one of the earliest tracts written against slavery, *The Selling of Joseph* (1700). This tract is divided into three parts. The first part uses scriptural sources to argue that whites and blacks are all God's children, and, as such, have "an equal right unto liberty." The second part suggests that indentured servitude is much superior to slavery not only morally but also practically because servants who have their freedom to look forward to will work harder than slaves. In the third part, Sewall denies that the Bible approves of slavery and argues that "these Ethiopians, as black as they are, seeing they are the sons and daughters of the first Adam, the brethren and sisters of the last Adam, the offspring of God; they ought to be treated with a respect agreeable." Sewall adds that a man who holds slaves "forfeit[s] a great part of his own claim to humanity."

### 1.3.2 CULTURAL/INTELLECTUAL/LITERARY SCENE

Sermons, including jeremiads, devotional poetry and history are the three kinds of literature handed down by the Puritans. Fiction, including drama, was regarded as trivial and corrupting. Sermons in particular were a crucial part of Puritanism because they were considered the doorway through which most Saints were led to accept grace. Because of their belief in predestination, Puritans did not believe in a cause-and-effect relationship between sermons and conversion; they would reject as preposterous the idea that if a person went to church and listened to sermons, he or she would be saved. Rather, they believed that there were things one might do to prepare the way for irresistible grace, and listening to sermons was chief among them. A typical sermon had three major parts. The preacher began with a biblical text, which he explicated. The preacher then explained what laws and lessons might be derived from the text. Finally, he demonstrated how the text and laws applied to everyday life in New England. Puritan sermons and histories were written in plain style, like their churches, unadorned, clear, and straightforward. Similes and metaphors (such as those used by the English poet and priest John Donne (1572–1631) in his sermons)

were regarded with suspicion, and clarity and logic were considered of utmost importance. The sermons delivered by Puritan ministers were neither simple nor emotional; instead, they were lengthy, almost legal, disquisitions that required both attention and analysis.

In many ways, William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630–1650) is as much a jeremiad as it is a history. Beautifully written, it attempts to understand God's purpose in the founding of the colony and why the colony did not fulfill its original purpose. Thus, Bradford's history, like the jeremiads, becomes a call to the current generation to reclaim the greatness of the earlier times. In true Puritan fashion, Bradford looks for God's plan even in the wickedness he sees around him, speculating that "the Devil may carry a greater spite against the churches of Christ and the gospel here."

Among the great writers of history in Puritan New England was Cotton Mather. Mather's literary output was prodigious, amounting to more than 450 books and articles over his long life. His greatest work, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), is an exhaustive chronicle of the New England settlement written as a series of biographies of its saints. Mather, an uncommonly well-educated man who spoke seven languages and was the first American-born member of the British Royal Academy of Science, however, also believed in witchcraft and wrote two works about the Salem witchcraft trials: *Memorable Providences* (1689) and *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693).

During the trials, Mather wrote letters to judges and preached from his pulpit at the Old North Church in Boston declaring his belief that the devil himself was behind the possessions. Mather hoped that the crisis in Salem would actually help motivate people to return to a more active religious life. Although others apologized for their part in the trials, Mather never did, and his reputation with posterity has been damaged by his involvement in the entire episode.

In addition to sin and worldliness, Massachusetts Bay Colony was also plagued by religious dissent, perhaps most famously in the case of Anne Marbury Hutchinson (1591–1643). Hutchinson had been a follower of the great Puritan preacher, John Cotton (1584–1652), in England. She and her husband William migrated to Massachusetts in 1634, a year after Cotton did so. In Boston, Hutchinson continued with a practice she had initiated in England:

Every Sunday she met, mostly with female churchgoers, after services to discuss the sermon and to express her religious views. The essence of what she taught can be summed up in her own words: “He who has God’s grace in his heart cannot go astray.” Although that statement in itself may not sound radical, Hutchinson was tried and convicted of heresy in 1637—not only because of what she preached but also because as a woman she dared to usurp what was then considered the male prerogative of preaching.

The concept of Divine Providence is another of the many aspects of Puritanism. It is based upon the idea that God’s plan for the universe was by definition good. Thus, no matter what happened to an individual or a community, it was the duty of a saint to find the good in it. This tendency can easily be seen in the work of America’s first poet, Anne Dudley Bradstreet (1612–1672), especially in her poem “Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House” (1666). This work in particular exemplifies the tendency to interpret disaster as Divine Providence, while showing the difficulty of maintaining sincere piety in the face of catastrophe. Bradstreet knows that the possessions lost in the fire that consumed her home are God’s to give and take away. Nevertheless, she recalls those possessions lovingly:

Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,  
There lay that store I counted best.

It is this concrete detail and the very human sorrow at such a loss that appeal to modern readers. What appealed to Puritan readers, however, is the fact that Bradstreet manages to overcome her regret and place her personal disaster in the context of Divine Providence:

Then straight I ‘gin my heart to chide  
, . . . . .  
Thou hast a house on high erect,  
Framed by that mighty Architect,  
With glory richly furnished  
Stands permanent though this be fled.

Puritans also believed that God's plan for the universe could be discerned in His creation; that is, through the observation of nature, one could come to understand God and His plan. When later romantic writers and transcendentalist philosophers, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, began to advocate Pantheism, they were not far from their Puritan roots, although they did not recognize the link. Although Puritans certainly were not Pantheists, both Puritans and Pantheists tend to see the universe and all its creatures as symbolic. From Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* to Melville's *Great White Whale*, to Huck Finn's river, to Frank Norris's octopus, American writers have repeatedly written profoundly symbolic works that give their tales, whether superficially realistic or not, metaphysical dimensions.

Puritans also tended to engage in a kind of biblical interpretation called typology. Through typology, Puritan theologians and ministers would analyze a "type"—a person, event, or concept from the Old Testament—as a foreshadowing of the New Testament "anti-type," or the fulfilment of the promise of the type. For example, one could interpret the story of Jonah's three days in the belly of a whale as a type of Christ's three days in the grave. Thus, the story of Jonah prefigures Christ's resurrection. This kind of interpretive strategy was later expanded to include using Old Testament events to forecast or explain current events, as when Puritan ministers interpreted their journeys to America as parallel to—or a type of—the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. The poet Edward Taylor (1642–1729), a Puritan minister whose work was not discovered until the twentieth century, is a master in the use of typology, which he employs in the creation of some of the most beautiful religious poetry ever written. For many, Taylor's poetry has become a potent symbol of the true piety of the earliest settlers. Over the years, popular misconceptions have led to many negative stereotypes about the Puritans, not the least of which is that they were hypocrites—people more concerned with their neighbour's piety than their own—people who pretended to have religious faith in order to be socially acceptable. Though there were certainly hypocrites among the colonists, most of the original settlers were individuals of true piety. Taylor also shatters the stereotype of Puritans as prudish otherworldly types who wanted nothing to do with the pleasures of this world. Though his object is always religious, his poetry

is rich with the imagery and emotion—even the sensuality—of love. Although the object of Taylor’s love is God, the language and emotion are profoundly human. Typology, too, has become a part of the American character. Americans have, it seems, always regarded themselves much as their Puritan forbears did, as a people with a special mission ordained by God. The concept of “manifest destiny”, a phrase coined in 1845 by John L. O’Sullivan, for example, was used to justify and ennoble America’s westward expansion. Like the Puritans, who saw themselves not merely as settlers in a new land but as chosen people destined to prepare the way for Christ’s second coming, Americans saw their westward move not as land-grabbing or as a response to an exploding population but as part of God’s larger plan for the universe.

#### ***1.4 REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD***

Although American literature and culture were deeply influenced by Puritanism in the seventeenth century, the Enlightenment ideals also played a significant role in shaping American culture throughout the eighteenth century. These ideas had their roots in Renaissance humanism. In the seventeenth century, scientists and philosophers began to question religious authority and to see human reason as the ultimate tool in the discovery of truth. The movement that resulted from this shift in attitude was called the Enlightenment. Enlightenment philosophers encouraged people to doubt and question what they had been taught, to think for themselves, and to use reason and observation in analyzing the world around them. This philosophy was particularly popular among members of the new merchant class, both in Europe and in the American colonies, who themselves began to question the rights of kings to rule. The middle class began to wonder why they should continue to support such an institution. Enlightenment philosophers also believed in the separation of church and state, in the idea of basic human equality, and in the idea that the universe was governed by natural law. Enlightenment philosophers were not atheists, but their faith, known as deism, was based on what has been called a “clockmaker” deity. That is, they believed in a god who created the universe and all the laws of nature—but once that creation was accomplished, this god withdrew from



involvement and allowed the mechanism to work on its own—like a watchmaker winding up a clock. Thus, Enlightenment philosophers denied the possibility of miracles and believed that truth was to be found through scientific study of the laws of nature. They believed that human beings were born in a state of innocence and were corrupted by a corrupt society. The concept of “natural man,” articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), suggested that “all men were created equal” and that all humans possessed as their birthright the freedom to choose, a natural compassion, and the urge to perfect themselves and their surroundings. These ideas will sound familiar to every modern American because they became the heart and soul of the American Revolution and shaped the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Speaking of the revolutionary era, the first person that deserves mention is Benjamin Franklin. He embodied the new spirit of America, a combination of Puritan ideals of outer life, hard work and good conduct and the Enlightenment ideal of individual will.

Though born in Boston of Puritan parents, Franklin, while retaining all of his Puritan faith in the standard virtues, nevertheless had no patience with the Calvinist attitude that the earth was a vale of tears and suffering, so constituted to try men’s spirits for the wrath to come. Rather he believed that this life should be dedicated to the pursuit of human happiness, which is attained only through a constant cultivation of the art of getting along with one’s fellow man. For Franklin the act of worship was carried out most sincerely when it was directed towards the betterment of man in his practical, everyday human relationships. Accordingly, Franklin borrowed from Puritan teachings his famous Thirteen Virtues (temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility). In a sense Franklin’s attitude was simply a modernization of the Puritan concept of fruitful industry. But whereas the Calvinist regarded prosperity as a mark of God’s favour and a possible sign of heavenly reward, Franklin looked upon it as a means of establishing the earthly happiness of mankind (Horton, 62-63).

Thomas Jefferson is another person associated with the revolutionary period and it is not wrong to assert that he played the central part in the formation of America as a nation. He was given a place in the committee that was assigned the task of drafting the Declaration of Independence. This he rightly deserved, especially after his powerful assertion that Americans had freed themselves of the British authority by the exercise of a right “which nature had

given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice, has placed them.”

Jefferson’s ideas were characterized by a reliance on the principle of natural rights and the tool of reason. These would be used to construct a blueprint for the American nation. He lauded the American farmer: “Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens... They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its interests, by the most lasting bonds.” An assertion in his *Notes on the state of Virginia* (1787) goes thus: “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.” However, his idyllic vision of America had to face the reality of the day materialized by the institution of slavery. No doubt he condemned the institution, but his continuous insistence in his *Notes* on the need that blacks, once freed, should be “removed beyond the reach of mixture” only seal his suspected belief in the inferiority of the slave/blacks. This points to the fact that above everything else, he was a man of his times and hence was coloured by the prejudices of his times, so much so that he could not disentangle the two notions of black freedom and the insistence on removal/separation.

#### **1.4.1 SOCIAL SET UP**

A group of acts passed by the British Parliament triggered the American Revolution. The first of these was the Stamp Act. The Stamp Act of 1765 was the first internal tax levied directly on American colonists by the British government. The act, which imposed a tax on all paper documents in the colonies, came at a time when the British Empire was deep in debt from the Seven Years’ War (1756-63) and looking to its North American colonies as a revenue source. Arguing that only their own representative assemblies could tax them, the colonists insisted that the act was unconstitutional, and they resorted to mob violence to intimidate stamp collectors into resigning. Parliament repealed the Stamp Act in 1766, but issued a Declaratory Act at the same time to reaffirm its authority to pass any colonial legislation it saw fit. The issues of taxation and representation raised by the Stamp Act strained relations with the colonies to the point that ten years later, the colonists rose in armed rebellion against the British.

The Tea Act of 1773 was another of the several measures imposed on the American colonists by the heavily indebted British government in the decade leading up to the American Revolutionary War (1775-83). The act's main purpose was not to raise revenue from the colonies but to bail out the floundering East India Company, a key factor in the British economy. The British government granted the company a monopoly on the importation and sale of tea in the colonies. The colonists had never accepted the constitutionality of the duty on tea, and the Tea Act rekindled their opposition to it. Their resistance culminated in the Boston Tea Party on December 16, 1773, in which colonists boarded East India Company ships and dumped their loads of tea overboard. Parliament responded with a series of harsh measures intended to stifle colonial resistance to British rule; two years later the war began.

#### **1.4.2 LITERARY SCENE**

The literature of the period encapsulated the new spirit of America. From Franklin to Jefferson to Patrick Henry, the writings of the period clearly suggested an influence of Enlightenment ideals, Puritanism and the Great Awakening. J. Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, in his *Letters from an American Farmer* published in 1782 asked the question "What then is the American, this new man?" In response to his own question, he suggested that "the American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions."

Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791) tells an amazing tale, one that has attained the status of myth. Every American knows the essence of the story: From humble beginnings, Franklin rose to international prominence through sheer hard work and integrity. Franklin's story is often cited as the very model of the "American dream," and there is a strong sense that it could have happened nowhere but in America. While the British essentially ignored their colonies for many years until they needed new tax revenues in the 1760s, Americans developed their own culture, which did not include the ideas of inherited nobility and strict social hierarchies. Franklin's origins would have sharply limited his ability to rise in status had he been born in England, for example. Yet another reason Franklin's story is so quintessentially American is that his life and thinking unite two dominant streams in American thought: Puritan ideas of morality and Enlightenment philosophy (Meyers, 47).

With regard to Jefferson, Meyers writes: “Jefferson was truly a person of the Enlightenment, a person who valued human reason beyond all other abilities, who was infinitely interested in the world around him, and who devoted his life to acquiring as much knowledge as possible.” Jefferson’s 1774 pamphlet entitled “A Summary View of the Rights of British America” enumerated “the united complaints of his majesty’s subjects in America,” adding that “The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time: the hand of force may destroy, but cannot disjoin them.” He is here influenced by Locke’s concept of natural rights, the rights one possesses through one’s birth as a human being.

The spirit of Enlightenment, with its doctrine of the natural rights of man, was not only restricted to the intellectual and political trends of the eighteenth century. It had a corresponding effect on religion too. In America, Unitarianism and Transcendentalism symbolized the radical departures from accepted norms of religious and intellectual outlook. We will now discuss both of these.

### ***1.5 FROM THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION TILL THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR***

After the Revolution, the thirteen colonies were united under the Articles of Confederation. By 1787, however, it was clear that the national government under the Articles had too little power to be effective, a “shadow without substance,” as George Washington said. Thus, in 1787, a convention was convened to draft a new constitution for what would become the United States of America. Unfortunately, the framers of the Constitution did not “remember the ladies.” Nor did they, as some of the delegates to the convention hoped, abolish the institution of slavery. For example, in his notes on the discussion about slavery that occurred on August 22, James Madison (1751–1836) writes that slave trafficking is “unreasonable” and “inconsistent with the principles of the revolution and dishonorable to the American character.” Still, several southern states refused to join the new union unless slavery was sanctioned by the Constitution. Because southern states in particular were leery of giving up their rights to a national government, several plans were proposed to effect a

compromise between northern and southern states. The bicameral legislature was one such compromise. Whereas the Senate was constructed to give each state equal voting power by giving each two senators, the House of Representatives ensured that the people of each state would be represented, with more populous states having a greater number of representatives. Interestingly, the words slave and slavery do not appear in the Constitution. The compromises that were made with respect to slavery included allowing the importation of slaves into the United States until 1808 and to allow each slave—referred to as “all other persons” (that is, other than free men)—to be counted as three fifths of a person for the purposes of electing representatives to the House. Indians were excluded from the count. The Constitution also allowed for persons “held to Service or Labor in one state, under the Laws whereof, escaping into another” to be returned—meaning that fugitive slaves had to be returned to their “owners.” Although the Bill of Rights, which was added to the Constitution in 1789, does not address slavery, it does say that no person could “be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.” Unfortunately, at the time, slaves were considered property—not people—so this clause protected slave owners, not the victims of slavery. The Constitution framers, however, in omitting the words slaves and slavery from the Constitution had their eyes on history. Although those who opposed slavery may have lost the battle, they won the war. The words did not appear in the Constitution and the institution was eventually eliminated from the land.

### **1.5.1 MYTH OF THE OLD SOUTH**

People in the new south refused to adjust to the changes consequent upon the Civil War in the 1860s. They remained misfits and generally delusional. The Old South, in imagination, was a land of prosperous plantations and happy blacks, large white houses with window glass, cultured people who could read and write, music and literature, and a stable economy based on cotton. It was actually one of the most unpleasant and hellish societies ever invented by man, and one well on the way to dissolution when it was destroyed in fire and war. Once slavery was abolished, people of the old south remained unwilling to adapt to the changes that had come as a result of the change of scene from an economy

based on agriculture and plantations to that of industries. This reluctance to accept the post bellum south is captured very beautifully and symbolically in the character of Blanche du Bois in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), with the character mentioned finding it difficult in coming to terms with reality, which ultimately ruins her.

## **1.6 UNITARIANISM**

Unitarianism, as originally formulated, was ruled by the spirit of rationality. The rational temper revived and gave added force to certain departures from authoritarian interpretations of the scriptures from the beginning. The Unitarians decided that the fall of Adam did not involve the whole human race, and that man is prone to sin but also capable of working for their own salvation by faith, Christian rituals and by Christ's teachings. This doctrine encouraged individualism and believed in the individual's scope of development. Unitarianism failed to recognize that religion was a deeply felt psychological experience and attempted to approximate the spirit of scientific enquiry in its approach to the Bible as the word of God. For the Unitarians Christianity was not a series of revelations but a way of life. They upheld the following five ideas:

1. The Fatherhood of God.
2. The Brotherhood of Man.
3. The Leadership of Jesus.
4. Salvation by character.
5. Progress of mankind onward and upward forever.

The Unitarians reject the Trinitarian concept of God as being three persons in one- Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It even more radically holds that Jesus was a man and hence not divine. They also believed that the Bible was written by man and therefore not infallible. There are no absolute states of salvation or damnation. The fatherhood of God is emphasized and as He is the universal father, all men are brothers. For them sin is a matter of mortality involving human relationship and is therefore not an offence on God.

The Bible is not inspired but is one of the many possible avenues to truth and is read for ethics rather than for theology. The church is a purely human institution and no one church has a monopoly on the means of salvation nor is there any mystical “church of the spirit” behind all the diverse institutions. If it is to be believed that God created man in his own image, then it follows naturally that man partakes of divine goodness. Hence the lives of noble men provide the greatest moral force on earth. It was indeed a liberal version of religion and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are regarded simply as memorials. In some Unitarian churches however these were altogether omitted for they are deemed to be reminiscent of the theological concepts of election and vicarious atonement.

The Calvinists condemned this form of religion as not even Christian. In sharp contrast to it, this mode of worship came to be preferred by some of the wealthiest and most conservative of Boston citizens. The agonized soul searchings, anticipations of wrath and hell fire of Puritanism were replaced by a coolly rational approach. Textual criticism of the Bible was not uncommon under this mode of thinking.

The Unitarianism of the period in which it started i.e. 1785-1819 cannot be compared with what happened with it subsequently up to the Civil War. Many younger ministers became dissatisfied with the initial approach, which was to be called by Emerson later as “pale negations”. After 1819, the Unitarian leadership was taken up by William Ellery Channing. It was through his sermons and writings that he enunciated three basic principles:

- (i) God is all loving and pervading
- (ii) The presence of God in all men makes them divine
- (iii) The true worship of God is good will to all men.

Channing did more than revitalize Unitarianism. He laid the moral and spiritual bases for transcendentalism, the chief spokesman of which was to be Emerson.

## ***1.7 TRANSCENDENTALISM***

Transcendentalism in America is a philosophical and literary movement centered in Boston and Concord which remained prominent in the New England

scene from 1836 until just before the Civil War. Inaugurated by a Unitarian discussion group that came to be called the Transcendental Club, it included at one time or another Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Frederick Henry Hedge, W.E. Channing, W.H. Channing, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, George Ripley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Thoreau, and Jones Very. Here is what Abrams describes regarding the concept of Transcendentalism, its sources and its principal exponents:

Modern historians of the movement take as its central exponents Emerson (especially in *Nature*, "The American Scholar," The Divinity School Address, "The Over Soul," and "Self Reliance") and Thoreau (Specially in *Walden* and his journals) The term Transcendentalism, as pointed out by Emerson in his lecture "The Transcendentalist" (1841), was taken from the writings of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant had confined the expression "transcendental knowledge" to the cognizance of those forms and categories- such as space, time, quantity, causality- which, in his view are imposed on whatever we perceive by the constitution of the human mind. Emerson and others, however, extended the concept of transcendental knowledge, in a way whose validity Kant had specifically denied, to include an intuitive cognizance of moral and other truths that transcend the limits of sense experience (Abrams, 319).

The triumph of feeling over reason, the exultation of individual over society, the impatience at any kind of restraint or bondage or custom, the new and thrilling delight in nature- all these were in some measure characteristic of the American counterpart of the movement of which Wordsworth and Coleridge were the center in England and which inspired German idealist philosophy in Europe. In New England however, Romanticism assumed a predominantly moral and philosophical tone, the former having its foundations in the persistence of Puritan Idealism, the latter springing largely from the writings of Emerson.

The philosophical foundation of Transcendentalism was built from these sources:

- Neo Platonism
- German idealist philosophy



- Certain eastern mythical writings (which were introduced in the Boston area in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.)

From the first comes the belief of the importance of spirit over man (matter) and the ascending hierarchy of spiritual values rising to absolute Good, Truth and Beauty. From the second, transmitted chiefly through the writings of Coleridge and Carlyle came the emphasis on intuition as opposed to intellect as a means of piercing to the real essence of things, and the third lifted the bodily from an entirely alien culture and civilization. The last contributed to the kind of mysticism that helped to bridge over the weak spots in a tenuous and unsystematic philosophy.

In analyzing the contributions of transcendentalism to the life of the Americans in general, we would need to confine ourselves to a limited body of people. This being said, it must also be mentioned that Emerson travelled widely spreading its ideas despite the movement centered largely in and around Boston. However, to many of the American masses he was an unknown name and face and so were his ideas. The leaders of the movement formed a loosely united group and hence their views were individualistic.

Transcendentalism was an ethical guide to life for a young nation. It was a powerful call to break free from the confines of customs and traditions. This was an effort to move forward towards the development of a new and distinctive American culture. It insisted on the essential worth and dignity of the individual and in this, it was truly democratic in nature. It also practiced idealism, something which was necessary keeping in mind the rapidly expanding economy.

Transcendentalism, again, was never a systematic philosophy. It borrowed from many sources and reconciliations were few. A more serious criticism directed at transcendentalism follows that it resulted in rampant individualism than in a democracy of mutual helpfulness and equal opportunity. Outside the small Concord circle, the average people filtered out for themselves merely those elements and principles which justified their acquisitiveness.

Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, above anything else, signified a radical departure from the conservatism of the earlier centuries. Though it did

not persist for long, it went a long way in shaping the intellectual and social strands of the time that followed

### **1.8 SUMMING UP**

We have included in our discussion the various myths of origin pertaining to the American culture. Analyzing the myths, we have tried to conclude the absence of any veritable history propelled such explanations on the part of the Americans. From myths to the landing of the first Europeans, we have described the prejudices attached to natives by the Europeans and the potentialities of the new land. Religion forms an important part of any culture and the European influence is undeniable in this respect. From the early Puritanism to the Enlightenment philosophy, religious beliefs and intellectual thoughts have moved through phases to form a new strand of thought that is distinctly American. In our discussion therefore, we can notice a change in the outlook of American people under the leadership of certain intellectuals and writers. Individual contributions have been traced right from Mather, Hutchinson and Sewall to the people who directly influenced the Revolution like Franklin and Jefferson.



### **1.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

1. What is the importance of myths in American history? Give a detailed analysis of the American myths of origin.
2. Outline the importance of the colonial period in shaping the future of latter day America with a comment on their religion.
3. Show the literary preoccupations of New England from the colonial to the Revolutionary period.
4. How did the Enlightenment ideals influence the Revolutionary period in America.
5. Comment on the philosophical movements in America of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



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## **MODULE II: RALPH WALDO EMERSON AND WALT WHITMAN**

## **UNIT 2: “THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR”**

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Learning Objectives
- 2.2 Ralph Waldo Emerson: Life and Works
- 2.3 Summary of ‘The American Scholar’
- 2.4 Transcendentalism and Ralph Waldo Emerson
- 2.5 Reliance on Nature and the individual self
- 2.6 The American Genius
- 2.7 Declaration of American cultural independence
- 2.8 Major Theme
- 2.9 Summing Up
- 2.10 Assessment Questions
- 2.11 References and Recommended Readings

### **2.0 INTRODUCTION**

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman can be called two architects of American intellectual culture who dreamt of a country based on philosophy of insight and individual intuition rather than tradition that is followed without innovation.

Poet, essayist, lecturer and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, is celebrated as the father of Transcendentalism — a belief system in which spirituality transcends the physical. His iconic speech “The American Scholar” delivered in 1837, is commonly considered the American “Intellectual Declaration of Independence.” His seminal essay on self-reliance remains one of history’s most important works on individuality and reliance on one’s spirit.

### **2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

/By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- familiarize yourself with the life and works of Emerson
- acquaint yourself with Emerson’s philosophy of transcendentalism

- grasp the basic concepts of the text ‘The American Scholar’
- understand Emerson’s idea of reliance on Nature and individual self and his concept of Genius

## **2.2 RALPH WALDO EMERSON: LIFE AND WORKS**

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on May 25, 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1821, he took over as director of his brother’s school for girls. In 1823, he wrote the poem "Good-Bye." In 1832, he became a Transcendentalist, leading to the later essays "Self-Reliance" and "The American Scholar." Emerson continued to write and lecture into the late 1870s. He died on April 27, 1882, in Concord, Massachusetts.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on May 25, 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the son of William and Ruth (Haskins) Emerson; his father was a clergyman, as many of his male ancestors had been. He attended the Boston Latin School, followed by Harvard University (from which he graduated in 1821) and the Harvard School of Divinity. He was licensed as a minister in 1826 and ordained to the Unitarian church in 1829.

Emerson married Ellen Tucker in 1829. When she died of tuberculosis in 1831, he was grief-stricken. Her death, added to his own recent crisis of faith, caused him to resign from the clergy.

In 1832 Emerson travelled to Europe, where he met with literary figures Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. When he returned home in 1833, he began to lecture on topics of spiritual experience and ethical living. He moved to Concord, Massachusetts, in 1834 and married Lydia Jackson in 1835.

Emerson’s early preaching had often touched on the personal nature of spirituality. Now he found kindred spirits in a circle of writers and thinkers who lived in Concord, including Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau and Amos Bronson Alcott (father of Louisa May Alcott).

In the 1830s Emerson gave lectures that he afterward published in essay form. These essays, particularly “Nature” (1836), embodied his newly developed philosophy. “The American Scholar,” based on a lecture that he gave in 1837,

encouraged American authors to find their own style instead of imitating their foreign predecessors.

Emerson became known as the central figure of his literary and philosophical group, now known as the American Transcendentalists. These writers shared a key belief that each individual could transcend, or move beyond, the physical world of the senses into deeper spiritual experience through free will and intuition. In this school of thought, God was not remote and unknowable; believers understood God and themselves by looking into their own souls and by feeling their own connection to nature.

The 1840s were productive years for Emerson. He founded and co-edited the literary magazine *The Dial*, and he published two volumes of essays in 1841 and 1844. Some of the essays, including “Self-Reliance,” “Friendship” and “Experience,” number among his best-known works. His four children, two sons and two daughters, were born in the 1840s.

Emerson’s later work, such as *The Conduct of Life* (1860), favoured a more moderate balance between individual nonconformity and broader societal concerns. He advocated for the abolition of slavery and continued to lecture across the country throughout the 1860s. By the 1870s the aging Emerson was known as “the sage of Concord”. Despite his failing health, he continued to write, publishing *Society and Solitude* in 1870 and a poetry collection titled *Parnassus* in 1874.

Emerson died on April 27, 1882, in Concord. His beliefs and his idealism were strong influences on the work of his protégé Henry David Thoreau and his contemporary Walt Whitman, as well as numerous others. His writings are considered major documents of 19th-century American literature, religion and thought.

### **2.3 SUMMERY OF ‘THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR’**

Originally titled "An Oration Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, [Massachusetts,] August 31, 1837," Emerson delivered what is now referred to as "The American Scholar" essay as a speech to Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa Society, an honorary society of male college students with unusually high grade point averages. Emerson published the speech under its

original title as a pamphlet later that same year and republished it in 1838. In 1841, he included the essay in his book *Essays*, but changed its title to "The American Scholar" to enlarge his audience to all college students, as well as other individuals interested in American letters. Placed in his *Man Thinking: An Oration* (1841), the essay found its final home in *Nature; Addresses, and Lectures* (1849).

The text begins with an introduction (paragraphs 1-7) in which Emerson explains that his intent is to explore the scholar as one function of the whole human being: The scholar is "Man Thinking." The remainder of the essay is organized into four sections, the first three discussing the influence of nature (paragraphs 8 and 9), the influence of the past and books (paragraphs 10-20), and the influence of action (paragraphs 21-30) on the education of the thinking man. In the last section (paragraphs 31-45), Emerson considers the duties of the scholar and then discusses his views of America in his own time.

Emerson opens "The American Scholar" with greetings to the college president and members of the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College. Pointing out the differences between this gathering and the athletic and dramatic contests of ancient Greece, the poetry contests of the Middle Ages, and the scientific academies of nineteenth-century Europe, he voices a theme that draws the entire essay together: the notion of an independent American intelligentsia that will no longer depend for authority on its European past. He sounds what one critic contends is "the first clarion of an American literary renaissance," a call for Americans to seek their creative inspirations using America as their source, much like Walt Whitman would do in *Leaves of Grass* eighteen years later. In the second paragraph, Emerson announces his theme as "The American Scholar" not a particular individual but an abstract ideal.

The remaining five paragraphs relate an allegory that underlies the discussion to follow. According to an ancient fable, there was once only "One Man," who then was divided into many men so that society could work more efficiently. Ideally, society labors together — each person doing his or her task — so that it can function properly. However, society has now subdivided to so great an extent that it no longer serves the good of its citizens. And the scholar, being a part of society, has degenerated also. Formerly a "Man Thinking," the scholar is



now "a mere thinker," a problem that Emerson hopes to correct successfully by re-familiarizing his audience with how the true scholar is educated and what the duties of this scholar are.

In these two paragraphs comprising the first section on how a scholar should be educated, Emerson envisions nature as a teacher that instructs individuals who observe the natural world to see — eventually — how similar their minds and nature are. The first similarity he discusses concerns the notion of circular power — a theme familiar to readers of the *Nature* essay — found in nature and in the scholar's spirit. Both nature and the scholar's spirit, "whose beginning, whose ending he never can find — so entire, so boundless," are eternal.

Order is another similarity — as it is in *Nature* — between the scholar and nature. At first, the mind views a chaotic and infinite reality of individual facts, but then it begins to classify these facts into categories, to make comparisons and distinctions. A person discovers nature's laws and can understand them because they are similar to the operations of the intellect. Eventually, we realize that nature and the soul — both proceeding from what Emerson terms "one root" — are parallel structures that mirror each other (Emerson's term for "parallel" may be misleading; he says that nature is the "opposite" of the soul). So, a greater knowledge of nature results in a greater understanding of the self, and vice versa. The maxims "Know thyself" and "Study nature" are equivalent: They are two ways of saying the same thing.

Emerson devotes much of his discussion to the second influence on the mind, past learning — or, as he expresses it, the influence of books. In the first three paragraphs of this section, he emphasizes that books contain the learning of the past; however, he also says that these books pose a great danger. While it is true that books transform mere facts ("short-lived actions") into vital truths ("immortal thoughts"), every book is inevitably a partial truth, biased by society's standards when it was written. Each age must create its own books and find its own truths for itself.

Following this call for each age's creating truth, Emerson dwells on other dangers in books. They are dangerous, he says, because they tempt the scholar

away from original thought. Excessive respect for the brilliance of past thinkers can discourage us from exploring new ideas and seeking individualized truths.

The worst example of slavish deference to past thinkers is the bookworm, a pedant who focuses all thought on trivial matters of scholarship and ignores large, universal ideas. This type of person becomes passive and uncreative, and is the antithesis of Emerson's ideal of the creative imagination: "Man hopes. Genius creates. To create, — to create, — is the proof of a divine presence." The non-creative bookworm is more spiritually distanced from God — and, therefore, from nature — than is the thinker of original thoughts.

But the genius, too, can suffer from the undue influence of books. Emerson's example of this kind of sufferer is the English dramatic poets, who, he says, have been "Shakespearized" for two hundred years. Rather than producing new, original texts and thoughts, they mimic Shakespeare's writings. Citing an Arabic proverb that says that one fig tree fertilizes another — just like one author can inspire another — Emerson suggests that true scholars should resort to books only when their own creative genius dries up or is blocked.

The last three paragraphs of this section refer to the pleasures and benefits of reading, provided it is done correctly. There is a unique pleasure in reading. Because ancient authors thought and felt as people do today, books defeat time, a phenomenon that Emerson argues is evidence of the transcendental oneness of human minds. Qualifying his previous insistence on individual creation, he says that he never underestimates the written word: Great thinkers are nourished by any knowledge, even that in books, although it takes a remarkably independent mind to read critically at all times. This kind of reading mines the essential vein of truth in an author while discarding the trivial or biased.

Emerson concedes that there are certain kinds of reading that are essential to an educated person: History, science, and similar subjects, which must be acquired by laborious reading and study. Foremost, schools must foster creativity rather than rely on rote memorization of texts: ". . . [schools] can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create."

In this third section, Emerson comments on the scholar's need for action, for physical labor. He rejects the notion that the scholar should not engage in practical action. Action, while secondary to thought, is still necessary: "Action is

with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential." Furthermore, not to act — declining to put principle into practice — is cowardly. The transcendental concept of the world as an expression of ourselves makes action the natural duty of a thinking person.

Emerson observes the difference between recent actions and past actions. Over time, he says, a person's past deeds are transformed into thought, but recent acts are too entangled with present feelings to undergo this transformation. He compares "the recent act" to an insect larva, which eventually metamorphoses into a butterfly — symbolic of action becoming thought.

Finally, he praises labor as valuable in and of itself, for such action is the material creatively used by the scholar. An active person has a richer existence than a scholar who merely undergoes a second-hand existence through the words and thoughts of others. The ideal life has "undulation" — a rhythm that balances, or alternates, thought and action, labor and contemplation: "A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think." This cycle creates a person's character that is far superior to the fame or the honor too easily expected by a mere display of higher learning.

After Emerson has discussed how nature, books, and action educate the scholar, he now addresses the scholar's obligations to society. First, he considers these obligations in general, abstract terms; then he relates them to the particular situation of the American scholar.

The scholar's first and most important duty is to develop unflinching self-trust and a mind that will be a repository of wisdom for other people. This is a difficult task, Emerson says, because the scholar must endure poverty, hardship, tedium, solitude, and other privations while following the path of knowledge. Self-sacrifice is often called for, as demonstrated in Emerson's examples of two astronomers who spent many hours in tedious and solitary observation of space in order to make discoveries that benefited mankind. Many readers will wonder just how satisfying the reward really is when Emerson acknowledges that the scholar "is to find consolation in exercising the highest functions of human nature."

The true scholar is dedicated to preserving the wisdom of the past and is obligated to communicating the noblest thoughts and feelings to the public. This last duty means that the scholar — "who raises himself from private

considerations, and breathes and lives on public illustrious thoughts" — must always remain independent in thinking and judgment, regardless of popular opinion, fad, notoriety, or expediency. Because the scholar discovers universal ideas, those held by the universal human mind, he can communicate with people of all classes and ages: "He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart."

Although he appears to lead a reclusive and benign life, the scholar must be brave because he deals in ideas, a dangerous currency. Self-trust is the source of courage and can be traced to the transcendental conviction that the true thinker sees all thought as one; universal truth is present in all people, although not all people are aware of it. Instead of thinking individually, we live vicariously through our heroes; we seek self-worth through others when we should search for it in ourselves. The noblest ambition is to improve human nature by fulfilling our individual natures.

Emerson concludes the essay by observing that different ages in Western civilization, which he terms the Classic, the Romantic, and the Reflective (or the Philosophical) periods, have been characterized by different dominant ideas, and he acknowledges that he has neglected speaking about the importance of differences between ages while speaking perhaps too fervently about the transcendental unity of all human thought.

Emerson now proposes an evolutionary development of civilization, comparable to the development of a person from childhood to adulthood. The present age — the first half of the 1800s — is an age of criticism, especially self-criticism. Although some people find such criticism to be an inferior philosophy, Emerson believes that it is valid and important. Initiating a series of questions, he asks whether discontent with the quality of current thought and literature is such a bad thing; he answers that it is not. Dissatisfaction, he says, marks a transitional period of growth and evolution into new knowledge: "If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; . . . This [present] time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it."

Emerson applauds the views of English and German romantic poets like Wordsworth and Goethe, who find inspiration and nobility in the lives and work of common people. Instead of regarding only royal and aristocratic subjects as

appropriate for great and philosophical literature, the Romantic writers reveal the poetry and sublimity in the lives of lower-class and working people. Their writing is full of life and vitality, and it exemplifies the transcendental doctrine of the unity of all people. Ironically, we should remember that at the beginning of the essay, Emerson advocated Americans' throwing off the European mantle that cloaks their own culture. Here, he distinguishes between a European tradition that celebrates the lives of common people, and one that celebrates only the monarchical rule of nations: "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe."

Making special reference to the Swedish philosopher and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, Emerson contends that although Swedenborg has not received his due recognition, he revealed the essential connection between the human mind and the natural world, the fundamental oneness of humans and nature. Emerson finds much inspiration for his own thinking and writing in the doctrines of Swedenborg.

In his long, concluding paragraph, Emerson dwells on the romantic ideal of the individual. This fundamentally American concept, which he develops at much greater length in the essay "Self-Reliance," is America's major contribution to the world of ideas. The scholar must be independent, courageous, and original; in thinking and acting, the scholar must demonstrate that America is not the timid society it is assumed to be. We must refuse to be mere purveyors of the past's wisdom: ". . . this confidence in the unsearched might of man, belongs by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar," who will create a native, truly American culture.

## ***2.4 TRANSCENDENTALISM AND RALPH WALDO EMERSON***

To talk about American literature is to talk about Emerson's philosophy which is never complete without relating to the Transcendentalist Movement. In the previous unit you have learnt about the general philosophy of Transcendentalism. Now we are going to discuss how this movement received immense importance in the hands of transcendentalists like Emerson. You have already learnt that in religion, philosophy, and also in literature Transcendentalism

reflected a liberal, forward-looking, reformatory outlook. Transcendentalism was an ethical guide to life for a young nation. It was a powerful call to break free from the confines of customs and traditions. It believed in the doctrine of self-reliance, significance of every individual and free action of intuition that is not restricted to any specific law of action. This was an effort to move forward towards the development of a new and distinctive American culture. It insisted on the essential worth and dignity of the individual and in this, it was truly democratic in nature. It also practiced idealism, something which was necessary keeping in mind the rapidly expanding economy.

It was the publication of Emerson's first book *Nature* in 1836 that one can relate formally to the setting up of the Transcendental Club in Concord. From 1836 till 1847 transcendental club actively participated in shaping political, religious and cultural life of America.

Emerson, as a transcendentalist believed in individuals having great potential to play crucial role in bringing change and reformation in all spheres of American society. To justify his views he looked forward to the world of nature as the best teacher of a human mind. The unity and harmony that the world of Nature displays should be well adopted by human beings too to achieve the highest level of perfection. In *The American Scholar* Emerson identifies nature as the first and foremost influence upon the scholar. He believed that the great man subsumes his time and was convinced that a man can achieve both energy and insight beyond the familiar by drawing upon the life of the universe itself.

Margaret Fuller, a member of the transcendentalist club and a contemporary of Emerson said in her critical assessment of Emerson's essays, "If New England may be regarded as a chief mental focus to the new world, and many symptoms seem to give her this place, as to other centers the characteristics of the heart and lungs to the body politics, if we may believe, as the writer does believe, that what is to be acted out in the country at large is, most frequently first indicated there, as all the phenomena of the nervous system in the fantasies of the brain, we may hail as an auspicious omen the influence Mr Emerson has there obtained which is deeply rooted, increasing, and, over the younger portion of the community, far greater than that of any person".

## 2.5 RELIANCE ON NATURE AND THE INDIVIDUAL SELF

The world of Nature and her perfect coordination is key to most of the Emersonian philosophy. His great book *Nature* (1836) itself is the outcome of his own sense of security Emerson gained from the world of nature. Most of his philosophical essays ‘Self-reliance’, ‘The American Scholar’, his poems, lectures have their roots in the world of Nature and her unifying operational system. Nature’s law that lies in the concept of unity in diversity is taken as a role model by Emerson in his dream of an ideal America. Reliance on Nature for creation of confident, self-reliant individuals is what Emerson sought for.

Emerson envisions nature as a teacher that instructs individuals. It renders nourishment, spirituality, language and discipline which are integral to a unified mind. In his concept of a scholar or genius who is responsible for the creation of a morally and spiritually vibrant society all these elements of Nature have tremendous role to play. Emerson is of view that we all see the beauty in the world of nature and let it go as everyday phenomenon. But to understand the perfection of every object in nature one needs contemplation. When beauty is intellectually contemplated, it transforms into new creation. Emerson believes that every person who learns to read the unity in nature’s world becomes more and more disciplined. Such a discipline offered by nature leads to idealism. Human beings find him/herself going towards the world of spirituality from the world of commodity or materialism. Such people can contribute to the construction of a society that is culturally enriched and it is where culture begins.

In Emersonian concept reliance on nature means developing supreme individualism as nature teaches us to be oneself, to rely more on our spirit than anything else. The human mind with individualism can think originally rather than conventionally or traditionally. Emerson was critical to his age regarding people’s tendency to succumb to the past, bearing the burden of history that devalues the present, discourages originality, and casts doubt on the individual’s potential. He, again and again stressed on growing individualism within oneself. In his definition of scholar or genius whom he considers as the founder of his dream America, Emerson sees the ability for reinterpreting past so that the future can be innovatively designed. He wanted his age to escape from spiritually

impoverishing retrospection and be reawakened to a sense of its own responsibility to Spirit by inculcating individualism. The human who transcends past expressions which constitute our historical or cultural heritage and shows her or his unique individuality by expressing original thought, can only transcend a culture. Individualism is synonym to self-realization and self-knowledge which is most essential for independence from past or stagnant historical accounts in which most of the cultures live. Emerson's greatest faith is on such individual self that can lead America to its summit.

## **2.6 THE AMERICAN GENIUS**

In his dream of a culturally independent America the role of 'Genius' plays pivotal. Emerson is confident that America, with its futuristic view, is capable of creating many genius which in turn will make it a self sufficient nation. The concept of 'genius' is key to Emersonian thought and in several essays one can find this expression. You should always remember that the concept is very differently use by Emerson than the one we understand in our everyday life. Normally a genius means a person having high level of intelligence, who is far superior to the average. A genius acts as a genesis for new ideas, can see beyond ordinary human beings and finds solution for every problem an ordinary person fails to do.

But in Emersonian thought a genius is a combination of both external and internal components. He relates the idea to nature, people, thought, and action. The definition of Emerson's genius cannot not be restricted to only one of these components, rather one must examine his thoughts as a whole. More than external, the internal components of genius, that is the capability of one's personal struggle with creation and originality find expression in Emersonian idea.

Basically, Emerson's genius is an entity who is endowed with tremendous originality. A genius does not accept anything blindly. S/he is capable of redefining past and reworking on previous ideas until they are more functional to society or to a person on their own. They are the creators of worthwhile out of failed things and ideas. In "The Poet" Emerson defines genius as "the activity which repairs the decays of things, whether wholly or partly of a material and



finite kind” (190). In Emerson’s view of originality, being oneself is the most original thing possible. He is of view that the world is basically ruled by already existed ideas. The key to be original in this situation is to be oneself, believing in one’s own inner capabilities. By being oneself a genius not only creates and recreates ideas but also inspires other people to be original. A Genius is or needs to be rooted in people’s mind and thought. Emerson’s genius is moulded out of the past. Genius is a confident entity because of its focus in the future despite believing in history and thus genius is a fine combination of using history with a constructive and futuristic mind.

Emerson saw future of America in the hands of the youth. Thus when Emerson refers to “the Genius” he refers to an individual, one of youth and potential. Because he believes that a genius is involved in the process of the creation of a society, a youth with tremendous potential and zeal can play the role of a unifying agent amongst inhabitants of the society. He or she can work to better everything in a given community. With their originality they focus on the creation of new organizations of the external world which are improved from past ideas. Thus, Emerson’s idea of young genius is an action rather than a thought.

## ***2.7 DECLARATION OF AMERICAN CULTURAL INDEPENDENCE***

“The American Scholar” is considered as a milestone piece of work because of its original concepts of scholar or genius as a person with unique individualism and intuition. These are the qualities that can make America a face of the universe before other nations. Oliver Wendell Holmes called Emerson's lecture on the American scholar "Our intellectual Declaration of Independence;" and James Russell Lowell noted that while Americans had been politically independent of England since the Revolution, they "were still socially and intellectually moored to English thought till Emerson cut the cable." In other words both the authors credited Emerson for showing true path of freedom and independence for America that is beyond physical independence alone.

In his lectures and essays Emerson dwells on his idea of the America as a face to the world rather than a timid entity dwelling on the ideas of the rest of the world. In essays like ‘Self-Reliance’ and ‘The American Scholar’ he advocates in the creation of independent, courageous, and original human spirits, spirits which

in thinking and acting, demonstrate that America is not the passive society it is assumed to be. Emerson's greatest contribution is his idea of self-reliance and creation of individual self by means of learnings from the world of nature which teaches us to understand its law of unity in the midst of diversity. Emerson dreamt of a culturally independent America with its own individual and futuristic thoughts. For this he suggested to reconstruct the past constructively instead of following it as an ever-pervading law. In 'The American Scholar' he says "We must refuse to be mere purveyors of the past's wisdom: ". . . this confidence in the unsearched might of man, belongs by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar," who will create a native, truly American culture.

Emerson's analysis of the great poets and authors of the era is iconic to his concept of individualism and oneness of all that is essential to create an America with the idea of cultural unification. Emerson applauds the views of English and German romantic poets like Wordsworth and Goethe, who find inspiration and nobility in the lives and work of common people and exemplifies the transcendental doctrine of the unity of all people which is most essential for a unified America. "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe" is what Emerson says advocating romantics' transcendental doctrine of the unity of all people.

Emerson dreams of an America that has achieved spiritual maturity with equality and justice as the hallmark and not an America bent on the selfish principle of "every man for himself." The concept of America as the land of opportunity should not be used for selfish means of individual upliftment, rather as a means meant for every citizen. The understanding of equality of opportunity should not be subject to the liability of law, but should be embedded in the minds and hearts of all Americans. Only then America can be called truly independent.

## **2.8 MAJOR THEMES**

### **INFLUENCES ON THE MIND: NATURE, BOOKS, AND ACTION**

Emerson saw nature as the first and most important influence on human thought. He observed that we originally classify things in nature (i.e., biologically)

as separate from one another. However, after dealing with these classifications for so long, Emerson found that our minds begin to see more and more common patterns between things we used to consider different, rendering any further classification unnecessary.

Emerson also found the past to be a tremendous influencer of thought, or more specifically, the books that bring the past to us. 'Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst,' he claimed, urging that scholars should use books solely as inspiration and never as idols to be glorified and endlessly copied. He does make the distinction, though, that reading books on history and science is essential to scholarly endeavours.

The final influence on our intellectual faculties, action, is listed last for a reason and that's because Emerson and others didn't find it nearly as important to thought. However, he did acknowledge that it is essential, focusing on the value of experiences in the life of a thinker. He even went so far as to say the greatest value of action to the mind is like that of books, and better, since actions are also a great source of inspiration and 'Thinking (itself) is a partial act.'

### **THE SCHOLAR'S DUTIES**

Emerson thought the office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances. However, he also thought the only way one could do this was by living a self-directed life. This requires an enormous amount of self-confidence, which Emerson warned the scholar would never have unless he began to think for himself.

For the remainder of his speech, the philosopher condemned contemporary American society as too greedy and too dependent on predominantly European thinkers to direct their own thoughts. Ultimately, Emerson believed the American scholar exists in the heart of every citizen, and that this self-possessed intellectual force could help the country transcend its shortcomings.

## **2.9 SUMMING UP**

Emerson's essay *The American Scholar* which we have discussed in this unit is considered iconic as it bears his concept of individualism and oneness of all that is essential to create an America with the idea of cultural unification. After reading

this unit you have learnt how Emerson gave foremost importance to individualism for the creation of a nation that is not relied on its past mistakes. Self reliance and reliance on Nature are two important aspects that this essay reflects which we had elaborated in details.

Best effort has been given to present a comprehensive idea of the essay. Students are also requested to read the text of the essay for better understanding of the topics discussed.



## 2.10 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Summarise the salient matters discussed in the American Scholar.
2. How does Emerson dream of an America that is culturally independent entity.
3. What are the characteristics of an American Scholar or genius? How, according to Emerson, the scholar can acquire these qualities?
4. What idea of self-reliance do you find from the reading of the American Scholar?



## 2.11 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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## UNIT 3: WHITMAN: EXCERPTS FROM THE PREFACE TO *LEAVES OF GRASS*

### UNIT STRUCTURE

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Learning Objectives
- 3.2 Walt Whitman: Life and Works
- 3.3 Summary of 'Preface to *Leaves of Grass*'
- 3.4 Major aspects of the 'Preface'
  - 3.4.1 The Role of the American poet
  - 3.4.2 An American voice in Poetry
- 3.5 Summing Up
- 3.6 Assessment Questions
- 3.7 References and Recommended Readings

### 3.0 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we are going to discuss about one of the most prominent poets of American Literature, Walt Whitman. Whitman's poem collection *Leaves of Grass* is considered as 'The Bible of Democracy'. Before reaching the iconic status, 'The Preface' experienced a lot of set back as during its early days itself the work had to face public rejection. Whitman, during his life time never allowed the complete text of 1855 to be reprinted in America, nor did he permit the Preface to be reissued in any form in an American edition of his poems. In due course the Preface went through many revisions till it took the form of poetry where the prose disappeared. The ultimate transformation of the Preface into poetry was not, however, Whitman's; it came in 1982 when William Everson arranged the entire Preface into verse under the title *American Bard*.

### 3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to learn,

- the life and works of Walt Whitman
- A summary of 'The Preface'

- The role of American poets as said in the Preface
- The Preface as a Voice of America in the world of poetry

### 3.2 WHITMAN: LIFE AND WORKS

Walt Whitman was born on the 31st of May, 1819 to Walter Whitman, a carpenter, and Louisa Van Velsor. Born to a family with an unstable economic status, he had little opportunity to educate himself formally. At the young age of eleven, he had to leave his formal schooling and search for means to contribute to his family income. His father, however, was an avid reader and the exposure to intellectual life at home made it possible for him to continue an informal education. He found work as a printer's apprentice and later went on to publish his own newspaper, *Long Islander* in 1838. During his lifetime, Whitman engaged himself in numerous vocations—printer, schoolteacher, reporter, editor. He even worked as a clerk in Washington, DC at the time of the Civil War.

In shifting between works, it was inevitable that he had to shift places. This left him with a larger mind set and a broader worldview. His poems draw inspiration from these travels across places. His first hand experiencing of the buying and selling of slaves in New Orleans where he had gone to take up a job at The Crescent endowed him with new perspectives to life which reflect in his poems. Though his best-known poems came at a much later age, Whitman started writing poetry right from a very young age. While working under Alden Spooner, the editor of the weekly newspaper, *Long Island Star*, he started honing his literary skills. He became a regular visitor of the local library, attended theatre performances and published some of his earliest poems, though anonymously, in the *New York Mirror*. He continued working for various newspapers and contributed freelance fiction and poetry off and on. It is believed that Whitman in his life “may have begun to question his own sexual identity” (Killingsworth 7). His biographers hint at a disturbing love affair that he had with a man in the late 1850s. While the identity of that man is not clear, one name frequently suggested is Fred Vaughan, an omnibus driver with whom Whitman was on friendly terms.

During the last decades of his life, Whitman remained largely depressed due to the death of his mother and his own ailments. He moved to his brother's

place, Camden, New Jersey in 1873 and it was here that he took his last breath in 1892. Several health factors combined to make his last days utterly painful. Official reports cited the cause of his death as “pleurisy of the left side, consumption of the right lung, general miliary tuberculosis, and parenchymatous nephritis” (Reynolds, 588).

“The central event of Walt Whitman’s life, literally and figuratively, was the publication of *Leaves of Grass*...Whitman identified himself completely with *Leaves of Grass*” (Killingsworth 1).

The first edition of the book came out in 1855; but Whitman continued to revise and expand it till the end of his life. The book went through six more editions, culminating only with the Deathbed edition of 1891-92. The 1855 version contained twelve poems, all untitled at the time, and a Preface concerning his principles of poetic creation. The poems included some of his most famous pieces like ‘Song of Myself,’ ‘I Sing the Body Electric,’ and ‘The Sleepers,’—as they were to be titled in subsequent editions.

The 1856 version of *Leaves of Grass* contained thirty two poems. The third edition added 146 more poems; it also included two new groups of poems—the “Calamus” poems celebrating same sex love and “Enfans d Adam” celebrating the relationship between members of the opposite sex.

The Civil War had a great impact on Whitman as is evident from his war poems. He once commented that the war “was not a quadrille in a ball-room...it was about nine hundred and ninety nine parts diarrhoea to one part glory” (Killingsworth 9). *Drum-Taps*, an anthology of his poems concerning the war, was published in 1865. An expanded sequel came up in 1866 after the assassination of Lincoln. It was, however, finally incorporated into *Leaves of Grass* as a cluster. The poems included such popular pieces as “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed,” and “O Captain! My Captain!” *Democratic Vistas* (1871) laments the blatant industrialism and the materialistic outlook that followed the Civil War. *Memoranda During the War* (1875), and *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882) contains his prose reflections on the war and his Civil War journalism. *November Boughs*, a collection of prose and poetry, came up in 1888. Apart from his prose and poetry, Whitman also wrote a novel on temperance, *Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate*, which was published in 1842.

### 3.3 SUMMARY OF PREFACE TO LEAVES OF GRASS (*Excerpts*)

The original 1855 version of *Leaves of Grass* was published on or around the Fourth of July. The 1855 Preface is written in a ten page prose format and its style is lyrical and includes free verse. This was the only edition that Whitman included a Preface to his *Leaves of Grass* and he did not include the title or the name of the author. Only later did it become known as the 1855 Preface.

The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes . . . Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves. Here the performance disdaining the trivial unapproached in the tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings and the push of its perspective spreads with crampless and flowing breadth and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance. One sees it must indeed own the riches of the summer and winter, and need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground or the orchards drop apples or the bays contain fish or men beget children upon women.

The Preface is about America and her dream of a unified nation, a dream which can be fulfilled through the involvement of all its people. It is a dream where the dreamer sees America growing from its infant stage to its fullest as a country where all are equal. He compares her with a poem, beautiful, rhythmic, orderly and one that gives utmost pleasure to all-

“The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem”.

Again he says -



A great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as a woman. A great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning.

While calling the nation a poem, Whitman entrusts much responsibility on its creator, the Poet. Thus, Whitman's primary focus in the Preface is on the identity, aesthetics and the responsibility of the Poet. Like Shelley or even Emerson, Whitman believes in the poet's role is spiritual and inspired by ancient authority. With his visionary and prophetic power a poet can transcend a nation to a new entity. The poet is a link between common people and the nation, A poet "commensurate with a people." "His spirit responds to his country's spirit ... he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes". The poet must then write poetry both "transcendant and new," poetry suitable for the "psalm" of the American republic

The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions . . . he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake. His spirit responds to his country's spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes. Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri and Columbia and Ohio and Saint Lawrence with the falls and beautiful masculine Hudson, do not embouchure where they spend themselves more than they embouchure into him. The blue breadth over the inland sea of Virginia and Maryland and the sea off Massachusetts and Maine and over Manhattan bay and over Champlain and Erie and over Ontario and Huron and Michigan and Superior, and over the Texan and Mexican and Floridian and Cuban seas and over the seas off California and Oregon, is not tallied by the blue breadth of the waters below more than the breadth of above and below is tallied by him. When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast stretches longer he easily stretches with them north or south. He spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between them. On him rise solid growths that offset the growths of pine and cedar and hemlock and liveoak and locust and chestnut and cypress and hickory and limetree and cottonwood and tuliptree and cactus and wildvine and tamarind and persimmon . . . and tangles as tangled as any canebrake or swamp . .

In the Preface, Whitman is concerned with the qualities of great poets, and their influence over people. To Whitman, there is no better thinker, helper or worker than the poet, who can outrun the swiftest runners, and who can “make every word he speaks draw blood.” By his definition, the greatest poets avoid the trivial, instead turning small themes into big themes, connecting reality to the human soul.

The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for encouraging competitors . . . They shall be kosmos . . . without monopoly or secrecy . . . glad to pass anything to anyone . . . hungry for equals night and day. They shall not be careful of riches and privilege . . . they shall be riches and privilege . . . they shall perceive who the most affluent man is. The most affluent man is he that confronts all the shows he sees by equivalents out of the stronger wealth of himself. The American bard shall delineate no class of persons nor one or two out of the strata of interests nor love most nor truth most nor the soul most nor the body most . . . and not be for the eastern states more than the western or the northern states more than the southern.

The Preface reveals Whitman’s Poet as a poet of inclusiveness and democracy—the poor, blacks, and women were celebrated equally in Whitman’s poetry, and he was a firm believer in the beauty of the body, and the holiness of its desires and urges. The poet’s role toward the universe is one of a lover to his beloved, and this dictum informs all of his work: “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” He is the epitome of ‘generosity and affection’, he is the ‘kosmos’

The messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose, What we enjoy you may enjoy. Did you suppose there could be only one Supreme? We affirm there can be unnumbered Supremes, and that one does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another . . . and that men can be good or grand only of the consciousness of their supremacy within them. What do you think is the grandeur of storms and dismemberments and the deadliest battles and wrecks and the wildest fury of the elements and the power of the sea and the motion

of nature and of the throes of human desires and dignity and hate and love? It is that something in the soul which says, Rage on, Whirl on, I tread master here and everywhere, Master of the spasms of the sky and of the shatter of the sea, Master of nature and passion and death, And of all terror and all pain.

Whitman's Preface speaks about liberty, freedom of all, equality to all its inhabitants, whether men or women or children.

In the make of the great masters the idea of political liberty is indispensable. Liberty takes the adherence of heroes wherever men and women exist . . . but never takes any adherence or welcome from the rest more than from poets. They are the voice and exposition of liberty.

Whitman's speaks loud and clear as the voice for women's rights. Women, at the time, had no voice and had limited rights. They were not able to vote or have the same opportunities that men held. He declares throughout this essay that women should be as equal as men and emphasizes this by frequently writing both man and woman. He promotes his idea of valuing women in the workplace by using the term workwomen. For example, he speaks about the changing roles of religion and church and says that, "The churches built under their umbrage shall be the churches of men and women"(11). He speaks about Americans having an innate passion for everything from nature to sex and love. Not only did he mention women with men but he refers to them as freewomen. These abundant references to women tie into his philosophy of freedom for all people not just the white upper-class male.

Slavery was a key issue in America during the publication of *Leaves of Grass*. The nation was divided between North and South (free and slave states). Whitman speaks that we are one nation with a multitude of people and there are no differences between the plantation workers in the cotton fields and the slave owners. Whitman speaks for the black slaves and embraces their beauty and perspectives on life. Although they may be owned without any rights, illiterate, and treated like animals or property, their faith is still strong, "they never give up believing and expecting and trusting."(5). Whitman projects his hopes for the end of slavery when he states, ". . . when I and you walk abroad upon the earth stung with compassion at the sight of numberless brothers answering our equal

friendship and calling no man master..."(8). Modern critic, Marki Ivan notes of Whitman's declaration for equality of all Americans when he cites Whitman's quote, "others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not". America has an abundance of wealth and resources. Whitman refers to the United States as the "greatest poem" and we are the poets in this great nation. Here is a nation that accepts all mankind even though in this great nation people are divided according to race and gender and status. Whitman states this throughout the 1855 Preface and also makes references to the abundance of land and its many resources. He articulates that resources should be available to all mankind not just the select few (white males). Whitman also expresses his appreciation of the beauty and diversity of its natural resources. He believes that because of these assets people should find work and thrive.

Contemporary critic Marki Ivan refers to Whitman as the "Prophet of his land" (Ivan 2). Whitman gives the reader an incite a great poem and poet in his Preface to Leaves of Grass:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem.

Whitman strongly believes this idea and has faith in the American people to follow his advice. He feels that by accomplishing this task we will be one with one another, an equal and undivided nation "with liberty and justice for all".

### ***3.4 MAJOR ASPECTS OF THE PREFACE***

#### **3.4.1 THE ROLE OF THE AMERICAN POET**

Whitman and Emerson shares almost similar view regarding America as a growing nation and the tremendous potential the nation has. Both of them also acknowledge that the nation is still in the process of creating itself. You may well

remember that it was Emerson who was looking for the Scholar or the Genius who, with the help of his/her originality, would take America to its height.

On the other hand, Whitman's primary focus is on the identity and aesthetics of the poet. The Preface makes it clear that the United States has yet to find the poet it deserves and requires. Calling America "a teeming nation of nations," distinguished from others by its "ampler largeness and stir," Whitman approaches his major theme by asserting that the nation is itself no less than poetry. "The Americans," he states grandly, "of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem".

Whitman is of view that the time has come for the American poet to come forth and write the poetry of his nation and its people. A poet is one whose "spirit responds to his country's spirit ... he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes". Although this poet will write the songs of America, he transcends nationality, as he is also a mythic poet "of the kosmos," godlike in knowledge and judgment, a true creator who brings the perceived world into being: "He bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions neither more nor less". He says, "Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted, and their eras and characters be illustrated, and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative, and has vista. Whatever stagnates in the flat of custom or obedience or legislation, the great poet never stagnates. Obedience does not master him, he masters it. High up out of reach he stands, turning a concentrated light—he turns the pivot with his finger—he baffles the swiftest runners as he stands, and easily overtakes and envelopes them".

These lines echoes Emerson where he does not believe in relying in the past. Rather, past is to remember, not to internalise. In Whitman's words too, the American poets are to inclose old and new, as "Past and present and future are not disjoin'd but join'd" but the expression of the American poet is always to "transcendent" and create "new" as America is a nation of all races. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be, from what has been and is.

Here, according to Whitman lies the greatest quality of a poet that differentiates him from the common men. The greatest quality Whitman bestows upon the poet is his uniqueness as a 'seer', one who can see beyond time and

change a nation accordingly. The change is not in the geographical area, nor in its buildings and streets, but in the soul of every human being. The nation expects its bard “to indicate the path between reality and their souls”. You may notice that like Emerson, Whitman believes in an exalted concept of *soul*. An exalted soul re-examines all that have been told in the past or in any book, and dismisses whatever insults his own soul.

Whitman imagines the American bards as symbol of generosity and affection, one who encourages competitors. He is the one who sees the whole universe in him, glad to pass anything to anyone. One who believes in “equals night and day” meaning equality for all sections of the society. They shall not be biased for the riches and the privileged section. Instead of material prosperity, it is the wealth of the soul that will impress the American bard. Whitman in his Preface says, “The American bard shall delineate no class of persons, nor one or two out of the strata of interests, nor love most nor truth most, nor the soul most, nor the body most—and not be for the Eastern States more than the Western, or the Northern States more than the Southern”. In other words the poet is a universal soul who takes all souls, superior or inferior, inside him.

We may summarise with the words of Whitman, “The presence of the great poet conquers.” There is one sentence that neatly summarizes the great poet: “He does not stop for any regulation. He is the president of regulation.”

### **3.4.2 AN AMERICAN VOICE IN POETRY**

The ‘Preface’ remains a major critical document and a compelling manifesto in American history. Though it did not receive positive response from the people of America when it first appeared and disappeared into oblivion, in language of unusual energy and impassion it offers a compilation of romantic values and attitudes. Now the Preface is considered as the voice of poetry that is not only of America, but also of the whole universe. With its important themes of exaltation of the common people, sympathy for the oppressed and unfortunate, rejection of traditional authority, affirmation of individual autonomy, insistence on human rights and universal freedom; commitment to progress and trust in the soul as the ultimate source of power and knowledge, the Preface is truly a means to American Enlightenment.

Assertion of the poetic imagination as an index of truth; and faith in the poet, and in poetry is what Whitman values most while imagining America as an enlightened country. The way Emerson imagined scholars and poets as the founder of country with no bias and cultural division, Whitman too believes that ‘Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall’. He bestows the responsibility of leadership on the poets because poets keep the capacity of transcending time and space, ‘enclose old and new’ through their poems, can bring together races of races and thus are living embodiment of their cultural surroundings.

By giving the status of an exalted soul Whitman make the poets and their poetry not only a guiding force of America but also for poetry in general. He says, ‘A great poem is for ages and ages in common, and for all degrees and complexions, and all departments and sects, and for a woman as much as a man, and a man as much as a woman. A great poem is no finish to a man or woman, but rather a beginning’. Poetry artfully weaves words and language together to create something meaningful. Whitman uses the metaphor of poem and poets to its nation and the people of America who keep the capacity to build, create new that is artistic and for all. Poetry of all time and places should perform that role of a unifying agent who can transcend all hurdles of race, colour and gender.

Because of the details and critical reading of the poets and poetry and their true function which is not alone unique to America, but also to all, the Preface is considered as the Bible of Democracy today in America. Poetry takes all within it and merges all cultural and racial differences. It is the foundation of a truly great nation.

### **3.5 SUMMING UP**

By now you must have realized the significance of Whitman’s Preface to *Leaves of Grass* to American literature. Along with Emerson’s essays, Whitman’s Preface immensely helped in shaping the mental landscape of the nation and had a great impact on future writers. This unit also tries to see the Preface as

representative voice of America. What Emerson tries to see through the behaviour and quality of the American Scholar, Whitman tries to see through the transcending power of the poets and their poetry.



### 3.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Why does Whitman compare the Poet with the cosmos?
2. What qualities does Whitman expect the poets of America to have?
3. On what ground do you consider the Preface as a Voice of America?
4. How do poets contribute to the building of a nation?



### 3.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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#### **Full text of The Preface**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69391/from-preface-to-leaves-of-grass-first-edition>

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### **JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS**

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**JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS**

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