

# American Literature of the Twentieth Century: Modernism and After

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**Názov: American Literature of the Twentieth Century: Modernism and After**

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# General Introduction

Although modernism, like romanticism or realism, was a global phenomenon, its most striking manifestations are generally associated with Europe and the USA; that is, parts of the world in which dramatic civilizational changes affected almost every aspect of people's lives. It grew from romantic individualism and subjectivity, which may be traced back to Friedrich Schiller who, in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, compares the industrial civilisation of his times with the classical Greek civilisation, and arrives at a picture which would be a perfect description of the culture characteristic of the time period around the turn of the century:

That zoophyte character of the Greek States, where every individual enjoyed an independent life and, when need arose, could become a whole in himself, now gave place to an ingenious piece of machinery, in which out of the botching together of a vast number of lifeless parts a collective mechanical life results. State and Church, law and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was separated from labour, means from ends, effort from reward. Eternally chained to only one single little fragment of the whole, Man himself grew to be only a fragment; with the monotonous noise of the wheel he drives everlastingly in his ears, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of imprinting humanity upon his nature he becomes merely the imprint of his occupation, of his science.

(Schiller 35)

Although Schiller's text is considered to be a response to his disillusionment stemming from the French Revolution, he precisely identifies many issues which have been haunting western society since that time – mechanical civilisation, absence of harmony with the environment and the increasing compartmentalisation of knowledge, to which one can also add the movement from the country to the city, the increasing role of time in human life (especially the psychological effects of the contraction of time and space), the impact of sciences (both natural and social) and political tensions on human life.

Indeed, life was rapidly becoming different. One of the agents of change was science, especially the scientific theories of Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and James Frazer. While Darwin shed new light on the domain that was traditionally occupied by religion, showing that humankind may not be the result of divine creation but part of natural evolution, Freud drew attention to the human soul, calling it “the unconscious” and claiming that it was also part of nature rather than something divine. Frazer was an anthropologist who tried to interpret the beliefs and ideas of early people as expressed in mythology, magic, or rituals. Scientific inventions were constantly reminding people of the fact that they were living in a time of great changes. For example, as Kalaidjian has it, “Harvard professor Henry Adams would be so awed by the giant electromagnetic dynamos on display at the Great Exposition of 1900 that he would ‘see only an absolute fiat in electricity’ defining the modern age” (1). And, as he further mentions, the modern age included not only electricity, but the discovery of X-rays, radio waves, the detection of radium, and so on (1).

None of the above changes could leave the human “soul” untouched. They frequently led to its almost complete uprooting through the subversion of many accepted truths, forcing people to search for a private refuge in subjectivity, often in its extreme forms. The substitution of traditional normality of communal life (with its traditionally defined roles) for new relations based on new phenomena provoked a strong response from artists, many of whom “felt there was something badly unbalanced about ‘normal’ life itself, if by normal we mean industrialised, Western modernity, with its timetables, empires, machines, bureaucracies and banks” (Howarth 9–10). Modernist art then attempted to re-establish the role of a human being in the world. And one of the ways to achieve this was through the highlighting of non-normality, as, for example in the famous International Exhibition of Modern Art (generally known as the Armory Show) held in New York in 1913, characterised as a way of “making insanity pay” (Kalaidjian 3).

The United States of America was the country which perhaps best embodied these new tendencies, since it was not bound by tradition and perceived itself (and was so perceived by others) as the first modern nation. When compared with the previous two centuries, the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries saw America as a country which really changed from an agricultural and rural land to an

industrial superpower. The rapid growth of its cities, providing ideal and ample space for all the already mentioned modernistic tendencies, allowed Senator Beveridge to claim that “[t]he twentieth century will be American [...] The regeneration of the world, physical as well as moral, has begun” (qtd. in Ruland and Bradbury 239).

This American “regeneration” was not happening only in the world of science and technology, but was accompanied by similar trends in the human and social sciences, which took up the methods of hard sciences, such as Darwinian biology with its evolutionary theory, and attempted to apply them in their own field, for example history. In philosophy, the general trends toward the materialistic and the real, found their expression in the emergence of pragmatism, which can be characterised as a uniquely American contribution to the investigation of reality. Although its founder and most important representative, William James, acknowledged that “[t]here is absolutely nothing new in the pragmatic method. Socrates was an adept at it. Aristotle used it methodically. Locke, Berkeley and Hume made momentous contributions to truth by its means,” they were just “preluders,” and it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that the method “generalized itself.” Its essence was in linking the abstract with the concrete, or, as he claims, the rationalist and the empiricist, trying “to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences” (James). Pragmatism thus directly expressed the practical, experimental spirit of the developing nation, based not on metaphysical or historical abstractions, but on real results which could immediately be put to work. A very similar position was held by John Dewey for whom the sense of theory was primarily in its being an instrument of practical use. He was also active in various other activities, such as education, civil rights, peace, etc. Both personalities also became “instruments” of the new times in which the traditional had to give way to the modern.

While in science and technology modernism was linked to the creation of new things and phenomena, literature produced works which portrayed attempts to come to terms with these phenomena; works which analysed their reflections in human consciousness. We can thus find literary works which depart from the treatment of broad ethical issues through elaborate descriptions of characters and their relations to community or society, or works depicting historical or sociological phenomena – though rather highly subjectively, – as individualised, fragmented (even to the point of

incomprehensibility) treatments of newly emergent existential conditions. Perhaps the most illustrative case of this could be found in British literature in the shift from Victorian morality, based on the necessity to follow socially accepted values, towards the extreme subjectivity and isolation which can be found in the work of authors such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce who adopted the “stream of consciousness” style of writing.

In American literature the transition was not so extreme and sharp, since the first signs of modernistic consciousness emerged there maybe even earlier than in Britain, mostly in the poetry of Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman. One could compare this distinction with the differences between American and British romantic writers. The American romantics were not so revolutionary as the British, because the political and material conditions in the USA did not require it due to an almost fully established democracy, a huge territory with “safety valve” options if problems occurred and relatively good working conditions in comparison to Britain, etc.). Despite that, Whitman and Dickinson, as the early American modernist poets, brought new poetic expressions suited to a fragmented and broken consciousness resulting from the breakup of the collapsing romantic attempts to “fuse” subject and object, nature and city.

One of the significant features of modernism, experimentation, thus found its clear manifestation in poetry. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, there were several poets as well as poetic movements which changed the traditional understanding of poetry, both in terms of form as well as content. As for the form, there was a departure from traditional versification strategies. Regular rhythm, rhyme, and organisation into stanzas became less important than free verse, fragmentation, lack of rhythm and rhyme, or half-rhymes, etc. From the point of view of content, it is possible to say that most poets shifted their focus from great universal topics towards the everyday, the urban; the material on one side, or the philosophical, mystical and mythical on the other.

The crystallisation of the new poetic imagination was not, naturally, sudden and uncomplicated. It had to evolve through the work of the poets who were both part of – and attempting to depart from – Victorian sensibility and look for new possibilities of expression. Such tensions between the old and the new began to appear, for example, in the work of Gerald Manley Hopkins and Thomas Hardy, in the case of British poetry,

and in the work of the aforementioned poets Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman in American literature. However, they only became fully resolved in the work of William Butler Yeats, and, later, in that of the arch-modernists E. Pound and T. S. Eliot – the two Americans who revolutionised artistic milieus not only in Britain, but, one might say, in the whole of Europe. Acknowledging the importance of Dickinson and Whitman, one must thus say that their true role was rather in the creation of conditions and in setting the terrain for modernist expression in the USA. The writers who embody the full flowering of modernism came in the first decades of the twentieth century. They were poets, prose writers as well as playwrights.

The most representative American “poetic” modernists, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, were naturally attracted to European artistic circles and spent most of their creative life in Europe. Eliot even gained English citizenship and lived in London for the greater part of his life. Ezra Pound, too, left America and went to Europe, but his reasons had much to do also with his personal “extravagance” that made him see America as a “half-savage country, out of date” (Pound, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”). On the other hand, quite a few influential writers, remained in the USA, or went abroad just briefly. They included such towering personalities as William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, as well as Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, and others. It is often claimed that this created a division, a schism in American arts, with one group living and working in Europe and writing culturally sophisticated poetry, and the other staying at home and poetically depicting America, both its urban and rural settings.

As far as modernist fiction is concerned, one must start with the works written at the turn of the century by the so-called naturalists (Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane) – who in their novels most directly responded to the social forces changing American society and portrayed how these forces were projected into the lives of literary characters – as well as with the early experimentalism found in the work of Ambrose Bierce. Naturally, the fiction writers could not escape a rift similar to that in poetry which divided them into expatriates, including G. Stein, E. Hemingway, F. S. Fitzgerald, who lived for different amounts of time in European capitals and wrote about European themes, especially in the case of Hemingway, and writers like Sherwood Anderson or Willa Cather who focused on more characteristic American settings such as small towns or prairies. The expatriate writers have also been referred to as the *Lost*

*Generation*, especially because of the disillusionment affecting their lives as well as their work after WWI. As the twentieth century progressed, the European-American division lost its grip on American imagination, giving way rather to identity-based classifications. Thus, we find literature of the South, African-American literature, Native American literature, Jewish American literature, to name only the most significant. Although the literature of the Beat Generation did not directly address ethnic issues, it attacked the middle-class culture of the establishment, becoming a strong counter-cultural force and, in a way, sharing the anti-traditionalist view of Modernism as such. Through its power of subversion, it was preparing the way for the onset of Postmodern values of the late twentieth century.

# Emily Dickinson

Dickinson's poetry shows the first signs of modern times in the conflict between human existence and the attempt to express it, between the implicit sense and explicit form, manifested not only in her themes (extreme introspection, constant movement between the theme of death and nature), but in composition as well (semantic compactness opposed to formal fragmentariness). She lacks totalising romantic conceptions, which, we feel, are just illusions for her. Her poems are more human and truer, expressing inner struggles through which the poet wants to look at (her) life in its contradictoriness as well as simplicity.

Since the publication of the so-called Johnson edition of Emily Dickinson's poems there have been many attempts to grasp her poetry from many different points of view. In *The Emily Dickinson Handbook* (Grabher et al.), for example, authors look at different aspects of her poetry – historical, biographical, cultural, feminist, cognitive, dialogic – trying to contextualise and “update” her criticism within the framework of current critical approaches. However, whatever new approach one could adopt, it would be safe to say that “Dickinson has never been what one might call the theorist's exemplary poet” (Perlof 31), or to agree that “[i]n her symbolic language Dickinson could enjoy the creative liberty of mind that transcends all ideology and all stereotype, not least stereotyped gender restrictions” (Hagenbüchle 24). Even though the reasons for her “nonconformity” are complex, one would be of a very high importance – she was a strong individualist, revolting, consciously or subconsciously, against the culture she grew up in. There is an agreement amongst literary scholars that it was the culture of the collapsing Puritan world which brought an air of an emergence of something new. Emily Dickinson no longer believed in the old religious tenets but did not see anything else instead either. Her response thus was not programmatic, but individualistic, using the language of ambiguity and indeterminacy as a means of her ontological searches.

Another fact which may have contributed to the uniqueness of her poetry was her way of life. Since she spent almost all of it in her father's house, she could not (and did not want to) smooth her poetry by participating in intellectual discussions or other group activities of the day. The poems “materialised” on scraps of paper during her solitary walks and meditations, having been manifestations of the poet's existential anxieties.

This is the most natural reason for their formal irregularities and fragmentariness; they were the lived out by-products of intense spiritual activities, or, as Hagenbüchle has rightly noted, “processual<sup>1</sup>.” Naturally, there have always been critics<sup>2</sup> who claimed that the fragmentariness and formal “irregularities” occurring in her poems are signs of her poetic deficiency, and the publishers who tried to “formalise” her poems. Gradually, however, the number of critics who, on the contrary, saw this as a sign of her modernity has increased and, nowadays, she is even considered to be a literary inspiration for contemporary postmodern artists. As Fathi has put it, “Poets affiliated with modernism, postmodernism, and trends in contemporary poetry denoted by a host of other terms, have cited Dickinson as a literary precursor. Today, one finds many ‘Dickinsonians’ developing poetries of indeterminacy, negation, ellipsis, syntactic difficulty, and back-grounded narrative” (77).

There is no doubt that not all her poems show high level of complexity of form and thought. The fact that she kept writing poetry from her young age up to her death must have had an influence upon its quality. The first poems were simpler, “childish” ones, but the older she was getting, the more demanding they were becoming, increasing her level of “departure” from the contemporary intellectual and artistic milieu. Hagenbüchle, in his highly illuminating essay, provides, from the structuralist point of view, quite an exhaustive list of features of Dickinson’s poetry which make her so unique and impossible to be labelled by any theoretical movement: thinking in alternatives, elusiveness of meaning, the search for self, exploration of the symbolic power of language, its liminal or threshold quality, difficult writerly style based on semotactic indeterminacy, complex semantic shifts subverting the Victorian culture, the arrow of meaning, crossing the frontiers, and venturing into the wilderness.

The complex character of her poetic world results from the complexity of her reliance on the material world. Despite the claims by many critics that she was not primarily a mimetic writer, material things were crucial to her. No wonder – her lived world was

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect Hagenbüchle maintains that “Tomas H. Johnson’s standard edition creates a false impression since his editorial decisions [...] tend to erase what is a crucial feature of Dickinson’s poetry: its processual quality” (15).

<sup>2</sup> The attempts to “discipline” her poems started already during her lifetime: “By 1866 she had seen at least ten, very probably more, of her poems in print. The Republican had printed most of them, and in most of the printings Dickinson had seen alterations of her poems. According to her, such editorial interference dissuaded her from conventional publication” (Smith 11).

not extensive, in terms of her moving in many places and visiting cities, but intensive in its deep touch with objects that surrounded her. She saw the world through them. This seeing, however, was not only a traditionally romantic perception through “powerful feelings,” or “a series of ecstatic assertions, an abandonment to excess verging on mental unbalance” (Peterson qtd. in Deppman, “Trying to Think” 84), but a highly focused attempt to think of what she saw, and to invite the reader to participate in this, highly difficult, intellectual enterprise. The word “thinking” is thus one of the crucial concepts for Dickinson’s poetry which requires an intelligent reader, able to interpret what she thinks; to interpret the meaning of her words. According to Deppman, “she provides far fewer ‘ecstatic assertions’ than careful sequences of ideas and images, not so much ‘abandonment to excess’ as thoughtful production of, and reaction to, extreme states of being” (“Trying to Think” 85).

But the poet is no traditional formal thinker either, for what she expects from the reader is not a usual interpretive exercise, but a truly cognitive effort to “decipher” the meaning through images. Allen Tate captured it very well when he said that she “sees the ideas, and thinks the perceptions” (220). His analysis of Dickinson’s “figurative thinking” is based on her poem “Because I could not stop for Death –,” or as he claimed, “one of the perfect poems in English” (218):

Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.  
We slowly drove – He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor, and my leisure too,  
For His Civility –  
We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess – in the Ring –  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –  
We passed the Setting Sun –  
Or rather – He passed Us –  
The Dews drew quivering and chill –

For only Gossamer, my Gown –  
My Tippet – only Tulle –  
We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground –  
The Roof was scarcely visible –  
The Cornice – in the Ground –  
Since then – 'tis centuries – and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity –

(Dickinson 350)

According to Tate, every image in the poem “is precise and, moreover, not merely beautiful, but fused with the central idea” (219). The poem is one of her attempts to present what is unrepresentable through thinking, the idea of death. She does it through images – of the driver, carriage, playing children, the setting sun – which as if they showed the familiar objects of her life silently stopping, and disappearing, making way for the intimated finitude. The image of loss, of leaving something behind the carriage, is, however, complicated by the last stanza in which the plenitude is introduced. Death is contradistinguished to eternity, or “the idea of immortality is confronted with the fact of physical disintegration. We are not told what to think; we are told to look at the situation” (220), which cannot be resolved, only perceived.

One of Dickinson perhaps most anthologised poems is “There’s a certain Slant of light” which is frequently considered to be the expression of her transcendental sublime. The poem does not address death directly, as the previous one, but concentrates on the perception of a sublime moment in which her being has glimpsed its fullness.

There’s a certain Slant of light,  
Winter Afternoons –  
That oppresses, like the Heft  
Of Cathedral Tunes –  
Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –  
We can find no scar,

But internal difference,  
Where the Meanings, are –  
None may teach it – Any –  
'Tis the Seal Despair –  
An imperial affliction  
Sent us of the Air –  
When it comes, the Landscape listens –  
Shadows – hold their breath –  
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance  
On the look of Death –

(Dickinson 118–119)

The thought-provoking image here is that of a synesthetic perception of a strange heavy-sounding light whose otherness changes the world around, evoking the imminent presence of something intangible. Its presence is promising as well as painful for the poet just as the presence or absence of death can be. It metonymically points to the difference between the common and the substantial (which means also the painful and the terrifying) within the everyday. It is one of the poems in which Dickinson comes closest to Emerson's transcendentalist idea of nature as the place of the sublime, a means of transcendence towards Divinity. The poem may also be taken as a metaphor of Dickinson's work, in which she was obsessed with the search for the fullness of meaning in the materiality of her world.

The approach of "thinking through images," as I have tried to demonstrate through the two poems above, is, naturally, a *conditio sine qua non* for cognitive literary studies – the approach which has been very often used when discussing Dickinson's poetry. Its main hypothesis is that human cognition as such is largely based on mechanisms of metaphorical mapping (Lakoff and Johnson). However, there are also other features which make her work lend itself relatively easily to cognitive criticism. As mentioned above, one of the maxims of cognitive literary studies is that signifying processes are based on the "materiality" of human signifying processes. The language was not given to us by a transcendental authority, but is a natural function of the processes occurring within the human brain. Such proximity of the literary to the material can be found

throughout the work of Emily Dickinson. Perhaps the best way to illustrate it is to use her own words describing what poetry means to her: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken of, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?” (qtd. in Hirsch). Dickinson almost never loses herself in free-floating abstractions, as, perhaps, her contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne does. Even if one has a feeling that she uses abstract words, it frequently turns out that they are the products of metonymical shifts. Cognitive literary scholars have used this peculiar quality of Dickinson’s material and scientific leaning for the analysis of several of her poems. In the following part, I will try to comment on some of these analyses, especially the ones by Margaret H. Freeman who has turned out to be Dickinson’s most prolific “cognitive” commentator.

In her study “Metaphor Making Meaning: Dickinson’s Conceptual Universe,” Freeman sets out to characterise Dickinson’s conceptual world through which she structures the metaphorical world of her poems. She starts by characterising her time and place (the breaking of Puritan New England resulting in the shakeup of orthodox religious beliefs and the rise of new scientific discourses), to justify the shifts in Dickinson’s perception of reality. This is, in fact, not different from Tate’s identification of reasons for the uniqueness of Dickinson’s imagination. However, while Tate arrived at his concept of “thinking through images,” Freeman identified the shifts in cultural paradigms, as well as the materiality of life around her, open to the scientific leaning of the poet’s mind, as the main reason for Dickinson’s not modelling her conceptual universe on the traditional LIFE IS A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME metaphor which suited very well to her Calvinist upbringing. “From the details of nature in its annual cycles, the circumference of hills that surround the valley in which the town of Amherst lies, and, ultimately, from the discoveries of the new science, Dickinson transformed the metaphor of LIFE IS A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME into that of LIFE IS A VOYAGE IN SPACE” (“Metaphor Making Meaning” 648). Freeman goes on to explain how the religious “journey through time,” aimed at salvation in the afterlife, could not hold for Dickinson because of the effect of the changing paradigm and new scientific discoveries.

A similar metaphorical structuring may be demonstrated in the poem “Because I could not stop for Death –.” If for Tate the poem’s effect was achieved by a cluster of images

(the carriage, the rider, children, the setting sun, gazing grain), in cognitive analysis the poem's effect rests on the key image of driving and passing, i.e. the movement, and leaving behind the things of this world. Besides setting this basic concept, Freeman does not, however, discuss other stylistic or semantic subtleties. We all know that "life is a journey" from the beginning to the end, but in between these two extremes, there are other phenomena our life is filled with, such as pleasure, love, suffering etc.

A more sophisticated analysis of Dickinson's poems is offered by Freeman in her article entitled "Momentary Stays, Exploding Forces: A Cognitive Linguistic Approach to the Poetics of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost" in which she compares the two great American poets. I will concentrate again on the poem which I have tried to briefly discuss above through a traditional, i.e., non-cognitive, approach – "There's a certain Slant of light," commenting primarily on the differences between the cognitive and non-cognitive analysis, not on the differences between the poetics of Dickinson and Frost. In her analysis, Freeman herself demonstrates the two approaches when, at the beginning, she divides the poem into two parts, the first one consisting of the first and the last stanza, while the second part consists of the two inner stanzas. She claims that the "outer" stanzas are subjective, subjecting the human agency to the inhuman qualities of the light, while in the "inner" stanzas we learn about the objective qualities of the light. So far, the analysis is insightful, depicting the human condition with the interiority of meanings facing the objective and threatening force of nature. When, however, Freeman decides to incorporate the language of cognitive linguistics, we get back to the mechanical schemas of cognitive models. Here is what she arrives at using cognitive science terminology:

The poem exists as a whole, framed by its opening and closing lines: 'There's a certain Slant of light [...] On the look of Death –.' But inside that frame, iconically representing the frame of the CONTAINER schema of the human being in the inner stanzas, the damage has been done; not visible, but internal, an affliction of 'Despair.' We are made one with the 'certain Slant of light' which, as it comes and goes, leaves us – through the operation of the CHANGE schema – with the intimation of our own mortality ("Momentary Stays, Exploding Forces" 13).

Freeman is, of course, right when she approaches the poem through the CONTAINER schema, since Lakoff and Johnson classify CONTAINER metaphors as a type of

ontological metaphor which appear “through our experiences with physical objects (especially our own bodies)” and provide “ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances” (23), and there is no doubt that Dickinson is primarily an ontological poet, concerned with the exploration of her experiences with physical objects.

The acknowledgement of the cognitive metaphors’ partial structuring of human communication is, in our opinion, where the true contribution of cognitive linguistics’ theory of metaphorical structuring for literary theory lies. If we look at the above poem, for example, we clearly see that there is the inside-outside, subjective-objective schema involved, as it is in most of Dickinson’s other poems. The CONTAINER in this case seems to be the light which suffuses the scene and makes it different from ordinary, everyday scenes. It affects us, forces us to look at things in a different way, and to see them both as things in themselves (“We can find no scar”) and as things for ourselves (“internal difference”) throwing us to the “affliction” of existence within “differences,” “despair.” It is a figurative CONTAINER of our humanity, of our human condition as well as an image and a figure that causes us to think of something other.

The CONTAINER schemas are very frequent in Dickinson’s poetry (see, for example, the poems “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –,” “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –,” “I found the words to every thought,” etc.). They fit into her basic existential predisposition of a person deeply obsessed with meanings which cannot be found on the surface, but deep inside. In her search, she disposes of the superficial, of the unnecessary, and uses language in its emblematic and gnomic capacities to arrive at that inner meaning, which, as in the above poem, is frequently threatened with death, or nothingness. The inside is also frequently associated with the force she had to keep in (as a result of her life in the Puritan society requiring the observance of Calvinist tenets she, consciously or subconsciously, disagreed with), releasing it only through her poetry (“On my volcano grows the Grass”).

The poem, “Of Death I try to think like this –,” shows the same CONTAINER schema:

Of Death I try to think like this –  
The Well in which they lay us  
Is but the Likeness of the Brook

That menaced not to slay us,  
But to invite by that Dismay  
Which is the Zest of sweetness  
To the same Flower Hesperian,  
Decoying but to greet us –

I do remember when a Child  
With bolder Playmates straying  
To where a Brook that seemed a Sea  
Withheld us by its roaring  
From just a Purple Flower beyond  
Until constrained to clutch it  
If Doom itself were the result,  
The boldest leaped, and clutched it –

(Dickinson 648)

Here, however, the inside is more directly associated with death, which is “The Well in which they lay us.” The whole outside (most importantly the brook, which “seemed a Sea” in the second stanza) is a figurative expression of the border between life and death, with the exception of the “Flower Hesperian” and the “Purple Flower” which symbolise eternity, attained only through the crossing of the border of death. The basic CONTAINER schema is complicated by the PASSING schema, and even more by the PASSING IN TIME movement which is, in this case, reverse, since the second stanza is a flash-back to the (poet’s?) childhood. The movement to the past thus gives a peculiar air to the whole poem, hinting that earth (or eternity) waits at both ends of our life.

# Walt Whitman

The poetry of Walt Whitman appears to be, on one hand, a re-statement of the existential nature of artistic expression found in Dickinson's approach, whilst on the other hand it is a wholly new grasp of modern being. His imagination is robust and heterogenic, pushing him more to national and ideological contexts, which are, however, also relevant realms for modernist poets. Whitman is one of those unique poets who tackles the most profound layers of humanity through more pragmatic (political, social, racial, industrial, and rural) realities. Given the differences, both have one thing in common – they are no longer traditional poets expressing traditional concerns through a traditional poetic language.

Despite being considered a manifestation of American nationalism and democracy, Whitman's poetry, especially his most celebrated poem from the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, "Song of Myself" (Whitman 25–86), is also "politically-ontological," allowing the poet to express what it means "to be" an American as well as, and this is very important and frequently forgotten, also what it means to be human. Although "Song of Myself" is a source of inspiration for the generations of American poets who drew on his democratic impulses (for example, Ginsberg's *Howl*, to name at least one of the most important poems of the twentieth century American poetry, shows clear indebtedness to Whitman), it also works perfectly well with "the system of doctrine ... [which] is more Eastern than Western, [and which] includes notions like metempsychosis and karma" (Cowley xii). The source of these mystic notions must have been "a mystical experience in the proper sense of the term" (xii). As Cowley further refers to one of Whitman's disciples, the experience may have taken place in 1853 or in 1854, and it was essentially the same as the illuminations or ecstasies of earlier bards and prophets. Such ecstasies consist in a rapt feeling of union or identity with God (or the Soul, or Mankind, or the Cosmos), a sense of ineffable joy leading to the conviction that the seer has been released from the limitations of space and time and has been granted a direct vision of truths impossible to express (xii–xiii).

Despite strong mystic motifs, however, Cowley's suggestion that "Song of Myself" "is hardly at all concerned with American nationalism, political democracy, contemporary progress, or other social themes that are commonly associated with Whitman's work"

(iv), must be refuted, for it is, of course, impossible to separate the discussion of the poet from these issues, at least because in Whitman's introduction to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* he directly confronts them, saying that "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" (Whitman 5), that America "is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations" (5), that the great variability of common America, with its "deathless attachment to freedom" (6) is itself an embodiment of "unrhymed poetry" (6). Neither one can oversee the origin of *Leaves of Grass* in the context of American attempts at "cultural independence from Europe," seeking for a great national poem, or novel, which was explicitly acknowledged even by the great Emerson himself who greeted him "at the beginning of a great career" (qtd. in Cowley ix).

But again, despite these clearly recognisable connections to his "Americanness," Whitman was, as suggested above, a poet of universal appeal, attempting to grasp all cultures, all minorities, all political or ideological contexts, in a grand move of respecting the contradictions:

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then... I contradict myself;  
I am large... I contain multitudes."

(Whitman 85)

His subjectivity, and his Americanness, was also his universality; one not cancelling out but rather complementing, the other: "In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less, / And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them" (43). His existence is his being, differentiated as well as undifferentiated: "I exist as I am, that is enough" (44), "I am the poet of the body, / And I am the poet of the soul" (44), "I am the poet of the woman the same as the man, / And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man" (44), "I am integral with you... I too am of one phase and of all phases" (46), "One time as good as another time [...] here or henceforward it is all the same to me" (47). His creed is all creeds:

“Sermons and creeds and theology... but the human brain, and what is called reason, and what is called love, and what is called life?

I do not despise you priests;

My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths,

Enclosing all worship ancient and modern, and all between ancient and modern,”

(74–75)

To conclude, although Whitman’s first, and strongest, poetic expression dates to the mid-nineteenth century, the messages it brought are still surprisingly modern even in postmodern times, perhaps maybe especially in the deluded postmodern times. And, of course, they are universal. What else is literature good for if not to teach us that we are all human beings and deserve undivided, universal respect?

## Fiction at the Turn of the Century

If one were to search for the writers whose work would be the most direct response to scientific theories, an obvious choice would be a group of writers coming to the literary scene in the USA in the 1890s and, some of them, continuing well into the twentieth century – the Naturalists. The characters portrayed in their works resemble direct expressions of Darwin's evolutionary theory and seem to embody the application of his concept of the "survival of the fittest" to literature. Naturalism is often considered to be the second stage of realism; a stage in which the processes of realistic depiction, such as found in Dickens' criticism of various social phenomena, were used to present even the most ugly and brutal of events in which a protagonist is involved. They usually include scenes of death, crime and descriptions of a physical fight for survival. In American literature they can be found, most vividly, in the work of Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser.

Stephen Crane was a writer who, for the first time in American literature, in his novella *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), described war as something not noble and romantic, but as a scene of brutal killing and loss of lives. His protagonist, Henry Fleming, goes through the stages of youthful admiration of war, cowardice (running away from direct combat, overcome by fear), and, finally, attempts to make up for his initial act by getting the "red badge of courage" when he carries the flag into battle. The depictions of the scenes from the Civil War lack their usual air of pride in fighting for one's values, showing only bloodshed, suffering and fear of death. His other short novel, or rather a novella, entitled *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, portrays a poor girl forced to fight for survival on the street, succumbing to prostitution and finally death. The images from the work also show a world very distant from the world of romantic individualists wandering in nature and admiring its beauties. Here is an ugly world of urban life and individual human suffering.

A very captivating struggle for survival is also portrayed in his short story "The Open Boat." The four characters, the survivors from a ship which sank near the coast of Florida, must struggle on a small boat to get to the shore. The sea is a strong, unfeeling force playing ruthlessly with their lives, showing no logic, sense or explanation as to why it "chooses" someone "to be saved" and someone else "to be damned."

While Stephen Crane offered a deep insight into the biological drives of individual characters, Theodore Dreiser was more concerned with the relation of his characters to their social setting. In the novel *Sister Carrie* (1900), a young girl comes to a big city (Chicago) where her life undergoes a change and she is transformed from a simple rural country girl to an experienced woman manipulating men to reach her own goals. The novel may be taken as a reflection of what happened to the entire country, which also underwent a change from a rural country to a future industrial and commercial giant. Carrie Meeber gradually takes her life in to her own hands and is not afraid to actively push through all kinds of obstacles on her way. Dreiser's other masterpiece, *An American Tragedy*, depicts the ethical struggle of the protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, between his responsibility to a poor girl with whom he had an affair, resulting in her pregnancy, and a promise to marry the rich Sondra Finchley. As the indefinite article in the title may suggest, the ensuing tragedy is just one of such tragedies in a fast-growing society hungry for material wealth.

The motif of struggle for survival is also central to the short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890) by Ambrose Bierce. Although the story was written before the main onset of modernism, it is unusual in representing its main focal points – the movement from the social outside to the personal inside, from objective time to its subjective flow for the protagonist. Its treatment of time anticipates the work of the great English modernists, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

In general, the writers mentioned here and their works responded to the changed social, cultural and economic conditions in the USA, which in turn were related to what was happening in Europe. Their characters were not carriers of romantic traits, but, as mentioned above, fighters dealing with all kinds of obstacles – from personal enemies and the enemy of the establishment, to almost cosmic forces of inescapable fate. They were governed by unmanageable drives – inner and outer. Clyde Griffiths, for example, is driven by physical attraction as well as by a drive to step up the social ladder. The same can be said of Carrie Meeber from *Sister Carrie*. Most naturalistic characters are thus helpless victims to forces outside their own control, lacking free will and individual strength.

## Ezra Pound

A discussion of modern poetry without Ezra Pound would not be possible since he is considered by many as the poet who defined modernism and also became one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century. He was born in a small American town to a family with strong historical roots, and was educated at the University of Pennsylvania (together with Hilda Doolittle and William Carlos Williams – other famous American Modernist poets). After a short period of teaching at a small midwestern college he left the USA for Europe, to become a leading personality in the centres of the then artistic avant-gardes which were sweeping through Europe's capitals. He first went to Venice, but after a short time decided to go to London, where he soon became associated with London's artistic circles and people like William Butler Yeats, Ford Maddox Ford, Wyndham Lewis, and so on. Soon he began to attend the meetings of *The Poet's Club*, at which some English poets were discussing many problems of modern poetry, especially free verse, diction, and imagery. There he met T. E. Hulme who was instrumental for his elaboration of the theory of Imagism – a unique Anglo-American contribution to European avant-gardism. Hulme claimed that “beauty may be in small, dry things” and that poetry “always endeavours to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing” (“Romanticism and Classicism”). Romantic poetry was for Hulme typical by its “metaphors of flight,” while “[i]n the classical attitude [one] never seem[s] to swing right along to the infinite nothing” (“Romanticism and Classicism”). In other words, Romantic poets are obsessed with something beyond the real – the figurative; whereas the poets of the coming Classical age (which can be loosely associated with what was later called Modernism) were more concerned with the material, the non-figurative and the literal.

Hulme's desire for new poetry was followed by Pound's statement of the three principles of this poetry: “1. Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (“A Retrospect” and ‘A Few Don'ts’”). In the article “A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste,” Pound elaborated on the principles, specifying especially his understanding of the concept of the “image” as well as the use of language, rhythm,

and rhyme. Another statement on Imagistic principles also appeared in the anthology *Some Imagist Poets* of 1915 as a preface to the poems. It is in a way a variation of what has been stated so far – to use the exact word, create new rhythms, be free in the choice of the subject, present an image, produce hard and clear poetry which should be a result of concentration. The preface to the 1916 anthology does not bring any new “tenets” of Imagism, but explains the misunderstanding that the public had about such concepts as the image, rhythm, cadence, vers libre, etc. The 1917 anthology was published without any preface whatsoever.

As one could infer from what has already been said, of central importance in all the mentioned theoretical statements is, naturally, the concept of the image. It is in fact that what defines Imagism as a movement. Traditionally, image in literary studies is characterised as a verbal device which evokes sensual effects (Pokrivčák and Pokrivčáková 59). According to Abrams, images are “used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by *allusion*, or in the *vehicles* (the secondary references) of its similes and metaphor” (121), but “should not be taken to imply a visual reproduction of the object referred to” (121).

Such concept of verbal images, that is the images made up of words, can be identified already in Peirce’s category of symbol. He claims that

“[a]ny ordinary word, as ‘give,’ ‘bird,’ ‘marriage,’ is an example of a symbol. It is *applicable to whatever may be found to realise the idea connected with the word*; it does not, in itself, identify those things. It does not show us a bird, nor enact before our eyes a giving or a marriage, but supposes that we are able to imagine those things, and have associated the word with them.”

(9)

It must be noted here, however, that Peirce’s understanding of the concept of symbol is slightly different from what is understood by this term in literary studies, where we speak about symbol as about “a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself” (Abrams 311). But the Imagists’ understanding of verbal image differs even from traditional literary studies, since instead of taking verbal image as a sign pointing beyond itself (most

usually to re-present emotions) they tried to escape the re-presentation and took pains, in theory as well as in practice, to find images which would be clear presentations, without any semiotic quality, of something what Peirce defined as feeling when he described a person in a “dreamy state”:

Let us suppose he [the person] is thinking of nothing but a red color. Not thinking about it, either, that is, not asking nor answering any questions about it, not even saying to himself that it pleases him, but just contemplating it, as his fancy brings it up. Perhaps, when he gets tired of the red, he will change it to some other color,—say a turquoise blue,—or a rose-color;—but if he does so, it will be in the play of fancy without any reason and without any compulsion. This is about as near as may be to a state of mind in which something is present, without compulsion and without reason; it is called Feeling.

(4)

For the Imagists, this was exactly the position they wanted to achieve. They may have been successful to present it theoretically, but the practice was much more difficult, available, if at all, only through extreme cases of what I would call a non-metaphorical metaphor in the case of Pound, or the Stevens’ impossibility of metaphor. Both positions, however, force complexity into the literary meaning to the extent of its nullification.

The theory of Imagism emerges most clearly through two statements prefaced to their anthologies. In *Some Imagist Poets 1915*, they claim that they are not “a school of painters, [though they] believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous” (vii), or, in *Some Imagist Poets 1916*, that their movement is not about “the presentation of pictures. ‘Imagism’ refers to the manner of presentation, not to the subject” (v). To avoid the simplicity of a mechanical transfer of meaning by analogy, Pound stressed complexity and instantaneity, characterising the image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” For him, this can best be achieved by metaphor, that is “the most compressed form of image” (Juhasz 15) able to “conjoin the dualities” (13). It involves, however, the awareness of a constant tension between presenting the mental images of concrete things, as if seen directly in the essence of

their thingness, and as being “under [constant] pressure from meanings beyond them” (Miles viii), which is a perfect image of human existence.

The four Imagists’ anthologies provide many examples of the existential struggle to break free from the duality of seeing things of the world. Metaphor is a perfect witness to – as well as an obstacle in – that struggle. Thus, as an example of “very little metaphor,” i.e. of a poem in which the poet wanted to get rid of this duality, Gleason quotes F. S. Flint’s “Easter” published in the 1916 version of *Some Imagist Poets*:

**Friend**

we will take the path that leads  
down from the flagstaff by the pond  
through the gorse thickets;  
see, the golden spikes have thrust their points through,  
and last year’s bracken lies yellow-brown and trampled.

(51)

Even if the poem is not metaphorical, but rather narrative, one can find here images which, through their being poetically focused outside of a more determining context, may evoke a hint of a potential “beyond.”

Naturally, all four of the Imagist anthologies provide more examples of non-figurative language, or at least a language which the Imagist theorists wanted to be “direct,” non-figurative, and depicting Hulme’s “physical thing” to “present” Peirce’s “Feeling.” The poems by H.D., for example, are such very clear visions and presentations of things. In “Hermes of the Ways,” she uses the following images:

Apples on the small trees  
Are hard,  
Too small,  
Too late ripened

By a desperate sun  
That struggles through sea-mist.  
  
The boughs of the trees  
Are twisted  
By many bafflings;  
Twisted are  
The small-leafed boughs.  
But the shadow of them  
Is not the shadow of the mast head  
Nor of the torn sails.

*(Des Imagistes 22)*

The poet visualises everyday objects through their physical qualities, not through their symbolic or abstract meanings. Their objectivity is only slightly “distorted” by a subjective touch of personification (“desperate sun”), which, however, does not diminish their objective thingness. The reader here is not aware of a comparison, of seeing one object in terms of another, as, for example, the metaphor in Richard Aldington’s poem “the light is a wound to me” (*Des Imagistes* 13), or William Carlos Williams’ “Your hair is my Carthage / And my arms the bow / And our words arrows” (*Des Imagistes* 39).

Undoubtedly, the most unique images and metaphors can be found in Ezra Pound’s poems. They range from clear presentations, “the petals fall in the fountain, / the orange coloured rose-leaves, / Their ochre clings to the stone” (*Des Imagistes* 46), to complex comparisons, “O fan of / white silk, / clear as frost on the grass-blade, / You also are laid aside” (*Des Imagistes* 45). But the nature of Imagism emerges most clearly in his famous short poem “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

The poem can serve as an important representative text of Imagism for several reasons: 1. it uses concrete images (petals, bough, faces, crowd) without any abstract

descriptions, 2. it is short, 3. it does not represent, but presents. The author explains its creation as follows:

“Three years ago in Paris I got out of a ‘metro’ train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion.”

(Gaudier Brzeska)

Then he continues saying that what came to him, instead of words, were the “splotches of colour<sup>3</sup>.” He finished writing the poem, or searching for an appropriate form of expression of the emotion, only after a year when he cut the original 30 lines of text to the two lines.

The poem represents all the pros and cons of poetic metaphor. Despite Pound’s claim that there may be no meaning in it, one is forced to search for it and find it, since this is the force of its figurativeness. There are two images juxtaposed, faces and petals; inviting an immediate comparison. It is, however, not a simple one, since one of the images seems to consist of another comparison, “apparition of these faces,” comparing normal faces in the crowd to strange, ghostlike faces. The final image is metaphorical, for there is no “like” or “as,” as the simile would use. But what this is an image of is the most difficult part of the metaphor.

There is a long history of the search for this poem’s meaning, from drawing critical attention to the word “apparition” as being an expression of suddenness (Bevilaqua), visual beauty (Knapp), mystery (Witemeyer), or the Underworld (Kenner), to the discussion of the way the two images are joined. Steve Ellis, for example, claims that it is also important to pay attention to how the lines were “joined” together, since there were versions of the poem in which the first line ended by a colon, semicolon, or even any punctuation mark. This, he claims, may tell us something about the equivalence or superposition of one line to the other, that is, about a crucial process in the creation of the final metaphorical effect. He refuses Earl Miner’s claim about the *discordia concors*

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<sup>3</sup> See Peirce’s description of *feeling* above.

in the poem, stating himself that Miner neglected “to consider the care that Pound himself took to indicate to the reader how that gap should be ‘imaginatively leaped’” (Ellis).

A very important line of interpretation of the poem is based on Pound’s Oriental leanings, especially his preoccupation with the Japanese haiku. Thus Jyan-Lung Lin interprets Pound’s images as expressing the Zen mood of Yugen, that is, the sense of mysterious depth in nature:

This mood, as mentioned before, is identified by Zen people as an essential precondition of enlightenment. It produces, and at the same time is produced by, the image, which is not to be used as an ornament but to point at the Tao or self-nature, a mysterious totality of the inner and outer nature.

This is in perfect accord with Pound’s own comment on the nature of the poem, its images, and, by extension, the images of Imagism as such: “In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective” (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 103), or, when we look at it from the other pole of the creative process, when “things internal are transformed, through art, into things external” (Juhasz 15).

In addition to his great role in founding Imagism, Pound became an important (and highly controversial) personality in two other aspects as well: 1, he carried experimentation in modern poetry almost to the most extreme level so far (in some of his *Cantos*), 2, he got involved in politics during WWII by supporting Mussolini, which led to his imprisonment after the war by the American Army and subsequent trial for treason. As a result of this, he spent several years in a mental hospital – through which he escaped capital punishment.

As for his experimentation, it could be said that he showed the “meaning” of poetry to the post-romantic and post-realistic readers. First of all, despite complicated form and content so typical for modernists, Pound is often claimed to have tried to make his poetry part of life. His life, however, was a little bit more complicated than the life of ordinary citizens. His work *The Cantos* was an attempt to write an epic poem which would reflect his life. Like many other writers who tried to do it (e.g. William

Wordsworth in his *Prelude* or Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*), it took him a long time, much experimentation, and a change in style and themes.

## T. S. Eliot

It would be quite difficult to find literary works more characteristic and symptomatic of twentieth century Anglophone literature than T. S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land*. For many, it has become a symptomatic expression not only of the period when it was published, i.e. the aftermath of WWI with its disillusionment and the ensuing anxieties of modern life in the city, but of the general loss of values in the years to come as well.

Initially, the poem's publication was an important event on the cultural scenes of both England and the USA. The person who was responsible for this, greatly shaping its final form by extensive proofreading and then using his influence among the publishers to arrange for its printing on both sides of the Atlantic, was Ezra Pound. He immediately recognised the importance of Eliot and considered *The Waste Land* to be as good as *Ulysses*: "His poem is as good in its way as Ulysses in its way, and there is so DAMN little genius, so DAMN little work that one can take hold of and say, 'This at any rate stands, makes a definite part of literature'" (qtd. in Rainey 28). However, after initial popularity in the first half of the century, *The Waste Land*, unlike *Ulysses*, lost its overwhelming attraction in the second. The reasons for the relative decline of the poem's impact in contemporary cultural milieu have not yet been adequately discussed. Not a small role could be attributed to a general lack of interest in poetry caused by changed cultural conditions, especially the rise of the television and the internet. Not of lesser importance, however, may be the personality of the poet himself; especially his opinions concerning culture and religion which, for most contemporary scholars, have become "obsolete," conservative, if not even straightforwardly "reactionary." It is not surprising, since the times in which T. S. Eliot lived and wrote (*The Waste Land* was published between WWI and WWII, the two most cataclysmic failures of human culture) could not have left him immune to all the complexities he was faced with, and the current literary scholarship, obsessed with ideological shortcuts, seems to be losing the ability to discriminate such complexities.

Various critical approaches to the reading and studying of literature, having their own points of culmination and demise over the span of the twentieth century, also have meant paying more or less attention to the poem, since philological, New Critical,

archetypal, structuralist, poststructuralist, cultural and postcolonial approaches pursued their own goals, not necessarily corresponding to the themes and language of *The Waste Land*. Despite these developments, one can say that the *The Waste Land* is not a thing of the past, that it is still powerful, and, as Rainey has put it, “[P]erhaps the ultimate testimony to the poem’s wild power is the fact that it has, for so long, survived the attention of its warmest admirers” (39–40).

The fact that T. S. Eliot was not only a poet but an important critic makes it necessary to view his poetry, including *The Waste Land*, within a larger picture, not only as an emotional outburst (he was writing it during strong upheavals in his marriage), but also as the imaginative embodiment of his opinions regarding cultural and philosophical phenomena of the time. It is a poem in which the individual self is firmly interlinked with its cultural constitution. Without the ability to sense a rich layer of cultural backdrop behind the self’s inner emotional drama, one cannot fully comprehend the universality of the poem’s appeal.

Before approaching *The Waste Land* from this aspect, we should clarify, however, what Eliot meant by culture. T. S. Eliot addressed the concept of culture most extensively in his *Christianity and Culture* in which he sees it not as a clearly defined phenomenon, or concept, but as “the product of a variety of more or less harmonious activities, each pursued for its own sake” (92). Although, in his opinion, it is possible to speak about culture at the level of an individual, group or class, or of society, it does not exhaust itself at only one of these levels, but has to be perceived as an interactive whole, since “the culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class, and [...] the culture of the group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society to which that group or class belongs” (93). He does not strictly distinguish between culture and religion, claiming that the “development of culture and the development of religion, in a society uninfluenced from without, cannot be clearly isolated from each other” (100). The same holds true for art and religion: “The artistic sensibility is impoverished by its divorce from the religious sensibility, the religious by its separation from the artistic” (98). This broad understanding of culture also thus includes, more or less, other such categories as class and elite, region, sect and cult, politics and education. Politics is claimed to be part of culture; not something standing against it and used as an instrument. At the same time, however, “uncultured” politics – driven

by profit – can have negative effects on culture: “American economic expansion can be also, in its way, the cause of disintegration of cultures which it touches” (168).

Although, on one hand, some of his opinions concerning education could be read as supporting restrictive access to education, on the other hand it is important to point to their flexibility and permeability, as is the case with his other concepts (class, elite, etc.). Therefore, in education, what is of primary importance is not the idea of universal accessibility, but the purpose of education: “It would be a pity if we overlooked the possibilities of education as a means of acquiring wisdom; if we belittled the acquisition of knowledge for the satisfaction of curiosity, without any further motive than the desire to know; and if we lost our respect for learning” (175.) True, nowadays one does not challenge the idea of uniform educational system, but neither did he. For while on one hand he claims that it “leads imperceptibly to the education of too many people, and consequently to the lowering of standards to whatever this swollen number of candidates is able to reach” (175), on the other hand he acknowledges the fact that “[E]ducation for everybody is the means we must employ for putting civilisation together again” (182–183). What his “aversion” against the idea of universality truly means can then maybe be characterised more as a typical modernistic fear of massification, and the consequent lowering of cultural standards, than the unacceptable elitism of the past: “A ‘mass-culture’ will always be a substitute-culture; and sooner or later the deception will become apparent to the more intelligent of those upon whom this culture has been palmed off” (184). But again, even his rejection of mass culture is not unequivocal. As Chinitz has pointed out, “there is also evidence of his lifelong attraction to various forms of ‘lowbrow’ culture: comic strips (‘Krazy Kat,’ ‘Mut and Jef’), boxing, street slang, melodrama, vaudeville, sensational news stories (especially about murders), the music of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, the bawdy comedy of Ernie Lotinga” (237). He maintains that there is “the constant presence of popular culture in his creative process” (240). and that the “elitist Eliot alone could never have written Eliot’s poetry, which issues in part from an internal struggle over popular culture” (241). This is hardly surprising since what today’s detractors of Eliot (branding him as a reactionary conservative and anti-Semite) seem to entirely forget is the simple fact that “T. S. Eliot was a creature of paradoxes, and paradoxes which he did his best to cultivate and sustain” (Howarth 57).

Although the “vicissitudes” of culture are a key for understanding *The Waste Land*, the word itself does not occur in the poem. It lurks, however, behind every other word in it. The fact that the poem was written shortly after the time of the so far “unparalleled destructiveness” of WWI when culture was abused and lost, highlights its centrality and importance for those times, and, by extension, for today, when culture is in danger of becoming lost and “wasted” again.

There is no doubt that the poem is culturally heterogeneous, since in addition to European cultural layers, one can find there a strong presence of the elements of Indian culture, and, upon close analysis, intertextual overflows to other cultural spheres, past and present. However, what can be most strongly felt in it is the domination of European mythological, literary and philosophical sources. In one of the first responses to the publication of *The Waste Land* the author of the article printed in the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote that “[B]etween the emotion from which a poem rises and the reader there is always a cultural layer of more or less density from which the images or characters in which it is expressed may be drawn” (“A Zig-Zag of Allusion” 616). The poem’s cultural layer is indeed very dense as well as extensive. To recognise it, one needs education well above the mass level. For some of the first commentators it was a sign of the author’s immense learning and some considered it too intellectual, or too esoteric and deliberately mystifying (Munson 156), while others found it to be a “mad medley,” “a smoke-screen of anthropological and literary erudition,” owing its inspiration not only to Frazer and Weston, but “to Spenser, Shakespeare, Webster, Kyd, Middleton, Milton, Marvell, Goldsmith, Ezekiel, Buddha, Virgil, Ovid, Dante, St Augustine, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and others.” Moreover, as the author continues, “[L]ines of German, French and Italian are thrown in at will or whim; so, too, are solos from nightingales, cocks, hermit-thrushes, and Ophelia,” resulting not in the waste land, but rather the “waste paper” (Powell 156).

Ambiguous responses to the poem’s (multi)cultural background occurred also among critics drawing on similar critical orientation, like the American New Critics. While for John Crowe Ransom, for example, the problem of *The Waste Land* was in the fragmentariness and the disconnection of its individual cultural allusions, I. A. Richards on the other hand saw allusions as technical devices of compression (274). A thorough analysis of themes and symbols, in a truly New Critical way, was offered by Cleanth

Brooks who pointed to the unity of experience created out of the complexity of cultural material. As suggested above, speaking about culture in relation to *The Waste Land*, one is naturally led to the culture of Europe, although as Banerjee claims, “[s]tudying Indic thought with its radically different assumptions, alongside anthropology, comparative religion, and philology, Eliot attempted to go beyond the limits of his own cultural perspective, gaining an appreciation, at the same time, of just how difficult it was to do so” (Banerjee 240).

Despite his Oriental leanings, and being American-born, it is “European culture” which dominates his work. What this concept meant for him was explained in the three lectures given to the German public after WWII, included in his *Christianity and Culture*. Eliot sees Europe here not as a politically rigid territory composed of nation-states, but as a kind of large community consisting of the interpenetration of local, national and international phenomena, competing as well as cooperating in various spheres – economic, political as well as spiritual, drawing on common sources – the culture of Rome, Greece and Israel. Eliot’s ideas here are so modern and up to date, that if one inserted some of his passages to current EU documents, they would appear perfectly compatible. Thus, for example, in the concept of European art he sees “the local tradition, the common European tradition, and the influence of the art of one European country upon another” (“The Unity of European Culture”). Healthy European culture needs, in his opinion, two conditions to be fulfilled:

that the culture of each country should be unique, and that the different cultures should recognise their relationship to each other, so that each should be susceptible of influence from the others,” adding that “this is possible because there is a common element in European culture, an interrelated history of thought and feeling and behaviour, an interchange of arts and of ideas.”

(The Unity of European Culture)

A crucial, though nowadays understood as very controversial, role in the unity of European culture Eliot attributes to religion, on one hand claiming that “no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion” (*Christianity and Culture* 87), but, on the other hand, also saying that “a culture is more than the assemblage of its arts, customs, and religious beliefs.” He speaks, however, of “the common tradition of

Christianity which has made Europe what it is” (“The Unity of European Culture”). Of course, EU documents do not mention any particular religion as dominant in Europe, despite the unsuccessful struggles of not so long ago, during the negotiations about the European constitution, to characterise Europe as primarily Christian. Even though one can agree with the argument of the necessity to “divorce the church and state” and not to allow the Christian Church, or any other Church for that matter, to destroy the mechanisms of civil democracy, the problem of the spiritual and imaginative essence of Europe should not be oversimplified, since “[I]t is in Christianity that our arts have developed; it is in Christianity that the laws of Europe have—until recently—been rooted. It is against a background of Christianity that all our thought has significance” (“The Unity of European Culture”).

Thus again, to truly understand Eliot, one cannot forget that he was “a creature of paradoxes,” complexity and contradictions. It holds true for his approach to Christianity as well, since in *Christianity and Culture* he takes pains to stress that he is not a religious apologist, that “this book does not make any plea for a ‘religious revival’ in a sense with which we are already familiar” (4), that the concept is much more complicated for him and more sociological than connected to the practical, everyday issues of “churchgoing.” As he has further emphasised,

“I attempt, as far as possible, to contemplate my problems from the point of view of the sociologist, and not from that of the Christian apologist. Most of my generalisations are intended to have some applicability to all religion, and not only to Christianity; and when, as in what follows in this chapter, I discuss Christian matters, that is because I am particularly concerned with Christian culture, with the Western World, with Europe, and with England.”

(*Christianity and Culture* 143)

The strong position of Christianity, as the historically most important European religion, is key in Eliot’s conception of the cultural unity of Europe. It emerged as such, however, only later in his career – after he joined the Church of England in 1927. In *The Waste Land*, the omnipresent European cultural background was primarily created by more heterogeneous means of myth, history and art, all embodied in intertextual references and allusions. There are, in fact, just a few words which do not allude to

other textual realities. Eliot himself confirmed it by revealing his sources in his famous “notes” to the poem’s first book publication (which he slightly ridiculed later) – like Edgar Allan Poe, his famous American predecessor, who also attempted to guide readers into the intricacies and symbolism of his “The Raven” (see Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition”), creating confusion as well as the disbelief of some and the admiration of others. It would thus be difficult, if not useless, to repeat Eliot’s explanation of the sources, or to elaborate on them and bring new links or forgotten allusions, for – over the years – it has been done by many of the poem’s commentators and critics. To understand the poem more fully, and in an “Eliotian” way, it seems better to mix the “tradition and individual talent,” or the cultural and individual perception; reading the poem as a poem with the support of intellectual and cultural scaffolding (Brooks 185).

The very first lines of the poem<sup>4</sup> invite such an approach. Its motto “Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi / in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; / respondebat illa: ἄπο Θανείν θέλω.” immediately takes even a casual reader to the “intellectual and cultural scaffolding.” The heart of European culture, the ancient Greek and Latin mythology and literature, sets the tone for the whole poem, not only formally (using fragments of past works), but also thematically. In the image of the Sybil of Cumae hanging in a cage Eliot introduces the poem’s leitmotif – “the unbearable lightness of being.” The Sybil was given eternal life by Apollo, but, because she refused to be his lover, she was not granted eternal youth. Therefore, she lives for as many years as there are grains in a “handful of dust,” but her life is not full, being just a fragment of what it used to be, and losing its substance as she becomes older and lighter and lighter; not dying, even though she wishes to die. The lost substance is explored throughout the poem. It emerges in an incredibly rich intertextual world made up of fragments from various times and places.

The poem is divided into 5 parts of various lengths. Its final form, however, is the result of an incredibly long creative process, both at the level of composition as well as the poet’s internal imaginative processing of his worldly suffering into this ontological cleansing. The compositional process is usually associated with Ezra Pound’s almost

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<sup>4</sup> My reading is based on *A Norton Critical Edition: T. S. Eliot The Waste Land*, edited by Michael North.

“co-authorial” reshuffling, which is, after all, said to have given the poem its internal coherence and force. However, it would not have been possible without “the fire” of Eliot’s primary mental wanderings into the fragmented world of the cultural past and present, of which he tried to make sense – in a truly modernistic way.

The first part, “The Burial of the Dead,” is a straightforward beginning of the author’s “past and present” play. Even without being aware that the title is commonly understood as a reference to the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, one can sense in it a more general, universal coming to terms with the necessity of an end and a new beginning. Such duality is typical for all of Eliot’s references, which are both allusions to something else as well as standing on their own. The end-beginning imaginative move is clearly visible in the first lines of the text as well. “April is the cruellest month” must remind an informed reader of *The Canterbury Tales*: “When that Aprilis, with his showers swoot, / The drought of March hath pierced to the root” (Chaucer), although here the expressions evoke the opposite emotion.

While for Chaucer April marks the beginning of spring, joy, and an awakening to new life, for Eliot it is the “cruellest month,” marking the end of warmth and forgetfulness, and exposing the naked waste of the land. However, it is suddenly exchanged for summer with a hidden motif of love, and a geographical jump from medieval England to German Starnbergersee and Hofgarten, seemingly taking the reader to the author’s own childhood; though, at the same time, appearing to be a reminiscence of a past encounter which, in turn, takes one to an even more distant past of Austrian nobility (see the note on this allusion in North 5). And again, even without being able to trace its cultural, historical or personal source, the use of German, alongside the previously mentioned place names of Starnbergersee and Hofgarten, as in “Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch,” lends the paragraph another intercultural layer, further intensified by “Russin” and “Litauen.” Moreover, when one learns that Lake Starnberg is in fact the place where King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who was very fond of Richard Wagner’s work (to which Eliot refers through another German quotation, “Frisch weht der Wind / Der Heimat zu, / Mein Irisch Kind / Wo weilest du?”) and listened to it in an artificial cave and rode sledges drawn by horses at night, one may begin to feel as if you are falling into a vortex in which individual artefacts blend into a totality of cultural impact.

The following stanza is a real tour de force of existential anxiety at the background of the desert (and deserted) land:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

(5–6)

Again, what one finds here is an overpowering cultural biblical context (see Eliot's own note on this in North 21), interrelated with the previous reference from the motto (Sybil's wish to live as many years as there are grains in a "handful of dust") as well as with Eliot's own near obsession with the motif of "shadow." The stanza is a very direct expression of the theme of "waste land," of civilizational dryness and lack of hope, of his times' "broken" images not rooted in any kind of refreshing life source – as the land here is a stony one without any water producing shadows which give protection from the sun, but follow us as reminders of a loss. By definition, a shadow is something immaterial, but, at the same time, retains the relation to a material source without which it could not exist. It is a manifestation of what postmodern theory terms simulacrum, which also lacks substantiality. Eliot here imaginatively stretches the cultural emptying out into its extreme.

In addition to the famous Tarot card section of "Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante," rich with other cultural allusions and implying another way of shadowing, shallowing or de-substantialising reality, the part ends with a jump into the "Unreal City." It is the London of the present, with its crowds flowing over London

Bridge – being compared to the human shadows from Dante’s *Inferno* – and then, suddenly, shifts to someone called “Stetson” brought back trans historically to Mylae, the site of the ancient battle between Carthage and Rome.

The next part continues this fragmentation and de-historising of history and culture. Named “A Game of Chess,” it could also be understood culturally and metaphorically, since it refers to a well-known game based on intellectual “manipulation” as well as to cultural phenomena (North 8). Here we can also find maybe the most direct expression of Eliot’s personal anxieties resulting from an unhappy marriage with Vivienne Haigh-Wood:

“My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

“Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.

“What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

“I never know what you are thinking. Think.”

(9)

There are other allusions to the present (war, pub drinking), but again, not without references to Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest*, or a story from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The third part, “The Fire Sermon,” develops the cultural inroads into English literature by alluding to *Prothalamion* by Edmund Spenser (“Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song, / Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long”) and Andrew Marvell’s *To His Coy Mistress* (“But at my back from time to time I hear / The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring”). In the latter reference, Eliot continues Marvell’s ironical treatment of a lady not willing to enjoy herself with the poet (“But at my back I always hear / Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near”). Sexual overtones are strengthened in the image of the typist’s abandonment by a lover and Tyresias’ transgender nature. The final lines of the part display the motif of an intense heat:

Burning burning burning burning

o Lord Thou pluckest me out

o Lord Thou pluckest  
burning

(15)

Eliot himself explained it in his notes by reference to the Buddha's Fire Sermon (see the note 308 in North, p. 25). This is one of a few "non-European" references in the poem, proving, in fact, not only the nonsense of Eliot's supposed cultural conservatism (at some point in time he was immersed in the study of Oriental wisdom) (LeCarner), but of the poem's universal aspiration. "Death by Water" is the shortest and undoubtedly the most poetical part of *The Waste Land*. It returns to the character of Phlebas, the drowned Phoenician sailor who was first introduced in "The Burial of the Dead." The overwhelming theme the part expresses is that of time, and loss in and through time, which results in sadness and existential grief:

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss.  
A current under sea  
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell  
  
He passed the stages of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool.  
Gentile or Jew  
o you who turn the wheel and look to windward,  
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

(16)

The part is most fragmented even among the other fragments. It is very short and differs by its lyricism, as if cancelling out what Eliot had been painfully trying to express in previous sections. Though maybe because of that it paradoxically fits into the composition. Eliot originally wanted to leave it out entirely, but, after all, preserved it due to Pound's advice. Again, critics find in it not only personal lyricism, but inter-cultural overtones going back to Eliot's acknowledged original mythological inspiration, Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, where waters restore the dry waste land into its

fertility again. Water here, however, is juxtaposed with death, as if even its surplus would not save the world from forgiveness.

After the excess of water in “Death by Water,” the poem’s final part, “What the Thunder Said,” begins with its catastrophically deadening lack, following the depiction of the crucifixion scene (“he who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying” [...] “Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road”). It then assumes the intensity of a speeding apocalypse (“Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air / Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal”), to be substituted with more surreal images of decay, and the voice of thunder, expected to bring rain to the “jungle crouched, humped in silence.” Then the thunder speaks, uttering a single syllable “Da,” the same but understood differently by those to whom it was addressed (see Eliot’s note 401 in which he says that the meaning of the voice of thunder can be found in the *Upanishads*; North 25). Although Eliot himself in his notes gives sources for these final images, their force is greater when left to stand on their own. As such they express the beginning in the end, order in chaos, and peace in understanding – as he suggested in his final note, commenting on the nonsense word “Shantih,” which ends the poem.

There is not much to be said on the conclusion, since, by its nature, the poem does not offer any conclusion or any closure. It is a tour de force of strong imagination bordering on incomprehensibility, displaying in a nutshell not only the cultural and intellectual history of Europe, based on our shared sources (Rome, Greece, Israel), but Oriental wisdom as well. Almost every word in the poem is an allusion or reference to an external phenomenon as well as to the author’s internal sense of being.

Although its fragmented nature seems to suit a postmodern sense of the self, it does not suit its lack of involvement, for *The Waste Land* is anything but a play of signifiers. And as such, it is still a warning and hope.

# Wallace Stevens

The image plays an important role in the work of another American author –Wallace Stevens. Although he was not part of the “inner circle” of Imagists, his close association with some of its members (especially William Carlos Williams), as Juhasz claims, “brought him near the vortex of Imagist theory and practice... [and] no doubt spurred his own experiments in this vein” (18 n). His poems are “speculations about the nature of man and of the world” (16), using metaphor both as the principal figure through which he aims to express it as well as, again, the principal “obstacle” (16).

One of his first and perhaps most famous poems, which deals with the essentiality of reality, is the frequently anthologised “The Snow Man”:

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;  
And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter  
Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
in the sound of a few leaves,  
Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place  
For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

(Stevens, *The Collected Poems* 9–10)

The poem is a simple and clear, almost non-figurative, depiction of the reality of winter and the (im)possibility of a human perception of it. On one hand, there is nature: winter with its images (the frost, boughs, pine-trees, snow). On the other hand, the

mind: a human being, separated from and foreign to nature, facing loneliness and misery. Their point of contact is their point of departure – from oneself to the other, expressing the difficulty of figuration: “One must have a mind of winter,” if one wants to “behold” it, in the light of its “distant glitter,” which is the light of the essence.

The metaphor of such beholding is expressed by the snowman, the snow and the man, the man of snow. It is a non-representational trope, a human thing, balanced between the two worlds, striving to express the sensation of their unity, to unite the thing external with the thing internal. According to Perkins, it is “a metaphor of a metaphor [...] a metaphor of a ‘mind of winter’, and this, in turn, is a metaphor of something even more abstract: a mind that entertains nothingness.” But since nothingness is ultimately un-metaphorical and un-figurative, “The Snow Man” is also “a radical critique of representation” (Hartman 15); the critique through which he hoped to defy the commonly known fact that “things stand over against us” (Bottum 214). Stevens himself makes it very clear in his other poems – “The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it” (*The Collected Poems* 465) as well as in various occasional statements such as “A poem is like a natural object” (205). But what is important here is the “like,” an indication of the metaphorical nature of perception, since if it were not for the “like,” we would have no means to know it.

While “The Snow Man” is a figurative image of looming non-figurativeness, and a glimpse of a perceived nothingness, the poem “Of Mere Being” is tense with the poetic suggestion of utmost strangeness – a silent and artificially fragile epiphany of being:

The palm at the end of the mind,  
Beyond the last thought, rises  
In the bronze decor,  
A gold feathered bird  
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,  
Without human feeling, a foreign song.  
You know then that it is not the reason  
That makes us happy or unhappy.  
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.  
The wind moves slowly in the branches.  
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

*(Opus Posthumous 141)*

Like the "The Snow Man," "Of Mere Being" shows both a division and a unity. The division between the world of "human meaning" and "human feeling" and the realm of the other where such qualities are absent. The otherness is suggested by a metonymical image of "A gold feathered bird" that "Sings in the palm." The bird sings, but the song is not human, it expresses neither a meaning nor a feeling, as the world "at the end of the mind" may not bear such qualities. But "[i]s this not to prove the ultimate creativity of self, of the mind which must always conceive a reality beyond form or metaphor, beyond thought, but nevertheless at the end of, not outside, the mind?" (Riddel). A reality which would be playful, arbitrarily colourful, non-referential, the result of the mind's loss in itself, but despite its effort to show the beyond, still only an absolute opposite of the "physical thing," the other extreme of metaphor towards which image always gravitates, pulled by an irresistible force.

# The Lost Generation

“You are a lost generation” – these are the famous words of Gertrude Stein used as a motto in Hemingway’s novel *The Sun Also Rises* – a programmatic work of a generation of American writers who left the USA and spent a considerable part of their careers in post WWI Europe. They fled America because of dissatisfaction with its values and conventions, its institutions and morality, and went to European capitals; mostly London and Paris, but also Barcelona, Madrid, and Rome. In Europe, they participated in significant events affecting the continent and tried to reflect them in a new style of writing (economy of language, symbolism, fragmentation, and pictorial language), since the old Victorian ways based on writers’ ethical treatment of social issues were not applicable for the depiction of distress in the aftermath of WWI. The presence of war affected their own lives and values, estranging them to the common, simple pleasures of human existence, and making them abandoned and lost. Although the “Lost Generation” was never a group with fixed membership or statutes, scholars usually agree that the most important artists included in the group are Ernest Hemingway, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein as their “tutor.”

If one of the most important features of modernism was a new way and style of writing, then Ernest Hemingway cannot be excluded from the list of prominent stylistic innovators. He is usually characterised as a person who brought simplicity of expression but complexity of thought. His often quoted “iceberg theory” forces the reader to read between the lines to get to the meaning of simple and clear sentences. There is no doubt that such linguistic “minimalism” is also associated with his initial journalistic experience at the *Kansas City Star* where he worked after finishing the Oak Park high school. The reporters there had to follow the journal’s style, summarised into a style sheet consisting of 110 directives: “Ernest himself later said the 110 directives were ‘the best rules I’ve ever learned for the business of writing. I’ve never forgotten them.’ The main precepts were ‘Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative’” (Dearborn 46). Hemingway’s avoidance of clichéd adjectives also stems from his journalistic Kansas City experience: “One example Ernest provided of the style sheet in action was that reporters were never to say anyone was ‘seriously injured. All injuries are serious. [The victim] was, as I recall,

slightly injured or dangerously injured.’ Another dictum was to avoid adjectives, especially words like ‘gorgeous,’ ‘grand,’ or ‘marvellous.’ Similarly, ‘Slang to be enjoyable must be fresh’” (Dearborn 46).

Hemingway’s unique minimalism is most clearly visible in his short stories. In “Hills Like White Elephants,” for example, he plays out a complicated human relationship with just a few simple sentences and two characters – a girl named Jig and her companion or lover, referred to as the American, waiting for a train in a station somewhere in Spain. The conversation is short, first about the drinks they are going to have and then, without any warning for the reader about an operation. Only later do we realise that the “operation” is most probably abortion, though the word is never used in the story. Despite the shortness and simplicity of sentences, it is clear that the man insists on the going for an abortion, though, again, never saying it out loud. Jig’s responses show her unwillingness to do it, as well as her realisation of her partner’s attempt to persuade her to do it – again, not openly stated and rather sarcastic:

“If I do it you won’t ever worry?”

“I won’t worry about that because it’s perfectly simple.”

“Then I’ll do it. Because I don’t care about me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t care about me.”

“Well, I care about you.”

“Oh, yes. But I don’t care about me. And I’ll do it and then everything will be fine.”

“I don’t want you to do it if you feel that way.”

(Hemingway 213)

The story’s setting is also very important. As Renner has it, “[T]o follow the girl’s development in ‘Hills Like White Elephants,’ it is essential to have a clear sense of the setting in which the development takes place” (28). Train stations are usually the places through which people come from one direction and go in another. Here, symbolically, from one way of life to another. There are two directions, two lines of rails with the

station in the middle, two sides of the valley with two landscapes, again divided by the station. While “on this side there was no shade and no trees” (Hemingway 211), on the other side “were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro” (213). Renner sees in it a symbolic intertwining of setting and conflict. “The choice of abortion is associated with the arid sterility of the hills on the barren side of the valley and by extension, with the aimless hedonistic life they have been leading. The choice of having the child is associated with the living, growing things on the other side of the valley...” (28).

The short story is frequently discussed also because of its open ending. The reader, in fact, does not know whether the girl will go for the operation or succumb to her unexpressed, yet very strong, wish to keep the child.

While Hemingway’s short stories are usually referred to as examples of a minimalistic style, some of his longer works are important reflections of crucial European events occurring in the first half of the twentieth century. The first time Hemingway came to Europe was in May 1918 to take part in WWI as a volunteer ambulance driver for the Red Cross on the Italian front. In just a few days he was wounded by a shrapnel from a bomb that exploded very near and killed a person who stood close to him. After his hospital treatment in Milan, where he met his first love (the American nurse Agnes von Kurowsky) he left for America only to come back again in 1921 – this time to Paris and accompanied by his first wife, Hadley Richardson. Paris became the city which most significantly influenced Hemingway’s work, making him a representative of the “lost generation.” Most critics therefore consider Paris as a “Mecca” of American literary expatriation; identified by many Americans with the “rejection of conservative mores in America, sexual liberation and alcohol consumption, creative cross-fertilization, and so on” (Herlihy-Mera 49).

In *The Sun Also Rises*, the company of Americans indeed do not pursue meaningful activities other than drinking and dancing. It must be said, however, that the city does not play a crucial role in it, for they do the same in Spanish Pamplona where they come to see the famous bullfighting. The motif of excessive drinking then seems to be rather typical of Hemingway’s writing, probably resulting from the author’s own drinking habits.

The novel is generally perceived as a portrayal of the “lost generation” and its disillusionment after WWI. Its protagonist, Jake Barnes, had suffered an unspecified wound in the war, which made him impotent – both physically as well as spiritually – and unable to have a meaningful relationship with his love Brett Ashley. Brett likes Jake, but she likes other men as well, which does not result in any strong sensation in Jake. He tries to make up for the loss of Brett by intensifying his “social” activities – partying in Paris and going with his friends to bullfights associated with excessive drinking during the San Fermín festival in Pamplona. His friends are also “lost,” and unable to care about conventional American values. What Jake’s friend Bill tells him may be a true picture of them all as well: “You’re an expatriate. You’ve lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafés” (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 100). Their loss is thus an American loss, for they find themselves away from home (which many of them despise) and its culture, unable to make sense of life on foreign ground, and when fighting in foreign wars.

Whilst in *The Sun Also Rises* the war is hidden (only its consequences are visible in the protagonist’s destruction), the protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms* finds himself right in the middle of it. It is a story of love between an American ambulance driver at the Italian front during WWI, the “tenente” Frederic Henry, and his pretty Scottish nurse, Catherine Barkley. The depiction of Henry’s wounding and his subsequent stay at an American hospital in Milan, where he is treated by Catherine Barkley, is freely based on what happened to Hemingway himself. The couple’s fleeing on a boat to Switzerland is their attempt to make “separate peace” for themselves, which, however, cannot be enjoyed since Catherine dies in childbirth.

While *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* are more or less related to WWI (either through its devastating effects on the psychic life of soldiers or through the writer’s direct portrayal of the fighting and its consequences for the human psyche), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* depicts a few days in the life of an American volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. In it, Hemingway expressed one of modernism’s significant themes – the analysis of existential anxiety at the background of great social events. Although the story centres on Robert Jordan, a dynamiter given the task to blow up a bridge, it

also portrays the “historical violence of the Spanish Civil War” as well as “a metaphysical violence,” using “war symbolically, as a frame or correlative, for the inner crisis that springs from the recognition of the self, its existence and its annihilation” (Allen 204). As in *A Farewell to Arms*, there is death at the end, though this time it is not a woman who dies, but a man. The last scene leaves Robert Jordan wounded, facing his own unavoidable destruction, and, through personal sacrifice, giving a chance to his comrades to escape.

What is unique about this novel is that it shows not only a personal crisis, but the crisis of humanity which escaped the carnage of the first “war of the world” only to plunge into a second one. In between the wars there was a bloody struggle of nationalists and republicans in Spain, or, to put it maybe simplistically, in the line of this work’s main theme, a struggle of conservatism with modernism. The conservatives (including also extreme far right elements, fascists, nationalists, monarchists or orthodox Catholics) won and under the leadership of Francisco Franco ruled in Spain until 1975. Despite being labelled as modernists, the other side included all sorts of left-wing extremists (communists and socialists), but also republicans – and generally included the poorer parts of society. In the novel there are several descriptions of atrocities committed by both parties, e.g. Pilar’s description of the brutal murdering of fascists or the bombing and finally beheading of the guerrilla leader El Sordo and his group. In both cases life is “subordinated” to ideological hatred. The reader suddenly realises that humanity and culture come second, and what is important for the protagonists is just the naked fact of war. The depiction of this “spirit of war,” of all wars, is perhaps one of the lasting successes of Hemingway’s creative ability. In the introduction to the Scribner edition of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Jeremy Bowen compares the portrayal of the Spanish Civil War to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993:

The smell of horse sweat, the wooden saddles laden with ammunition, the soldiers’ tobacco, the trail that went uphill through the forest and then out into the high, sun-roasted mountains of Herzegovina, all transported me back to Hemingway’s novel. The fact that it was even possible to hear the echoes of a novel in the middle of the nasty, dangerous reality of the Balkans in the early

1990s shows how successfully Hemingway got into the minds of people who find themselves caught up in a war.

(1)

Had Hemingway finished his writing career here, we could describe him as one of the literary geniuses of the twentieth century – analysing the Euro-American cultural and social tensions during the time of armed conflict, and its consequences for human existence. However, he continued with other themes, which eventually earned him the Nobel Prize for literature, “for his mastery of the art of narrative, most recently demonstrated in *The Old Man and the Sea*, and for the influence that he has exerted on contemporary style” (*The Nobel Prize*, The Nobel Prize in Literature 1954). He ended his life by committing suicide in 1961.

There is perhaps no better embodiment of the “roaring” 1920s, or the Jazz Age, than Francis Scott Fitzgerald. The decade is associated with several unforgettable phenomena, namely, the so-called Prohibition Era (1919 – 1933), during which Americans experienced a ban on the consumption of alcohol (which, in turn, led to bootlegging, speakeasies and, consequently, the rise of organised crime – Al Capone), the popularisation and rapid success of jazz music, the growing popularity of moving pictures, the rise of Hollywood and investment craziness at Wall Street. Americans suddenly found themselves obsessed with music, dancing, alcohol and sex, all inevitably coming to a sudden and brutal halt in the form of the Stock Market Crash in 1929, followed by the Great Depression. Although most of these events were made themes in Fitzgerald’s short stories and novels, one must say that they were also the themes of his own life, which was also crazy and glamorous, full of heavy drinking and frantic work to pay for it, and which also led to a sudden stop in the form of a fatal heart attack – and also his wife Zelda’s death in a mental hospital just a few years later.

Fitzgerald addressed these themes both in his short stories as well as in his novels. According to Sutton, “[U]sually, the pattern in Fitzgerald’s fiction is for material to appear first in his short stories and later in his novels” (164). In “Babylon Revisited,” the author depicts the return of the protagonist Charlie Wales to Paris, the scene of his previous “wild life,” led during the pre-Depression glaring years, and ended in the tragedy of his wife’s death, in order to get his daughter Honoria from the legal

guardianship of his sister-in-law. Charlie is constantly reminded of his past excesses, and, despite his strong effort in presenting himself as a person who managed to move on from his previous life and start a successful business, he nevertheless fails to achieve his goal due to the interference of his old friends who force themselves back into his life again.

A very similar motif, an effort to overcome the past, to win back the past love, or, as Sutton has it, to win “back a female who was once his” (165), can be found in his masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*. But this is not the only similarity. “Both works portray money, when not honestly earned, as corrupting that past innocence” (Sutton 165). Gatsby’s attempts to “recover” the love of Daisy Buchanan are, however, also precluded by his problematic past; namely, his suspicious way of making money.

The novel is also a great imaginative discussion of the American Dream, or rather its failure. Gatsby has managed to make big money to attract Daisy, but it does not bring him happiness or love. In the end, Daisy decides to stay with her husband and Gatsby is killed. Thus, as Hearne has it, “Fitzgerald sees the American dream—its ideology and its very character—as a contradiction to and a distortion of reality” (190), not as a fulfilment of romantic notions of love, happiness, and wealth. As the “roaring twenties” came to an end in disaster and death, metaphorically as well as physically, for the many newly rich – thus Gatsby inevitably meets the same destiny.

# Literature of the American South

Since the very beginning of the formation of American culture, the south has shaped itself as a distinct cultural and economic entity. Its humid climate favoured agriculture based on the growing of tobacco and cotton and the use of slave work, both on plantations and as personal servants to attend the quasi-aristocratic families living in great houses built in the Greek style. The Civil War and Reconstruction had disrupted this culture, bringing, among other things, the collapse of traditional values and nostalgia, which, in turn, led to the rise of the myth of the “old South,” with handsome gentlemen and pure southern “belles,” created in a number of sentimental cheap works.

The writer who made the myth of the South a theme of most of his works was William Faulkner. Born in the South and living there for almost all of his life, he tried to chronicle its imaginative history in many short stories and novels. Most of them depict the largely conservative southern communities plagued with racial tensions; presenting their local destinies, usually set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, as universal human appeals – as “the old verities and truths of the heart” (Faulkner, *The Nobel Prize*).

In his widely anthologised short story “A Rose for Emily,” Faulkner portrays the “decay” of a once famous family through the fate of an isolated and lost woman, not suited to the modern world. However, the theme is depicted much more intensively, and in a more elaborate form, in *The Sound and the Fury* – his first great novel. It is a story of four members of the Compson family – Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and the black servant Dilsey. Each part is told in a different narrative style and time frame, making it difficult for the reader to grasp the incidents in their temporal development.

The first part is presented through the mind of Benjy, a mentally handicapped adult person, in broken and metaphorically coloured utterances. On “April Seventh, 1928” (as this part is named), Benjy, aged 33, and his younger companion Luster are watching a golf game. Benjy does not understand the game. He sees just the material things and movements, without comprehending their meaning, their abstract significance:

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward where the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster

was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass.

(*The Sound and the Fury*, locations 79–83).

Passing through a hole in the broken fence, Benjy snagged on a nail, which immediately sent his mind many years back to the time when he was crossing a fence with his sister Caddie:

‘Wait a minute.’ Luster said. ‘You snagged on that nail again. Can’t you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail.’

*Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, so we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see. We stooped over and crossed the garden, where the flowers rasped and rattled against us. The ground was hard. We climbed the fence, where the pigs were grunting and snuffing. I expect they’re sorry because one of them got killed today, Caddy said. The ground was hard, churned and knotted.*

*Keep your hands in your pockets, Caddy said. Or they’ll get froze. You don’t want your hands froze on Christmas, do you.*

(locations 98–104).

The shifts in time, signalled by italics, is how Benjy’s mind works throughout the whole first part. For him and for Quentin, the protagonist of the second part of the book, time is not a progressive movement, but a series of stable flashes, existing in eternal or coincidental presents (Roggenbuck 581). What is also typical for Benjy are his synesthetic abilities –smelling the cold, smelling the sickness, his hands seeing the slipper – which create peculiar sensations for the reader, adding strange and fascinating dimensions to the “established” qualities of things.

As the title of the second part indicates, “June Second 1910,” we move many years in to the past, to the time of Benjy’s temporal jumps in the first part, following his brother

Quentin's coming to study at Harvard, and his suicide. The narrative style here is also highly "modernistic," almost a Joycean stream of consciousness. Unlike Benjy, Quentin is an intellectually capable person, though also carrying a curse – a disorganised consciousness, obsessed by time and family disintegration, falling into inevitable collapse:

*"seeing on the rushing darkness only his own face no broken feather unless two of them but not two like that going to Boston the same night then my face his face for an instant across the crashing when out of darkness two lighted windows in rigid fleeing crash gone his face and mine just I see saw did I see not good-bye the marquee empty of eating the road empty in darkness in silence the bridge arching into silence darkness sleep the water peaceful and swift not good-bye."*

(locations 2804–2807).

To allow Quentin to go to Harvard, the family had to sell land belonging to Benjy, arousing in Quentin pangs of conscience. He is archetypally obsessed with water, which finally causes his death. In addition to the motif of water, Quentin is also tormenting himself by his almost erotic obsession with his sister Caddy who fell into disgrace by having an illegal affair and an illegitimate daughter Quentin, who, in turn, in the third part, is in conflict with her uncle Jason, Caddy and Quentin's brother.

Jason's part, entitled "April Sixth 1928," is the first of the last two stylistically "normal" parts. Jason Compson is the "black sheep of the family," in the sense that, unlike Benjy and Quentin, he is pragmatically obsessed with money and lacks any scruples. He steals money from his niece Quentin as well as his mother, even though the mother (a secluded egotistic hypochondriac) is fond of him and considers him the best of all her children. Jason is a symbol of the "new times" to which the rest of the family could not adapt, though his is also the destiny of a fall into disgrace. The last section, "April Eighth 1928," is focused on Dilsey – a black servant who keeps the family together, since she is the only person who is in fact "normal," not obsessed with anything. She takes care of Benjy and is not afraid to scold Jason and his niece Quentin for their conflicts. The "normalcy" of Dilsey is also signalled by the use of omniscient narrator.

All in all, the novel is one of the finest examples of twentieth century American literature. The author used a highly modernistic narrative style to portray "a plague"

the once aristocratic South has to face in modern times; the inevitable breaking of the link to land and traditional ways of life. The disintegration is presented through the archetypal images of earth, fire and water, all leading the characters to their collapse, except for Dilsey who becomes the symbol of a healthy attitude to life.

In addition to the towering personality of William Faulkner, the American South can boast of other similarly famous literary personalities including Truman Capote (the author of *In Cold Blood*, one of the first nonfiction novels), Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor (the famous Catholic novelist using the so-called Southern Gothic style), and even Harper Lee (the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a famous novel displaying the conflict between the law and the code) (Stevens).

The latter is an example of how, even long after the Civil War, the South is still ruled by racism present in people's heads; that is, by the code clearly restricting the black population to clearly defined roles and behaviour in comparison to the whites, despite the fact that the law considers them equal. The story is told from the point of view of the young Jean Louise Finch (nicknamed Scout) whose father defends Tom Robinson, a black person charged with raping a white woman. Seeing his conviction in court and later death (despite his innocence), Scout gradually learns that many people in her town are unjust, racist, and even outright dangerous. The novel may thus be seen as yet another version of the treatment of southern society, including its racism, from the point of view of a small child; a twentieth century modification of Tom Sawyer's or Huckleberry Finn's adventures.

# African American Literature

The beginnings of African American literature can be traced back to the times of slavery, when authors of African descent living in the USA began to write, in the so called “slave narratives,” about their experience of being slaves or escaping from slavery. One of the most famous of such accounts is Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). The first attempts at literary creation, however, can be traced back to a more distant past, that is to the work of Phillis Wheatley (1753 – 1784) who was the first black woman writing poetry in colonial America.

Naturally, the most frequent themes in African American literature include slavery, racial relations, ethnicity, protest, the struggle for equality with the majority population, etc. Although slavery had ended by the end of the Civil War, it became part of African American historical memory and therefore it was depicted in 20th and 21st century literary works as well, though it was usually placed within a larger cultural context. One of such contexts was the so-called Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, during which there was a significant rise of Black culture and arts. The movement’s centre was Harlem, a New York borough with a majority black population. It was not restricted to literature, but, as has been indicated, encompassed wider cultural areas, especially one of the new musical expressions of the country’s black population – jazz.

The poet who perhaps best embodied the Harlem Renaissance was Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967). Born in Joplin, Missouri, he lived in several other Midwestern towns before moving to New York and becoming a central literary figure of this artistic movement. What characterises Hughes best is his simplicity, stemming from his attempt to write poetry for common black people whom he sees not in opposition and enmity to white people, but in the proudness in black identity and heritage, as well as linking poetry with music. Hughes’ “metaphysics of simplicity” (Henzy 915) and his way of addressing the common (black) people earned him a comparison to Walt Whitman.

The Whitman variation was best expressed in his short poem “I, too” in which he is aware of racial inequality but hopes that this will disappear in the future. The poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (first published in 1921 in the journal *The Crisis* and later

collected into his first book of poems *The Weary Blues* in 1926) treats identity differently, concentrating on its historical context. In an almost archetypal string of images, the poet sees the blacks as an ancient race, existing long before their coming to America. The symbols of this ancient existence are rivers, the Euphrates, the Nile, the Congo, and the Mississippi. They symbolise movement as well as permanence and the lyrical subject draws strength and rootedness from them. The musical inspiration of Hughes' poetry is best visible in his "The Weary Blues" – the poem whose lyrical subject watches a black piano player perform in a Harlem bar. The sound and the movements of the player express his existential sadness and "weariness," which can be metaphorically transferred to the fate of the whole race. Although the ethnic colouring of the poem is undeniable, "I heard a Negro play," it is, however, not devoid of reference to a universal human "weariness" as well.

While Hughes' artistic aspiration was to address simple black people using simple, though not simplistic, language, another African American writer associated with Harlem (but not a member of the Harlem Renaissance group) was Ralph Waldo Ellison (1913 – 1994). If Hughes is primarily associated with his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (some scholars say that, had he not written anything else, he would have become a literary celebrity anyway), Ralph Ellison's masterpiece is *Invisible Man*. The novel was published in 1952 and in 1953 was immediately recognised by the National Book Award, which brought its author many honours and a permanent place in the pantheon of American literature. The novel was not only great, but it was the only one he wrote during his life. It addresses several issues that affected African Americans, especially their identity and racial tensions. The narrator's invisibility is a sign of the attitude of society towards the black community, but the meaning of the novel cannot be restricted to racial problems. What we see in it is also a story of a black boy who relocates from the rural South (having been expelled from an all-black college) to industrial New York and comes into contact with socialist or communist ideas and groups. Although the consciousness of the narrator's black identity as well as the setting (Harlem) is omnipresent in the novel, Ellison was not a black nationalist, but rather a black writer who was heavily influenced by great artists (R. W. Emerson, M.

Twain, F. Dostoevsky, T. S. Eliot, E. Hemingway, W. Faulkner) – irrespective of the colour of their skin.

# The Beat Generation

While WWI is usually said to have been the main influence on the writers of the Lost Generation, WWII may be said to have been a catalyst for the rise of the Beat Generation – a group of various people who saw themselves as the opponents of everything that traditional American morality consisted of. They searched for liberation in alcohol, sex (including openness in gay and lesbian practices), new forms of music and writing (often “enhancing” their creative potential through experimentation with drugs) as well as in Eastern philosophy, most often Buddhism. The “Beats” were not a homogeneous group, but a free association of friends and friends’ friends who shared their pacifist and anti-establishment views. The two most important centres of “Beat” activities were New York and San Francisco. In the 1960s they were substituted by the “Hippies” who added pacifism and anti-establishment activities to their agenda. The two most significant representatives of the Beat Generation were Jack Kerouac (1922 – 1969) and Allen Ginsberg (1926 – 1997).

Jack Kerouac was of Canadian American ancestry with strong Catholic leanings. Even though he wrote several novels, the work in which the values of his generation were best expressed was his “roman-à-clef” *On the Road*. The novel is significant for at least two reasons:

1. it is based on the author’s own experience from his “wild drinking travels” across America as well as Mexico, with real people standing for fictional characters, and
2. the author used the method of “spontaneous prose.”

Its first version was written on a continuous scroll of paper without punctuation or paragraphs, and with graphic language depicting drinking and sexual sprees. The company to which the author offered the manuscript refused to publish it, claiming that it was pornographic. It was published only in 1957 when Kerouac changed the names of characters (the Neal Cassady of the first version becoming Dean Moriarty, Jack Kerouac becoming Sal Paradise, Allen Ginsberg turning into Carlo Marx, etc.). Kerouac also made the style less “spontaneous” (introducing paragraphs), and slightly “civilised” the language. With or without the changes, the novel became an American

classic, exploring themes like a lack of home, constant movement and life on the road; all of which, in fact, go back to the beginnings of American civilisation, that is, to the arriving of the first colonists, their permanent forays into the wilderness, and the colonisation of the West.

It may be said, however, that these archetypally American themes were, in Kerouac's handling, enriched by something more significant: a spiritual quest – though not everyone has been able to see it. For example, as Prothero claims with regard to the whole movement, contemporary critics have inherited two key interpretive approaches to the Beats: “first, the tendency to view the beat movement rather narrowly as a literary and cultural impulse; and second, the inclination to judge this impulse negatively, as a *revolt against* rather than a *protest for* something” (205). Unlike other critics, he considers them “spiritual protesters as well as literary innovators” (208). The travels of Sal Paradise (Kerouac's travels) across America in *On the Road* do indeed contain a spiritual element, and one could perhaps say the same of all the other “Beats”; however their spirituality stems rather from protest than a search for God.

Allen Ginsberg was perhaps the most controversial of the Beats. Although one can say that the words that characterise him best are “counterculture” and “anti-establishment,” he also looks back to the “official” American cultural history for inspiration, and finds it, like many other American writers, in Walt Whitman. He openly says it in his poem “A Supermarket in California,” in which Whitman is portrayed as a “childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys” (“A Supermarket in California” 23). This is in the America in which all romantic and noble ideas have been destroyed; leaving its best minds, as he expressed it in his best poem “Howl,” “destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked...” (“Howl 9). The poem refers to Whitman not only thematically, but also through its form – long open sentences, enumerations and free verse, making its author an emulator of the best tradition of American literature, as well as a controversial and scandalous iconoclast.

“Howl,” however, is not a continuation only of the American literary tradition, but as Meyers maintains, “is as densely allusive as *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*” (89). Moreover, among his influences are included Dante, William Blake, the Surrealists, Jack

Kerouac and William Carlos Williams (Meyers 89). Ginsberg, in any case, expressed in it the existential trauma of a generation fed up with the consumerism and traditionalism of the post-WWII American society. The poem was first publicly read at Six Gallery meeting in 1955 and published next year by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore. It caused the attacks of conservative America against its supposed obscene language, ending up in the imprisonment of the store manager and a consequent trial, which, however, resulted in a ruling against the poem's obscenity, and thus, ironically, made it much more famous.

Aside from the scandal that the poem created on the American cultural scene, it also presented an artistically striking picture of a society ruled by money and technology, driving its best minds to madness ("Howl" 9). Its central image, "the best minds of [his] generation destroyed by madness, / starving hysterical naked" ("Howl" 9), initiates the poet's lamenting metaphorical listing of many other evils that befell them. The cause of those evils is provided in the second part of the poem; it is "Moloch" – a Canaanite cruel God embodied in the multiple manifestations of modernistic evils.

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!

Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgement! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!

("Howl" 17)

The third part is a series of addresses to Carl Solomon, a person whom he met in the past in a psychiatric hospital and who was apparently admitted to such a hospital again. In his madness, which he considers holy, Ginsberg sees a cure for the madness

of the world, of his “best minds.” Finally, in the “Footnote to Howl,” he expresses the holiness of everything and everyone, which makes him both universal as well as simplistically childish.

In general, one can say that there was something childish, or adolescent, about the whole Beat movement. On one side, they were deeply suspicious and critical of the establishment, on the other one they were expressing their distaste through petty personal existential protests. The movement had its continuation in the Hippies of the 1960s with their countercultural protests based on non-violence, love and peace.

# Native American Renaissance

Native American Renaissance is a term that denotes the rise of literature and culture of indigenous inhabitants in the territory of the present day USA. They had come from Asia through the frozen Bering Straits approx. 20,000 years ago and spread across the whole continent. Although referred to by European colonists as Indians, Amerindians, or, nowadays Native Americans, they have never been a homogenous people, but were made up of communities (tribes) with different names and different lifestyles (mostly sedentary tribes in the east, hunting tribes in the Plains, Pueblo building people in the Southwest). Until the mid-twentieth century, their culture was mostly oral and utilitarian, that is, used for ceremonial and practical purposes – dancing around a campfire to call for the rain, lullabies to put babies to sleep, educational tales to teach children about various aspects of tribal life. Naturally, there are also religious aspects to their cultural expressions, for example, origin myths telling stories about how the tribe came to be, about certain sacred phenomena, sun dances, etc. Some scholars even see their relationship to the American counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s, especially in their refusal of the Euro-American norms, spiritual connection to the environment and personal wholeness (Kaiser 189).

At the arrival of the first European colonists, Native Americans were a pre-technological civilisation, with their literary expressions mostly oral. Only in the 20th century, following the publication of the novel *House Made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday in 1968, their written texts began to draw the attention of American readers. When the novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, it caused a significant stir on the American literary scene, initiating the so-called Native American Renaissance. Like in the case of the Harlem Renaissance, the Native American Renaissance brought to the spotlight the artistic production of a people who had almost been forgotten, or, if not, considered unworthy of any critical attention.

N. Scott Momaday was born in Lawton, Oklahoma, near the place which served as a symbolic setting for his famous *The Way to Rainy Mountain* – an unusual collection of tribal stories, mixed with his family and autobiographical memoirs and illustrated by his father, who was a teacher and visual artist. Although the book is tiny, it presents a symbolic picture of his native Kiowa ancestors on their way from Montana to new

settlements in Oklahoma. Memory of the past and place play a vital role in their survival. As Momaday himself claimed: “Both consciously and subconsciously, my writing has been deeply informed by the land with a sense of place. In some important way, place determines who and what we are. The land–person equation is essential to writing, to all of literature” (Momaday 12).

The dislocation of time and place is important for Momaday’s most famous work, *The House Made of Dawn*, though it is presented not so much at the tribal level, but rather through the flashes of the protagonist’s suffering. The novel is unique not only because of its depiction of a Native American view of the world (so different from mainstream American values) but also because of the author’s narrative artistry, similar to Faulkner’s *Sound and the Fury*. It is a story of a young Indian man, Abel, who has just returned from WWII and has to face life without a clear aim or purpose, falling in to all the traps that such uprootedness brings – alcoholism, death, love, loss, hope. The novel shows Abel’s close relationship to nature, the history of the tribe, and, especially, the sense of life without its communal support.

Momaday’s work opened space for several younger writers – Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko as well as Sherman Alexie, to name just a few – who also drew on the Native American spirituality and closeness to nature, as well as their struggle with the worsening living conditions in twentieth century America.

# Jewish American Literature

The American Jews are another minority that has greatly contributed to the formation of American literature and culture. Their presence in what is now the USA can be traced back to the mid-17th century, when they came mostly from Spain and Portugal. In the 19th century, there was a significant Jewish arrival from Central and Eastern Europe. As is also the case with other minority groups, Jews brought with them their own language, Yiddish, as well as a strong cultural and religious identity that became the object of analysis for many famous 20th century Jewish writers (Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth). On the other hand, however, Jewish ethnicity was never a central object of analysis for many other writers (Norman Mailer, Nathanael West), since they tried to see it, instead, in larger terms. Thus, Norman Mailer claimed that “[a] member of a minority group is – if we are to speak existentially – not a man who is a member of a category, a Negro or a Jew, but rather a man who feels his existence in a particular way. It is in the very form or context of his existence to live with two opposed notions of himself” (Mailer 77). The tension between these notions is usually one of the central themes of the ethnically based Jewish writers. Other themes include sense of belonging, persecution and anti-Semitism, as well as the holocaust.

One of the most famous 20th century Jewish American writers was Saul Bellow (1915 – 2005). His parents came from Saint Petersburg, but he was born in Canada and studied at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University. In 1976 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. As Buckton-Tucker has it, “Saul Bellow’s protagonists, though varying in age, background, career and interests, share a common problem: they suffer from an inability to enter wholeheartedly into society and personal relationships as a result of a detachment from reality in one respect or another” (211).

We can find the same pattern in his perhaps most critically acclaimed work *Herzog* – a depiction of the midlife crisis of a university professor Moses E. Herzog. The tone of the novel is set already at its very beginning: “If I am out of my mind, it’s all right with me, thought Moses Herzog” (Bellow 3). And he behaves as if he were out of his mind – fails in his career as an academic and in his second marriage, must suffer his wife’s leaving him for his former colleague, dates another woman with fear of having to commit himself to a more permanent relationship, and is not able to establish

a meaningful relationship with his relatives either. Herzog becomes a symbol of the alienation of modern subject from family, community, religion, and, finally, oneself. The way that he deals with his problems is not ordinary. As an intellectual, he writes letters (that are never sent) to his friends, famous people, colleagues, politicians, and even to God. The letters are a kind of introspective analysis, often very ironical, which, however, do not succeed in making his existential anxieties any “lighter.”

The novel’s style reflects the protagonist’s intellectual anxieties. It is sophisticated and ironic at the same time. The story is told from Herzog’s point of view, revealing in flashbacks events from his past, related both to his personal and social engagements, i.e. his marriages, attitudes to women, members of his family, religion, professional career, etc. Even though these depictions are purely imaginative, many of them retain links with real people as well as events from Bellow’s life, making it almost a roman à clef. The novel ends with Moses Herzog seemingly trying to overcome his alienation by stopping writing letters never intended to be sent, and “probing” reality by symbolically cleaning his house and preparing dinner for Ramona.

# American Drama

The history of American drama is usually traced back to the late nineteenth century when authors like Bronson Howard and Claude Fitch began writing their plays. However, the first real success came only with Eugene O'Neill (1888 – 1953) who in 1936 received the Nobel Prize for literature. O'Neill's plays are psychological treatments of the strength of human emotions, often stemming from his own family problems, and modelled on ancient drama. One of his best-known plays is *Mourning Becomes Electra* – an analogy with Aeschylus' trilogy *Oresteia*. His aim was, in fact, to test whether it would be possible to use the Greek sense of fate in a modern play performed for people without belief in God and supernatural retribution (Chirico 81).

While the original Greek play unfolded before the background of the Trojan War, events in O'Neill's play follow the end of the American Civil War. It is divided into three parts, "Homecoming," "The Hunted" and "The Haunted." "Homecoming" is centred on the return of General Ezra Mannon (King Agamemnon in Aeschylus' play) to his home, where he is poisoned by his wife Christine (Clytemnestra) and her lover Adam Brant (Aegisthus). The second part begins with the return of Ezra Mannon's son Orin (Orestes), his learning from Lavinia (Electra) about the murder of their father and his subsequent killing of Adam Brant. The last part is a full display of sin, guilt and "divine retribution," ending in Orin's suicide and Lavinia's live entombment within the walls of the Mannon house.

As the first American modernist playwright, O'Neill in his work combines several streams – naturalistic drives (internal and external), expressionistic alienation and existential anxieties, as well as conflict between the individual and the impersonal society, if not the universe. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, all this is developed symbolically against the Puritan background of sin and guilt (so strong in the American imagination) and the fatal strength of human emotions. In his portrayal of Lavinia Mannon, the playwright gave us a symbol of the destructiveness of the human psyche.

Another important representative of a rather long list of great American playwrights of the twentieth century, and the one continuing O'Neill's preoccupation with human

emotionality, was Tennessee Williams. Even though his *A Streetcar Named Desire* does not have such great inter-cultural and inter-textual aspirations as *Mourning Becomes Electra* (not drawing on the analogy with ancient Greek mythology, or history of a family), it nevertheless offers an insight into the deep, emotional crisis of a middle-aged woman who is not able to face her collapsing world. For many years, critics have argued about the nature of her struggle:

“While some see the play as a psychological battle between characters, others see it as class warfare. Where one essay exalts Blanche DuBois as romantic heroine, another heaps praise on Stanley Kowalski as working-class hero. There’s no agreement over genre – is the work a tragedy or a melodrama or an example of conventional realism? Is it ultimately ambiguous and, if so, is its lack of clarity a mark of success or failure?”

(Crittenden 117)

In fact, it is a little bit of everything. The play is both set in American realia, with its “Old World vs. New, rural vs. industrial” conflicts (Kolin and Wolter 241), as well as in almost archetypal, mythical conditions. Blanche comes to New Orleans to stay with her sister Stella after a series of personal disasters – the bankruptcy of her family business, loss of her job as a schoolteacher due to suspicions of unethical behaviour towards students, as well as her husband’s suicide. Hoping to find stability, Blanche, with her “southern belle” manners, runs into the brutality and primitivism of the god of drink Stanley Kowalski, the mythical Dionysus and the symbol of phallic potency (Roche-Lajtha 58). Instead of coming to terms with her life, her mental state deteriorates further and she ends up in a mental hospital.

In addition to Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams, the great personalities of the American modernist theatre included Arthur Miller (1915 – 2005), with his masterpieces *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Crucible* (1953), as well as Edward Albee (1928 – 2016), who became the progenitor of the theatre of the absurd in the USA with his play *The Zoo Story* (1958). *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) continued in a great tradition of family drama, drawing on such works as the above-mentioned *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

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