



**TEZPUR  
UNIVERSITY**



**MASTER OF ARTS**

**ENGLISH**

**CENTRE FOR OPEN AND  
DISTANCE LEARNING**

**MEG MEG 404: American Literature II**

**BLOCK II**

**CENTRE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING**

**TEZPUR UNIVERSITY (A CENTRAL UNIVERSITY)**

**TEZPUR, ASSAM -784028**

**INDIA**

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# **MEG 404: American Literature II**



**CENTRE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING**  
**TEZPUR UNIVERSITY (A CENTRAL UNIVERSITY)**  
**TEZPUR, ASSAM-784028**  
**INDIA**

## **MEG 404: American Literature II**

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# BLOCK II

## MODULE II: MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

UNIT 7: READING MODERN AMERICAN POETRY: EZRA POUND: “A PACT,” “THE RIVER MERCHANT’S WIFE” “THE RETURN”

UNIT 8: POETRY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP: MARIANNE MOORE: “POETRY”

UNIT 9: POETRY AS THE SUPREME FICTION: WALLACE STEVENS: “PETER QUINCE AT THE CLAVIER”

## MODULE III: CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S POETRY

UNIT 10: READING CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S POETRY: RACE, GENDER AND RESISTANCE

SONIA SANCHEZ: “I HAVE WALKED A LONG TIME,” “POEM AT THIRTY,” “AN ANTHEM”

NIKKI GIOVANNI: “CHOICES,” “ALL I GOTTA DO,”

JUNE JORDAN: “POEM ABOUT MY RIGHTS,” “POEM FOR SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN,” “A SONG FOR SOWETO”

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## INTRODUCTION: BLOCK II

**Block II of MEG-404: American Literature II** will introduce you to some of the major modern poets like Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens who brought new era to modernist poetry through their poetic craftsmanship. Along with this, you will also be able to learn about few major African American women poets and their criticism of racial and gendered social outlook through their poetry.

**Block II** comprises of **Module II and III**.

**MODULE II: Modern American Poetry** has three units in it. *Unit 7: Reading Modern American Poetry: Ezra Pound: “A Pact,” “The River Merchant’s Wife” “The Return”* will make you familiar with Ezra Pound. He brought in an interest in history and the European past, to counter the problems in poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century. He launched Imagism in poetry to meet the need for precision and concreteness and became one of the most important modernist poets of time. *Unit 8: Poetry and craftsmanship: Marianne Moore: “Poetry”* will introduce you to another modernist poet, Marianne Moore who believes that Poetry is not all about intellectualism. It includes emotion as well. Poetry, of all kinds should be able to refresh dead imagery in new ways and create new imagery. It is about poetic craftsmanship. *Unit 9: Poetry as the Supreme Fiction: Wallace Stevens: “Peter Quince at the Clavier”* will discuss yet another most important twentieth century American poets Wallace Stevens. Stevens is known for his metapoetry, that suggests the art of poetry-making: the word chosen in a poem, the poet’s muse, the thought process, the writing process which, with a balanced blending makes beautiful poetry.

**MODULE III: Contemporary African American Women’s Poetry** includes important women poets like Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and June Jordan. *Unit 10: Reading Contemporary African American Women’s Poetry: Race, Gender and Resistance.*

*Sonia Sanchez: “I Have Walked a Long Time”, “Poem at Thirty”, “An Anthem”*  
*Nikki Giovanni: “Choices”, “All I Gotta Do”. June Jordan: “Poem about My Rights”, “Poem for South African Women”, “A Song for Soweto”* will give a study of African American women’s poetry with special mention to the poets prescribed. Having a long history oral tradition since slavery, the richness of subject set up a background for female black voice in African American poetry. By the 1960s Black Power Movement and Black Arts Movement involved many women as part of that cultural nationalist force. The poets brought up the issue of sexual oppression with racial segregation to highlight and also articulated their frustration with the androcentric focus of “the movement” and the patriarchal bias of some its most prominent texts.

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## **MODULE II: MODERN AMERICAN POETRY**

## ***UNIT 7: READING MODERN AMERICAN POETRY: EZRA POUND: “A POET”, “THE RIVER MERCHANT’S WIFE”, “THE RETURN”***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 7.0 Introduction
- 7.1 Learning Objectives
- 7.2 Ezra Pound: Life and Works
- 7.3 Reading the poems of Ezra Pound
- 7.4 Reading Modern American Poetry
- 7.5 Summing Up
- 7.6 Assessment Questions
- 7.7 References and Recommended Readings

### ***7.0 INTRODUCTION***

The words modern, Modernism and modernist are not interchangeable or synonymous. Modern means progressive in nature, thought. Modernism is a philosophical movement of the early twentieth century. Ezra Pound is a well-known figure in the Modernist movement. His maxim “Make It New!” became an inspiration for many Avant-garde movements. With the Cubist, Futurist, Dadaist painters and stream-of-consciousness novelists, he believed in bringing a new perspective to the already existing way of producing or looking at art. Pound popularized imagism in poetry. He believed in precision, clarity, crisp language as a counter to the sentimental language of Georgian poetry.

### ***7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

The aim of this unit is to introduce the student, to the famous Modernist poet in America at the turn of the twentieth century, Ezra Pound. To this end this unit will

- introduce you to the life and works of Ezra Pound

- enable you to critically read select poems by the poet
- help you to critically examine the themes of his poems
- understand Pound's contribution to the Modernist movement

## 7.2 EZRA POUND: LIFE AND WORKS

Ezra Pound was born in the western town of Hailey, Idaho, on 30 October 1885. Throughout his life, in fact, Pound would variously live in Indiana, Venice, London, Paris, Rapallo, Washington DC, Brunnenburg in the Italian Alps, Rome and, finally, Venice again, where he would die in 1972. Pound was kept in St. Elizabeth's Hospital in America for twelve years following his arrest by the US forces in Pisa for his radio broadcasts supporting Mussolini in 1945.

Pound graduated from college in 1905 and went on to work briefly before being fired in 1907 from Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, a small liberal arts school. Pound sailed to Europe in 1908. There he spent some time in Venice where he published his first book, the 72-page *A Lume Spento* (The Spent Taper). Pound headed to London in 1908, determined to meet Yeats. In London he met Dorothy Shakespeare who would later become his wife. Dorothy would later introduce Pound to Yeats and both of them would spend some time together in 1913 when Yeats asked him to be his secretary because of failing eyesight. Yeats and Pound were influenced by each other's ideas of poetry.

Pound's *The Spirit of Romance* was published in 1910. This book offers a study of medieval European literature in the Romance languages. Pound returned to England in February 1911. His profile grew when he became poetry editor of Dora Marsden and Harriet Shaw Weaver's the *New Freewoman*, soon to be renamed *The Egoist*. This liberal journal would become an active source of new ideas and writing. Pound acted as the foreign correspondent for Harriet Monroe's journal *Poetry* and helped a lot of poets from England and America to get their poems published in it. In 1913, he helped Robert Frost to get his first book of poems, *A Boy's Will*, published in

England. Pound continued to promote young poets as the correspondent of *Poetry* till his departure for Paris in 1920.

In 1914 Pound met fellow American TS Eliot in England and was impressed by Eliot's efforts to modernise himself as a poet. Together, they worked to launch the Modernist movement in England and America. Pound gave final shape to Eliot's *The Waste Land* which was published in 1922. They continued to work on a common programme for a few more years. By 1930 Eliot started writing religious poetry and Pound moved on to further his own quest for knowledge and culture. The friendship however continued till Eliot's death in 1965.

Pound left London in 1920 and went to Paris. After spending some time there he went to live in Italy. It was in Italy in 1945 that Pound was arrested for his radio broadcasts in support of Mussolini and had to spend forty days in a steel cage in the compound of the camp for American troops. He was later shifted to America where he underwent trial for treason. He was then confined to St. Elizabeth's hospital where he had to spend more than twelve years. Eliot and Frost helped to secure Pound's release from the Hospital. After that Pound lived with his daughter in Rapallo, Italy till his death in 1972.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



One of Pound's most revolutionary acts occurred in the tea room of the British Museum. In the early fall of 1912, Pound read H. D.'s poem "Hermes of the Ways." After slashing through the text, he rapidly wrote at the bottom "H. D. Imagiste" and a movement was born. At the time, he was Foreign Correspondent of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine in Chicago, to which he sent the poem.

## 7.3 READING THE POEMS OF EZRA POUND

### 7.3.1 Reading the poem "The Return"

See, they return, ah see the tentative  
Movements, and the slow feet,

The trouble in the pace and the uncertain  
Wavering!

See, they return, one and by one,  
With fear, as half-awakened;  
As if the snow should hesitate  
And murmur in the wind,  
and half turn back;

These were the “Wing-with-Awe”,  
                inviolable.  
Gods of the winged shoe!  
With them the silver hounds,  
                Sniffing the trace of air!  
Haie! Haie!  
                These were the swift to harry;  
These the keen-scented;  
These were the souls of blood.  
Slow on the leash,  
pallid the leash-men!

The poem thematizes the mode of divine apparitions in poetry. The hero-gods of the past are through an effort of poetic conjuring brought up into the foreground of consciousness. The gods returning, do so in an unusual manner, signifying slowness and pallor.


**Stanza 1:** This is not just about the return of the culture gods who were once powerful. It is about the past which at one time was the powerful and vibrant present. For the poet, the past is important and the present needs to connect with the past. However, the past cannot make its way into the present on its own. It needs to be led or helped by something in the present. That is, the past has to be resuscitated by the poet for it to be of any use.

**Stanza 2.** This stanza builds up on the first: the return of the gods is marked by hesitation and uncertainty. They are not sure of their reception in the present. These gods from the past appear ghostly and unsure as they tentatively feel their way into the present.

**Stanza 3.** This stanza comments on the once powerful gods. They drew awe from others and appeared inviolable. What is present will in time become past and lose some of its vitality. The returning gods are led by silver hounds or guide dogs to show them the way.

**Stanza 4.** The poet regrets the loss of past grandeur. As all things pass on, so did that great present. Now it appears slow and pallid, almost lifeless.

Thus, Pound holds that the past continues into the present. But unlike Eliot, he suggests that the past cannot make its own way into the present. It has to be directed and then too, its trajectory is hesitant and uncertain. The gods help to show the movement of the past and its status in the present.

<b>CHECK YOUR PROGRESS</b>	
	1. What is the poem about?
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	
2. What are these gods? Why is their movement uncertain?	
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	
2. Comment on the role of the past in Pound's "The Return".	
<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	



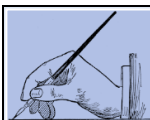
### 7.3.2 Reading the poem “A Pact”

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman -  
I have detested you long enough.  
I come to you as a grown child  
Who has had a pig-headed father;  
I am old enough now to make friends.  
It was you that broke the new wood,  
Now is a time for carving.  
We have one sap and one root -  
Let there be commerce between us.

This poem is about Pound’s uneasy relationship with the spirit of Walt Whitman. Whitman had died in 1892. In 1913, Pound writes this poem to acknowledge his debt to Whitman. By pact he means an agreement with the earlier poet. Pound had turned away from Whitman’s poetry as he could not accept that loose sprawling kind of composition. While Whitman lays stress on a democratic present, Pound is all for history in poetry. The difference between them is presented in terms of a father-son conflict. The son now accepts his “pig-headed father” who played a pioneering role in giving American poetry a flavor and identity of its own. That is why, the son (Pound) pays tribute to the father who “broke...new wood,” that is, opened up new ground in American poetry.

Having said that, the mature son is willing to build upon the foundations laid down by the father (Whitman). He will carve upon the model left by Whitman. Pound returns to the fold to affirm that they have common roots and goals. They are both committed to a poetics for America.

The last line suggests that the poet is willing to draw upon Whitman or take forward his project for America.



#### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the pact mentioned by the poet?

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2. Why does Pound call Whitman his father?

### 7.3.3 Reading the poem “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”

While my hair was still cut straight  
across my forehead  
I played at the front gate, pulling  
flowers.  
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing  
horse,  
You walked about my seat, playing with  
blue plums.  
And we went on living in the village of  
Chokan:  
Two small people, without dislike or  
suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.  
I never laughed, being bashful.  
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.  
Called to, a thousand times, I never  
looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,

I desired my dust to be mingled with  
yours  
Forever and forever and forever.  
Why should I climb the lookout?

At sixteen you departed,  
You went into far Ku-to-en, by the river  
of swirling eddies,  
And you have been gone five months.  
The monkeys make sorrowful noise  
overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went  
out,  
By the gate now, the moss is grown,  
the different mosses,  
Too deep to clear them away!  
The leaves fall early this autumn, in  
wind.  
The paired butterflies are already  
yellow with August  
Over the grass in the West garden;  
They hurt me. I grow older.  
If you are coming down through the  
narrows of the river Kiang,  
Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you  
As far as Cho-fu-sa.

This poem is translated from the Chinese original by Li Po, the seventh century AD poet. Pound's translation is based on the prose notations of Ernest Fenollosa, the American scholar of Japanese. Fenollosa did not know Chinese but because of the similarity of the script, he could sight translate from Chinese to Japanese to English.

The poem is in the form of a letter written by a young wife to her husband who has been away from home on business. Interestingly, she had grown up with her husband who had been her childhood playmate. When they were children, they played without inhibition as equals. But when fourteen, she married her friend and the order changed between them. Her playmate became her 'lord,' that is, she had to accept that oriental women are subordinate to their husbands.

The speaker records her growing up gradually. Married at fourteen, she took some time to adjust to the changes around her. At fifteen, she accepts her role and becomes aware of her growing love for her husband. Soon however, the young husband has to travel away from home and he has been gone for five months. The wife misses her husband and tries to put across her feelings through a number of images from nature. Being shy and restrained, she tries to convey her feelings without losing her dignity.

In the last stanza the paired butterflies indicate the mating season, just as the moss by the gate in the earlier stanza shows that the husband has been away for a long time and nobody has come that way. The simple words “they hurt me” speak of her pining for her husband. Instead of saying that she feels his prolonged absence, she refers to the monkeys making sorrowful noise overhead. She is eager for his return and suggests that she will go and meet him halfway.

Throughout the poem, the tone of stiff dignity remains. Pound tries through this poem to convey a model of oriental culture as an alternative to the European reading public.

#### **7.4 READING MODERN AMERICAN POETRY**

1. **Clarity and precision, lack of abstraction:** The poem “A Pact” is a concise poem. The economy of words is visible here. The use of diction justifies the clarity of the poetic feelings. The poem “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”, re-tells a traditional story in a different language. This shows that Pound was a translator too. He uses the ideogrammic method, a technique expounded by him, which allowed poetry to deal with abstract content through concrete images.
2. **Reaction against Edwardian and Georgian Poetry:**

Pound through his poetry and prose tried to address the shortcomings of his predecessors in England as well as Whitman in America. He brought in

an interest in history and the European past, to counter the problems in poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century. He launched Imagism in poetry to meet the need for precision and concreteness.

In his essay on Vorticism, Pound's defines the image as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." He remarks, "It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art." This makes him different from the Romantic and Victorian poets who elaborated the abstract thoughts in their poetry.

Pound moved next to Chinese poetry and the ideogram which is a word picture. Chinese poetry offered the concreteness he was looking for.

### **7.5 SUMMING UP**

In this unit we have discussed Ezra Pound as a Modernist Poet. His poetry is different from other modernist poets during his time. He was experimenting with different poetic forms. Pound rejected the conventional meters and diction. He wrote in free verse but not always. He and Eliot used the octosyllabic quatrain form in 1920 to show they were capable of adhering to metrical discipline. He explored past cultures to look for poetic forms. Without any superfluous words he created his own rhythm, which retained the harmony in his poems.



### **7.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

1. How is this letter different from an ordinary letter written in the present? What aspects of Chinese culture does it communicate?
2. Select some of the metaphors in the poem and explain them.

3. What was the famous maxim of Pound? What did he do to change the existing poetry?
4. Assess Ezra Pound as a poet on the basis of the three poems in your course.



### 7.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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Nadel, Ira. *Ezra Pound: A Literary Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2004

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## **UNIT 8: MARIANNE MOORE: “POETRY”: POETRY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP**

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 8.0 Introduction
- 8.1 Learning Objectives
- 8.2 Marianne Moore: Life and Works
- 8.3 Reading Marianne Moore’s poem “Poetry”
- 8.4 Critical Reading of the Themes
- 8.5 Poetry and Craftsmanship
- 8.6 Summing Up
- 8.7 Assessment Questions
- 8.8 References and Recommended Readings

### **8.0 INTRODUCTION**

The relation between poetry and seriousness of its creation is crucial. Marianne Moore is one of those poets who understands and interrogates this link. In this unit, we will talk about the elements of good poetry. She insists on craftsmanship (that includes technique), the inspiration and emotion which together produce a poem. Moore tries to define poetry in her corpus of work. She remarks “If technique is of no interest to a writer, I doubt that the writer is an artist”. Form, rhyme, rhythm, diction, emotion, inspiration, poetic devices, imagery should all blend together to construct well written verse. Moore’s views on poetry were expressed in her career as editor of *The Dial*. She saw the importance of the force of omission, extraction and fragmentation. The editing or revision which goes into the raw material of poetry gives it shape and finesse. It is her insistence on craftsmanship, compression and the use of imagination within a framework, that makes her a modernist, like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

## 8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to introduce the student to a Modernist poet of America, Marianne Moore. To this end this unit will:

- introduce you to the life and works of Marianne Moore
- enable you to read critically the poetry produced by her
- help you to grasp the major thematic concerns and stylistic features of the prescribed poem
- identify Moore as a modernist poet

## 8.2 MARIANNE MOORE: LIFE AND WORKS

Marianne Moore was born in Kirkwood, Missouri on November 15, 1887. She attended college with HD (Hilda Doolittle), another future poet and graduated after four years. She moved with her mother to New Jersey in 1916, and in 1918 to New York where she came into contact with fellow writers and poets. She published her first poems in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* and Harriet Weaver's *The Egoist*. Her first book *Poems* was published in 1921 by HD without her knowledge. She edited the *Dial*, a fortnightly review between 1926 and 1929 which published work by T S Eliot and Conrad Aiken amongst others. In 1935, her *Selected Poems* with an introduction by Eliot was published. Other collections followed.

Moore remarks that for her the stanza was more important than the line as a poetic unit. This is seen in her poem "Poetry," where the lines vary in length throughout. Because of her studies in the sciences, she is seen concentrating on objects and scenes rather than on moments of contemplation. Her choice of images veers on the exotic but she manages to give them a context which on closer reading gives it an added depth. Her poetry is marked by precision, compression and impersonality. Moore was associated with various magazines, like *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Partisan Review*, and *The New Yorker*. She attended college



campuses for lectures and became a member of American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1955 and was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1962. Her later works include a translation of *The Fables of La Fontaine* (1954); *Like a Bulwark* (1956); *O, to Be a Dragon* (1959); *Tell Me, Tell Me: Granite, Steel, and Other Topics* (1966); and *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (1967). Additionally, she was a baseball fan. She also wrote the liner notes for Muhammad Ali's record, *I Am the Greatest*. Moore's prose works includes *A Marianne Moore Reader* (1961), *Predilections* (1955), and *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore* (1987). Throughout her life she corresponded with poets such as Ezra Pound, T.S Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop and Wallace Stevens. Moore died in the year 1972.

### **8.3 Reading Marianne Moore's Poem "Poetry"**

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all  
this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one  
discovers in

it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes

that can dilate, hair that can rise

if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because  
they are

useful. When they become so derivative as to become  
unintelligible,

the same thing may be said for all of us, that we  
do not admire what

we cannot understand: the bat

holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf  
under

a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that  
feels a

flea, the base-

ball fan, the statistician--

nor is it valid

to discriminate against 'business documents and

school-books'; all these phenomena are important. One must  
make a distinction

however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the  
result is not poetry,

nor till the poets among us can be

'literalists of

the imagination'--above

insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them', shall  
we have

it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,

the raw material of poetry in

all its rawness and

that which is on the other hand

genuine, you are interested in poetry.

Moore begins her poem by defending poetry and poets. As if in answer to unnamed critics, she accepts that to some poetry is only 'fiddle' meaning useless. However, on a closer reading one finds something genuine

and tangible in it. Things are made the subject of poetry not because they can pack in a lot of meaning but because they are useful. Meanings should not be so derivative as to be worn out. Without allowing for high sounding interpretations, poetic meaning should be fresh, direct and dense. There is no room for the abstruse and the convoluted in poetry.

Yet anything can be the subject matter of poetry. Whether it is dry documents or school books, if there is room for interpretation, if things are suggestive, then they can be the stuff of poetry. The choice of topics in poetry is not important. It is the treatment that is everything. 'Half-poets' may ruin things through their clumsy handling; genuine poets on the other hand can be literalists of the imagination. That is, they can achieve verisimilitude or create artful fictions for and from the imagination around things of the real world. So long as the subject of poetry is genuine, it does not matter if it is crude and lacks finesse. Poetry conveys the essence of truth. It carries a lot of power and transforms words into things. This transformation is so powerful that the world of words becomes more real than the world itself. Poetry enhances the power of emotion by directing the focus to a particular point. The poem's style is unconventional with irregular lines and meter. The language is more or less simple although the expressions at times verge on the uncommon.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



In the year, 1921 Winifred Ellerman, an aspiring English novelist, and Hilda Doolittle, an expatriate American poet, printed Moore's *Poems* in London as a friendly surprise.

### 8.4 CRITICAL READING OF THE THEMES

This poem begins in a negotiating mood. Moore tries to define poetry. She negotiates with what poetry is 'not'. It is through this rejection that she

tries to clarify what poetry 'is'. However, it is important for us to note that the way she tries to explain to her readers about poetry is not the universal definition of poetry. She is subjective and her poem shows her singular technique. The garb of impersonality that every poet tries to build shatters at some point of their work and subjectivity intrudes. But it is also important to note that Moore is trying to promote the aesthetic derivation of a poetic form.

This poem has loose sentence construction. The poet uses techniques like enjambment where the sentence continues beyond the line or stanza in a poem. Suspense is another major method used here, to keep the anticipation of the readers intact. The speaker uses wit. Her questions are rhetorical. The stream-of-conscious method used in the poem adds to the informal and conversational mode of the lines. Unlike other poets, she does not allude to too many symbols. She uses the shortcomings of poetry writing to elaborate on the higher aim of poetry as a genre. She is precise and clear about the message or the moral of her poem. She uses meticulous imagery. She tries to reach the idea of "genuine" poetry and filter out badly written ones from the good ones. Moore established herself in the tradition of modernism through these questions regarding poetic form.

By saying "I, too, dislike it" she opens poetry (as a genre) to necessary discussions. Moore detested the obscurity poets create, which misleads the readers. She is of the view that poetry should have its imaginations intact, rather than a surface of intellect. It is badly written poetry that created the space for her to think that good poetry can help the readers to fight back the dishonesty of superficial intellect. It is only when we as readers will discourage poetry as "fiddle", our contempt will enable us to see that there is still some possibility of honesty in the expressiveness of poetry. Good poetry can automatically bring some vigor to our senses, that Moore explains with the image of hand, eyes and hair. The simulation generated by good art work cannot derive from oddly complex thoughts. There is no need of a "high-sounding" explanation to the poetic lines. The simplicity and genuine idea of a poem can activate our senses by itself. Poets sometimes make the poem

derivative or too allusive. They allude to many obscure ideas and make the poem unintelligible. This is not the aim of poetry. The aim of poetry is to drive the readers towards better aesthetics. The enhancement of life experiences is important. Its role is to communicate, rather than holding back thoughts. The more the reader understands the poetic lines, the more they are capable of admiring it. The audience a poem generates comes from its stylistic appeal and its impulse to explain experiences and social events justly.

Moore holds that “business documents and school-books” are as important as any other object in poetry. Poetry can be written on ordinary things like the snail if one can frame the words imaginatively. There should be a perfect blend of emotion and intellect in a poem. As readers we should be capable of making the distinction between half poets and “literalists of the imagination” (a term taken from W.B. Yeats). “Half poets” or people who keeps up the outward appearance of poets drag dead metaphors and present it to the world as new. However, they cannot withstand the change of time. They sometimes dismiss poetry as “fiddle”. It is the imagination of genuine artists who can rescue poetry from this state. The standard point of admiring good poetry, according to the poet, is when he/she creates 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'. This is when a poet rises above insolence and triviality. The rawness or sincerity of good poetry is all that a reader of poetry should seek. Moore tries to set her poem as a dialogue between the supplements and compliments of images. She examines the boundary between honesty and dishonesty, derivative and imaginary, inclusion and exclusion. The mediocrity of poetasters is discouraged to avoid poetry falling into the slough of the humdrum or the banal.

### **LET US STOP AND THINK**



In the year 1987, a series of documentaries on modern American poetry appeared on public television. The Annenberg/CPB Project released Voices and Visions, of which a portion is devoted to Moore entitled Marianne Moore: In Her Own Image.

## 8.5 POETRY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

There are two different strains of understanding a mode of producing art (poetry). The first is developed by Plato. According to him, poetry is spontaneous. It is channelized in a moment of ecstasy. So, he calls all poets madmen. The second strain is developed by his disciple Aristotle. He opposes Plato and talks about the importance of polishing and perfecting a work of art. Poetry is not only about spontaneity, but also about intellectual craftsmanship. The need of skills, techniques is as important as the overwhelming emotion and feelings in producing a work of art.

The Aristotelian perspective of craftsmanship is visible in the poetry of Marianne Moore. In *The Complete Poems* (1967), of Marianne Moore, the poet cuts her poem “Poetry” from twenty-nine lines to three lines that goes like this:

“I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.”

This can be taken as an example of craftsmanship. She holds the essence of the long poem in just three lines, thereby showing that the rest of the previously written lines only supported these core lines. The addition, subtraction and revision that went into the poem, she describes in the line: “Omissions are not accidents,” in a prefatory note.

Moore is a poet’s poet and a moralist in writing. She is a modernist of her own decree because of her realistic allusions and footnotes. She writes as a poet and an acute observer. She employs an argumentative technique in “Poetry.” Her balance of the raw material of poetry writing and the crafted product (which is good poetry) is important to note. She gives importance to both of them. The stance of Moore as a modernist is so unique that sometimes

she even defies any particular school of thought. “Poetry” has shown the style of syllabic as well as free verse. She uses contradictory and ironic lines to drive home a point about “what is poetry” and what is “good” quality verse. She highlights that imaginary gardens can be created by ugly yet real toads in them. It shows that poetry is all-inclusive when it comes to choice of image. Poetry is not all about intellectualism. It includes emotion as well. Poetry, of all kinds should be able to refresh dead imagery in new ways and create new imagery. She believed that the essence of a poem can still be intact after revisions and omissions. This is what happened to her three lined version of “Poetry”. Moore’s stance in her poem is that of a poet and critic. She is a self-conscious modernist.

## 8.6 SUMMING UP

Marianne Moore concentrates on the thing before her as she aims at compression achieved through a blend of reality and imagination. In her words it is “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” In the introduction to Moore’s book *Selected Poems* (1935), Eliot remarks: “Living, the poet is carrying on that struggle for the maintenance of a living language, for the maintenance of its strength, its subtlety, for the preservation of quality of feeling, which must be kept up in every generation... Miss Moore is, I believe, one of those few who have done the language some service in my lifetime.” We hope that you would be inspired to read other works by her.



## ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What, according to Moore, is the aim of poetry?
2. What does the poet mean by “imaginary gardens with real toads in them”?
3. Comment on Moore’s poetic style.
4. Justify Moore as a poet of the Modernism movement.
5. Explain with reference to the poem, the meaning of half poets.

6. What did Moore mean by fiddle and derivative poetry? Can you relate the two words in the context of poetry construction?



## 8.8 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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## **UNIT 9: WALLACE STEVENS: “PETER QUINCE AT THE CLAVIER”**

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

9.0 Introduction

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Wallace Stevens: Life and Works

9.3 Reading Wallace Stevens’s poem “Peter Quince at the Clavier”

9.4 Critical Reading of the Themes

9.5 Poetry as a Supreme Fiction

9.6 Summing Up

9.7 Assessment Questions

9.8 References and Recommended Readings

### **9.0 INTRODUCTION**

The art of poetry is a blend of emotion and intellect. Wallace Stevens, one of the most important twentieth century American poets justifies this balance. Stevens is known for his metapoetry. Metapoetry is poetry that suggests the art of poetry-making: the word chosen in a poem, the poet’s muse, the thought process, the writing process. The poem in our purview, “Peter Quince at the Clavier”, falls under the same category. In the lines of the poem itself, the readers/listeners are made aware that the speaker of the poem is trying to discuss the issue of poetry-writing. Also, Stevens, like his contemporaries, Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats, made use of symbols in his poems. He deals with concepts of beauty, music and truth.

### **9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

This unit aims at-

- introducing the readers to the life and works of Wallace Stevens
- comprehending his significance as an American poet

- defining poetry as a fiction of a superior quality
- analyzing Stevens's poetic style

## 9.2 WALLACE STEVENS: LIFE AND WORKS

**Wallace Stevens** was born in Reading, Pennsylvania on October 2, 1879, and died at the age of seventy-six in Hartford, Connecticut on August 2, 1955. He attended Harvard as a special student from 1897 to 1900 but did not graduate; he graduated from New York law school in 1903 and was admitted to the New York bar in 1904. From his university days Stevens was interested in poetry writing. His first book *Harmonium* was published in 1923. Stevens was an employee of an insurance company and rose to the position of Vice President of the company. He wrote poetry in his spare time.

## 9.3 READING WALLACE STEVENS'S POEM "PETER QUINCE AT THE CLAVIER"

This is a poem from **Wallace Stevens'** first book of poetry, *Harmonium* (1923). The poem was first published in 1915.

Just as my fingers on these keys  
 Make music, so the self-same sounds  
 On my spirit make a music, too.  
 Music is feeling, then, not sound;  
 And thus it is that what I feel,  
 Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,  
 Is music. It is like the strain  
 Waked in the elders by Susanna;

Of a green evening, clear and warm,  
She bathed in her still garden, while  
The red-eyed elders, watching, felt

The basses of their beings throb  
In witching chords, and their thin blood  
Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.

## II

In the green water, clear and warm,  
Susanna lay.  
She searched  
The touch of springs,  
And found  
Concealed imaginings.  
She sighed,  
For so much melody.

Upon the bank, she stood  
In the cool  
Of spent emotions.  
She felt, among the leaves,  
The dew  
Of old devotions.

She walked upon the grass,  
Still quavering.  
The winds were like her maids,  
On timid feet,  
Fetching her woven scarves,

Yet wavering.

A breath upon her hand

Muted the night.

She turned --

A cymbal crashed,

Amid roaring horns.

### III

Soon, with a noise like tambourines,

Came her attendant Byzantines.

They wondered why Susanna cried

Against the elders by her side;

And as they whispered, the refrain

Was like a willow swept by rain.

Anon, their lamps' uplifted flame

Revealed Susanna and her shame.

And then, the simpering Byzantines

Fled, with a noise like tambourines.

### IV

Beauty is momentary in the mind --

The fitful tracing of a portal;

But in the flesh it is immortal.

The body dies; the body's beauty lives.  
 So evenings die, in their green going,  
 A wave, interminably flowing.  
 So gardens die, their meek breath scenting  
 The cowl of winter, done repenting.  
 So maidens die, to the auroral  
 Celebration of a maiden's choral.

Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings  
 Of those white elders; but, escaping,  
 Left only Death's ironic scraping.  
 Now, in its immortality, it plays  
 On the clear viol of her memory,  
 And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

This poem is divided into four sections. He uses two distinctive allegories in the poem. Peter Quince, one of the mechanical figures in the play-within-the-play “Pyramus and Thisbe” (in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by Shakespeare), is used by Wallace Stevens to compare his feelings for a woman to music. Quince, being a theatrical organizer, a rustic actor, a surrogate author (a different version of the author himself) in the play is used here as a coordinator of feelings. The second allegory is of the Bible: the story of Susanna.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



- Susanna or Shoshana, also called Susanna and the Elders, is included in the Book of Daniel (as chapter 13) by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. She is a Hebrew wife. She is lustfully observed during her bath by two elderly voyeurs. Then, she is falsely accused of liaison and threatened into sexual exploits, then arrested. Soon a young man named Daniel interrupted her trial

and questioned the two men (accusers). He proved them wrong and showed the virtue of Susanna.

Word meanings:

Clavier: a keyboard musical instrument

Peter Quince is the Weaver in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* who is asked to write and stage a play. In the poem, Quince the player at the clavier is himself played upon.

Pizzicato : played by plucking rather than blowing the strings; pizzicati: a pizzicato note or passage

Hosanna: an expression of adoration, praise, or joy.

*Cymbal*: a common percussion instrument. Often used in pairs, *cymbals* consist of thin, normally round plates of various alloys.

*Byzantine* Empire: was the continuation of the Roman Empire in the East during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, when its capital city was Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul, which had been founded as Byzantium). It fell into Ottoman hands in 1453. In the poem, Byzantines refers to Susanna's servants.

*Tambourine*: a musical instrument in the percussion family consisting of a frame, often of wood or plastic, with pairs of small metal jingles, called "zils". The discord is presented through cymbals and tambourines.

Willow: a tree or shrub of temperate climates which typically has narrow leaves, bears catkins, and grows near water.

The first section links the music of the flesh (finger) with the music of the spirit. The speaker Peter, contemplates about his desire for a woman in a room, playing music on his clavier and wondering that music is not just sound, but also feeling. Like the elders who desired Susanna, he too desires the woman in "blue-shadowed silk". He wonders if it is lust. The music strain evokes a feeling which reminds him of the sexual arousal of the "red-eyed elders" in the biblical story. But as the poet notes, the effect on the elders was

striking: they felt their thin blood warming up and the resultant music of their base feelings struck a high note, a pizzicati. It was as if their bodies were stirring in a song of praise, a hosanna, in response to Susannah's naked beauty.

In the next section we find Susanna taking a bath in "green water, clear and warm", lost in her own hidden imaginations. The speaker enters the Susannah story to describe the biblical beauty as she enjoyed herself in the bath in her garden. It was a warm evening and Susannah lay in her bath, unaware of the danger around her, of the red-eyed elders peeping from behind the trees. If the elder's blood sang, Susannah had her music too. The beauty of the warm evening had caught her imagination and she sighed on discovering concealed imaginings or unknown thoughts.

Having completed her bath, Susannah steps out onto the garden, still caught up in that enchantment. As she looks for her clothes, expecting her willing maid servants, she feels instead "the dew of old devotions," meaning, the moist breath of the panting elders about her. Still unknowing, she takes a few steps more till she becomes aware of something amiss. She turns to find herself surrounded by the lusting elders.

The dissonance in the air is suggested by the crashing of a cymbal and roaring horns. Confronted by the danger around her, she shrieks and that brings out to her the running servants. They are surprised to find their mistress surrounded by the elders of that area. But in the light of their lamps they see the naked Susannah and realize what must have happened. The truth proves too much for them, and they rush indoors again, leaving Susannah to her shame. The poet observes that they disperse with a lot of noise, like the beat of a tambourine. This again suggests dissonance.

While parts II and III concentrate on the Susannah story, part IV is about beauty in general. The poet points out that beauty in abstract forms cannot capture the human imagination as well as beauty in tangible form, that is, in the shape of a beautiful woman. Even though the person dies, the idea of a beautiful woman lingers in the imagination. One beautiful woman may be

replaced by another, as evenings give way to night and autumns to winter. Similarly, maidens lose their maidenhead and become women but they are replaced by other young maidens.

Susannah's beauty stirred the elders to lust and indiscretion, but for their pains they were given the death penalty. The elders had made allegations against Susannah and tried to put her to death but Daniel who intervened found her innocent and punished the elders instead. Thus her honor was restored. Susannah's story has since continued to stir the imagination of people.

By comparing his feelings with that of the elders, the poet tries to raise their lust to the level of love. He also tests his feelings to find out if there was an element of lust in them like that of the elders. The poet turns Plato on his head to suggest that ideas are not more real. Rather, he affirms that beauty in the flesh is immortal.

#### ***9.4 CRITICAL READING OF THE THEMES***

Stevens was a contemporary of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot but chose to write a different kind of poetry. For him tradition or a sense of history was not important. He saw poetry as a blend of reality and imagination. Although Stevens trained as a lawyer, he entered an Insurance firm in 1908 and from then on made Insurance law his career. His life had little direct effect on his poetic career which continued side by side with his corporate career. Stevens insists that he does not have to be Modernist in technique to be Modernist in viewpoint. Stevens believes that the language and rhythm of poetry must be at a remove from ordinary speech. He tries to make his language colorful to counter the blankness of Platonism or naturalism. He uses exotic imagery, shifts in tone and perspective, wit and wordplay to present differences amidst harmony.

Stevens rejects the rigidity of rational ordering. He prefers instead, the poet's order of resolving contradictions. The poet creates the order in which



he participates as an ordinary figure; at the same time he revels in the artifice of that order.

His poetry relies on the ability to generate fresh fictions and so to allow the reader to see something from various angles. For him, the truth can be a fiction rising out of feeling or even reimagining things as they are. Stevens sought an absolute value through his poetry but he was aware that such a goal would be possible only through knowledge of the relative values connected with various acts of living. For him absolute value could be aimed at not by shunning the world, but by taking care not to see the mutable or ad hoc as absolute.

The themes and critical aspects of the poem “Peter Quince at the Clavier” are:

- The poem recreates the ideas of a symphony- with four movements or sections
- It talks about the connection between music and feeling
- Immortality of love, art and beauty
- It explores the variations of sexuality and desire
- Love is both pure emotion and physical lust
- The lover finds common ground between him and the biblical elders
- The poem upholds the role of imagination in poetry
- It is about the conflict of private and public spaces.
- Susanna’s figure is used to indicate that beauty in the flesh is immortal
- Susanna is one woman and all women

### ***9.5 POETRY AS A SUPREME FICTION***

Stevens’ poetry reflects poetic lyricism and meditation. Stevens manipulates his own self in various forms in his poems. He calls poetry a “supreme fiction.” By supreme fiction he meant a world in which truth is shaky. It is made up according to convenience and under acute imaginations. For him poetry creates a world of the imagination. In “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” he assumes the self of Peter to disclose his own feelings about the

relevance of music in poetry. His self is fictionalized over and over again in all his poems. It is through these fictionalised selves that he experiences variegated combinations of reality and imagination. The long poem “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942), is written by Wallace Stevens in three parts: “It Must Be Abstract”, “It Must Change”, “It Must Give Pleasure”. This work is also related to his idea of poetry as a supreme fiction.

Poetry is a supreme fiction because it is associated with imagination of reality in multiple ways. There is no proper boundary where reality ends and imagination starts. This makes it impossible to distinguish between the two. Imagination overtakes reason. The poet starts with the real and then allows the world of imagination to take over. It is the poet who assumes power and creates a new world of his own.

## **9.6 SUMMING UP**

In this unit we have read about the poetic sensibilities of Wallace Stevens. This American Modernist poet differs from his contemporaries because he deals with universal themes related to aesthetics, reality and poetic imaginations. His biographers are: Samuel French Morse, Peter Brazeau, Milton J. Bates, Joan Richardson.



## **9.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

1. What does the poet mean by music is feeling/feeling is music ?
2. Why does the poet call poetry a supreme fiction? Examine with reference to “Peter Quince.”
3. Discuss the lines:  
“A breath upon her hand  
Muted the night.  
She turned --

A cymbal crashed,  
Amid roaring horns.”

4. What does the poet mean by “the dew of old devotions”?
5. Critically assess Stevens as a poet on the basis of your reading of ‘Peter Quince’.



## **9.8 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS**

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## **MODULE III: CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S POETRY**

## ***UNIT 10: CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S POETRY: RACE, GENDER AND RESISTANCE.***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 10.0 Introduction
- 10.1 Learning Objectives
- 10.2 Sonia Sanchez: Life and Works
- 10.3 Reading the poems of Sonia Sanchez
  - 10.3.1 "I Have Walked a Long Time"
  - 10.3.2 "Poem at Thirty"
  - 10.3.3 "An Anthem"
- 10.4 Nikki Giovanni: Life and Works
- 10.5 Reading the poems of Nikki Giovanni
  - 10.5.1 "Choices"
  - 10.5.2 "All I Gotta Do"
- 10.6 June Jordan: Life and Works
- 10.7 Reading the poems of June Jordan
  - 10.7.1 "Poem about My Rights"
  - 10.7.2 "Poem for South African Women"
  - 10.7.3 "A Song for Soweto"
- 10.8 Race, Gender and Resistance
- 10.9 Summing Up
- 10.10 Assessment Questions
- 10.11 References and Recommended Readings

### ***10.0 INTRODUCTION***

African American women's poetry has a long history. The predicament and urgency behind the poetic impulse source from the history of slave trade. The existence of numerous songs and folktales, the rich oral tradition set up a background to start the journey of female black voice in African American poetry. Phillis Wheatly started the tradition and many other women represented

their generation with different aspects of black thought and expression. After emancipation, black ideologues saw art as a means of proving the worth of race, the emphasis on racial pride abandoned the issues related to black women particularly and undermined the development of women sphere. By the 1960s Black Power Movement and Black Arts Movement involved many women as part of that cultural nationalist force. Various women poets like Sonia Sanchez, Carolyn Rodgers, June Jordan and Nikki Giovanni etc. brought up the issue of sexual oppression with racial segregation to highlight. Many women poets during that time articulated their frustration with the androcentric focus of “the movement” and the patriarchal bias of some its most prominent texts.

The poetry of the seventies, of such as Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and June Jordan, who participated in the movement of the sixties, is evident of the depth of that reassessment. In the last decade, African American women poets have increasingly focused on themselves as women as well as black bodies. In her book *Inventing Black Women*, Ajuan Maria Mance comments, “The post-black art writings of Sanchez, Rodgers and Giovanni are part of the larger trend in the late- twentieth century African American women’s poetry toward deploying black womanhood as a device for expanding the discourse around race, identity and social change” (125).

### **10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

In this unit, we will introduce you to African American Women’s poetry through the poetry of Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and June Jordan. These poets are considered to be leading and popular poets of America since the Black Arts movement. After going through the prescribed poems by them you will be able to:

- comprehend the meaning of the prescribed poems
- identify major themes of Sanchez, Giovanni and Jordan’s poetry
- explain their particular poetic style and techniques
- notice the urgency of expression in their poetic voices

## 10.2 SONIA SANCHEZ: LIFE AND WORKS

Sonia Sanchez (1934- Present) was born in Birmingham, Alabama. She is known for both innovating musical formats and revolutionary poetry. Her works reflect the commitment to use her art as a means of improving Black lives throughout the world. She has portrayed the pain and beauty experienced by African American women in her poetry. Juanita Johnson-Bailey says, “with an unblinking and critical poet’s eye, Sonia Sanchez has been setting her readers straight, telling the ‘terrible beauty’ and reflecting images in ways that simultaneously solicit tears and laughter. For over thirty years this revolutionary poet has been undeterred from a path that began in the sixties. She has not given up the struggle to let her poetry be what she refers to as a ‘call to arms’ for her people” (*Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, 70). She has portrayed the picture of violence and conflict, power of love against racial and gender oppression; celebrated the strength, diversity and spirit of African American women in the past, present and future.

Sonia Sanchez is the author of sixteen books including *Homecoming* (1969), *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), *Love Poems* (1973), *I’ve Been a Woman: New and Selected Poems* (1978), *A Sound Investment and Other Stories* (1980), *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987), *Wounded in the House of a Friend* (1995), *Does Your House Have Lions?* (1997), *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* (1998), *Shake Loose My Skin* (1999) and *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (2007), *Morning Haiku* (2010) etc.

The three poems that make up this part of the unit are indicative of her wide range and style. In “I Have Walked a Long Time” we observe a picture of violence and conflict through powerful language and diction. “Poem at Thirty” is in a conversational mood. In “An Anthem”, she appeals passionately to the reader. This part of the unit will discuss the content and themes of these poems as well as about Sanchez as a poet. The exercises will help you to check your progress.

### 10.3 READING THE POEMS OF SONIA SANCHEZ

In this section we will read Sonia Sanchez. The approach to reading her poetry should be:

- Sanchez as a woman poet
- Sanchez's choice of vocabulary
- The degree of urgency in her voice
- Use/ Lapse of punctuation and why?
- The musical quality in her poems.
- Misspelled words and why?

#### 10.3.1 Reading "I Have Walked a Long Time"

i have walked a long time  
much longer than death that splinters  
wid her innuendos.  
my life, ah my alien life,  
is like an echo of nostalgia  
bringen blue screens to bury clouds  
rinsenwite stones stretched among the sea.

*you, man, will you remember me when i die?*  
*will you stare and stain my death and say*  
*i saw her dancen among swallows*  
*far from the world's obscenities?*  
*you, man, will you remember and cry?*  
and i have not loved.  
always  
while the body prowls  
the soul catalogues each step;  
while the unconscious unbridles feasts  
the flesh knots toward the shore.



ah, i have not loved  
wid legs stretched like stalks against sheets  
wid stomachs drainen the piracy of oceans  
wid mouths discarden the gelatin  
to shake the sharp self.  
i have walked by memory of others  
between the blood night  
and twilights  
i have lived in tunnels  
and fed the bloodless fish;  
between the yellow rain  
and ash,  
i have heard the rattle  
of my seed,  
so time, like some pearl necklace embracen  
a superior whore, converges  
and the swift spider binds my breast.

*you, man, will you remember me when i die?  
will you stare and stain my death and say  
i saw her applauden suns  
far from the grandiose audience?  
you, man, will you remember and cry?*

This poem is included in her poetry collection *Homegirls and Handgrenades* and also part of Full Moon of Sonia CD. The poem is a conversation between the self and other. Here, the self is represented by 'I' and the other is represented by 'you'. This self contains her as a woman, as a black and her conflict with others. The black female persona records her struggle through life, battling history and memory along with everyday reality.

She has walked long as well as experienced a lot as a black woman. This long time is symbolic of the collective journey of black women. This

journey has a history of pain and trauma. The narrator becomes nostalgic while remembering this historical journey.

Then she changes her tone and addresses man as others or listener. She is in doubt whether she will be remembered or not after her death and how will be she remembered. It is important to her because she has spent her whole life for others and received nothing. Now she does not want to hold that same identity after her death. She wants her right and status after her death also. She was never loved truly. She has described her soul as holding the records of her life as her body has done them. Her unconscious mind frees her from restraints as her body reacts to them. Her unconscious mind is free to think for herself.

Use of strong metaphors and symbols like “legs stretched like stalks against sheets”, “wid stomachs drainen the piracy of oceans”, “wid mouths discarden the gelatin”, “applauden suns”, “grandion audience” etc. refers to her unique style through powerful language choice and diction. Her sense of repetition in the poem serves as an agent to enhance the feeling of excitement and urgency, and to emphasize the need for the reader to strike out against those who control the world through patriarchy, imperialism, materialism, capitalism and hypocrisy etc. She has walked a lot with these inequalities. These are the forms of black experiences. So this walk is indicative of the struggle that is a black woman’s life.

It is important to note that words like “wid” is used instead of “with”. This is a poetic liberty taken by the poet. The issue here is not misspelling. Misspelled words are used in order to stick to the African conversational mode of speech. The poet’s violation of spelling is a way of expression, a mode of asserting her identity, which is of African origin. The use of African English as evident in this poem gives it a certain flavour.

The poem has a rhythmic quality to it. This takes the poem closer to the improvisations of jazz. The sing song quality of the poem does not degrade its nature at all. Instead it brings in larger implications of African American culture. The narration of black experience also touches upon the blues which denote the tragedies of African American life in America.

### 10.3.2 Reading “Poem at Thirty”

it is midnight  
no magical bewitching  
hour for me  
i know only that  
i am here waiting  
remembering that  
once as a child  
i walked two  
miles in my sleep.  
did i know  
then where i  
was going?  
traveling. i'm  
always traveling.  
i want to tell  
you about me  
about nights on a  
brown couch when  
i wrapped my  
bones in lint and  
refused to move.  
no one touches  
me anymore.  
father do not  
send me out  
among strangers.  
you you black man  
stretching scraping  
the mold from your body.  
here is my hand.  
i am not afraid  
of the night.

The poem “Poem at Thirty” is included in the poetry collection *Shake Loose My Skin*. It is a dusky, ethereal description of a woman’s recollection of a life less emboldened by passion. In the poem Sanchez speaks directly to and of Black men. The poem represents the pleading to fathers for protection, and to friends for endearment, and to both to create healthy relationships in the Black community. While focusing on the Black man’s role and removing the female body and physical descriptions, the poet temporarily removes the

importance of the physical wound from the reader, in order to speak to and about social, political, and intimate aspects of Black women's lives. Through the auto-fictional 'I' she has made a fearless assertion that drops the descriptions of female body.

It is a confession of a black woman at a matured stage about her childhood in solitude. The 'night' referred in the poem is symbolic of various dark chapters of black people's life. This 'night' is the time they have to walk away for freedom. This freedom may be of a little black girl's freedom from the fear of physical, sexual or mental assault or it may be the freedom of the all black people from an unequal status. Sexually exploited and neglected to second-class status, many women who graduated from the civil rights effort were convinced that the drive for equality had to be extended to gender. This poem is a reflection of such an outlook. As a child and unknown the black girl has walked a long way. She wants to talk about herself and her journey. In course of the journey she has suffered a lot as signified by her use of traumatic figurative language like "nights on a brown couch", "when i wrapped my bones in lint and refused to move", "you black man stretching scraping the mold from your body" etc. Thus, through the poem the poet produces motivation, and tries to empower others to overcome fear, shame, and hopelessness.

### **10.3.3 Reading "An Anthem"**

*for the anc and brandywine peace community*

Our vision is our voice  
we cut through the country  
where madmen goosestep in tune to Guernica.

we are people made of fire  
we walk with ceremonial breaths  
we have condemned talking mouths.

we run without legs

we see without eyes  
loud laughter breaks over our heads.

give me courage so I can spread  
it over my face and mouth.

we are secret rivers  
with shaking hips and crests  
come awake in our thunder  
so that our eyes can see behind trees.

for the world is split wide open  
and you hide your hands behind your backs  
for the world is broken into little pieces  
and you beg with tin cups for life.

are we not more than hunger and music?  
are we not more than harlequins and horns?  
are we not more than color and drums?  
are we not more than anger and dance?

give me courage so I can spread it  
over my face and mouth.

we are the shakers  
walking from top to bottom in a day  
we are like Shango  
involving ourselves in acts  
that bring life to the middle  
of our stomachs

we are coming towards you madmen  
shredding your death talk  
standing in front with mornings around our waist  
we have inherited our prayers from  
the rain  
our eyes from the children of Soweto.

red rain pours over the land  
and our fire mixes with the water.

give me courage so I can spread  
it over my face and mouth.

**Annotations:**

**Guernica:** Picasso's famous painting in 1937 in response to the Nazi bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica (during the Spanish Civil War). The attack resulted in the deaths mostly of about two thousand women and children. The attack was a military experiment in destruction of a city. Sanchez shares Picasso's response to war as a useless brutality.



**Guernica** (Wikipedia)

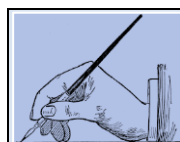
**Goose Step:** The goose step is part of a military parade where the soldiers swing their legs without bending them at the knees. Sanchez refers to the destruction of war where civilian damages and loss of lives are a part of military activity.

**Shango:** Yoruba deity in Nigeria who is worshiped as a glorious ancestor as well as a part of Nature. The poet hopes for Divine strength to counter the mindless forces of destruction that have taken over the world.

**Soweto Uprising:** Protests by school children in Soweto, South Africa, against the imposition of Afrikaans language in their schools in 1976 where countless children were gunned down by the government forces. The official death count was 176 although it is believed to have been several times more than that number.

The poem “An Anthem” is included in the poetry collection *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987). The poem is written in free verse broken into stanzas of varying lengths. Sanchez celebrates her African American heritage with vibrant rhythm and descriptions of music in the poem. Along with this celebration the poem claims to stand up for peace and compassion. It is an assertion of identity that acknowledges some of the evils of the world.

Sanchez has written about the importance of peace, even when pursuing it is uncomfortable or dangerous. Although the speaker in the poem asks for personal courage, the word ‘we’ dominates the poem. This ‘we’ is indicative of the collective application used for the collective experience of African American community. This collective statement or unity goes as a vision in all over the country seeking out those who are in favor of war. The speaker has identified her group and her use of figurative terms makes this search specific. She says that “they are people made of fire” and they “walk with ceremonial breaths” who speak with “condemned... mouths”. Thus, they are people of strength, determination, and heritage who continue to speak out for equality and liberty. They have wisdom, purpose and brave hearts that evade physical involvement. She has compared their spirit to Shango, the African God of Storms who will bring life into the desert. She is remembering the children from Soweto who sacrificed their lives for freedom and liberty. The speaker urges for the upliftment of the black people who have been victims of discrimination for decades. She asks for some courage so that she can spread the urge to the others across the world.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What kind of ‘walk’ is mentioned by Sanchez in “I Have Walked a Long Time”?

2. How does the poem “Poem at Thirty” refer to the affliction of black women throughout history?

3. Would you agree that Sonia Sanchez reaches beyond the concerns of African Americans to fellow human beings across the world? Examine with reference to her poem “An Anthem.”

#### 10.4 NIKKI GIOVANNI: LIFE AND WORKS

Nikki Giovanni (1943-present) is one of the best-known African American poets who reached prominence during the late 1960s. She was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, and grew up in Lincoln Heights, an all-black suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1968, Giovanni graduated with honors from Fisk University, her grandfather’s alma mater; she later attended the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University. Giovanni published her first book of poetry, *Black Feeling BlackTalk*, in 1968, and published a second book within the next year. Early in her career she was dubbed the “princess of Black



poetry”, and over the course of more than three decades of publishing and lecturing she has come to be called both a “National Treasure” and most recently, one of Oprah Winfrey’s twenty five “Living Legends”.(*The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni*1968-1998,PS.2)

Giovanni is the author of more than thirty books. Her autobiography, *Gemini* was a finalist for the National Book Award; *Love Poems*,*Blues: For All the Changes*(1999), and *Quilting the BlackEyed Pea*(2002) were all honored with NAACP Images Awards. Her other published books and collections are *Black Judgement* (1968),*Re: Creation* (1970, *My House* (1972), *The Women and The Men* (1975),*Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* (1978),*Woman* (1978) ,*ThoseWho Ride The Night Winds* (1983), *Knoxville, Tennessee* (1994), *The Selected Poems ofNikki Giovanni* (1996),*The Prosaic Soulof Nikki Giovanni* (2003),*The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni* (2003),*Acolytes* (2007), *Bicycles:Love Poems* (2009),*Chasing Utopia: A Hybrid* (2013) (HarperCollins)etc.

Her identity as a black is precious for her as she reveals in an interview with Jill Scott about her inspiration: ‘the source of my work has always been black Americans. I am absolutely fascinated by what we are, and how we have conducted our business more than hundred years in America’(*TheCollected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni* PS 6).

The development of a unique and distinctive voice has been perhaps the single most important achievement of Giovanni’s career. Giovanni has literally taken her poetry ‘to the people’ through hundreds of public lectures and readings over the last thirty-five years. Through her spoken voice and poetry she attempts to continue African and African-American oral traditions. While many of Giovanni’s poems explore and describe women’s lives, others celebrate women—Black women in particular—as a way of providing an antidote to the slurs so often cast upon them. Race and gender and identity crisis are essential dynamics in her poetry. This part of the Unit will discuss selected poems of Nikki Giovanni.

## 10.5 READING THE POEMS OF NIKKI GIOVANNI

In this section, let us focus on:

- Giovanni's use of punctuation
- The simplified diction

### 10.5.1 Reading "Choices"

if I can't do  
what I want to do  
then my job is to not  
do what I don't want  
to do

it's not the same thing  
but it's the best I can  
do

if I can't have  
what I want then  
my job is to want  
what I've got  
and be satisfied  
that at least there  
is something more  
to want

since I can't go  
where I need  
to go then I must go  
where the signs point  
though always understanding  
parallel movement  
isn't lateral

when I can't express  
what I really feel  
I practice feeling  
what I can express  
and none of it is equal  
I know  
but that's why mankind  
alone among the mammals  
learn to cry

Giovanni is conscious of her identity as an African American. Her poetry is a way to find a voice that would articulate the reality of the struggle of black Americans. This poem is also a vision of truth and reality of survival of black people in America. They are trapped in a dilemma of what they want to do and what they are required to do. They have no other options as choices. Anyhow the speaker chooses to hope, to wait for a better time. She is sure of the fact that one day this faith and hope will bring a better future for them. She has so many limitations as reflected in the form of phrases like –“I can’t do what I want to do”, “I can’t have what I want”, “I can’t go where I need to go”, and “I can’t express what I really feel” in the poem. She has transformed these limitations into her strength as she chooses to “not do what I don’t want to do”, “to want what I’ve got and be satisfied that at least there is something more to want”, “must go where the signs point though always understanding parallel movement isn’t lateral”. This dilemma is shared by black people who have lived through the days of trauma and agony. Since slaves were considered to be less human by the dominant culture they needed a revolution. After the civil war, slavery was abolished and blacks were hopeful of becoming a part of the American nation. Indication of this revolution is present in the poem in the denial of the things she does not want to do. A tone of hope and expectation, use of short and direct phrases enhances to the simplicity of the poem. However, the speaker in the poem knows that African Americans have to tread a narrow path even in their liberated stage. They have to negotiate impediments and discrimination, stoicism and fortitude, humour and patience. It would be unwise to claim that black lives are the same as that of whites in America.

### **10.5.2 Reading the Poem “All I Gotta Do”**

all I gotta do  
is sit and wait  
sit and wait  
if I can learn  
how

what I need to do

is sit and wait  
cause I'm a woman  
sit and wait  
what I gotta do  
is sit and wait  
cause I'm a woman  
it'll find me

you get yours  
and I'll get mine  
if I learn  
to sit and wait  
you got yours  
I want mine  
and I'm gonna get it  
cause I gotta get it  
cause I need to get it  
if I learn how

though about calling  
for it on the phone  
asked for a delivery  
but they didn't have it  
though about going  
to the store to get it  
walked to the corner  
but they didn't have it  
called your name  
in my sleep  
sitting and waiting  
thought you would awake me  
called your name  
lying in my bed  
but you didn't have it  
offered to go get it  
but you didn't have it  
so I'm sitting

all I know  
is sitting and waiting  
waiting and sitting  
cause i'm a woman  
all I know  
is sitting and waiting  
cause i gotta wait  
wait for it to find  
me

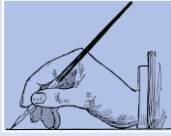
In “All I Gotta Do” Giovanni calls for black power, she evokes the powerlessness of women. Here phrases repeat, halt at line breaks, and recur in changing but always inconclusive combinations—these techniques echo Giovanni’s frustration at the gap between her individual need and the means allotted by her society for fulfilling them. “All I gotta do”, “sit and wait”, “cause I’m a woman”, “it’ll find me”, “wanting it” “needing it”, “getting it”, “having it”—these phrases are like formulas, and their arrangement makes the poem a revolt against established norms of society against women. The poet wishes that “it” will find her, but the “it” is undefined. Possibly it is the dichotomy of public and private in her mind; her inner self and expectations of society from her as a woman. The words that hint at sitting and waiting indicate a state of dependency. While severing from that position is the motivation the poet urges.

Giovanni has refused to be dictated by the male leaders of the Black Arts Movement or the Black Power Movement. It directed her to discover a distinct female identity that is not unconcerned about race. She has realized that she must find her own identity and her own poetic voice in order to win this war successfully. She wants to liberalize the position of women in society by reflecting on the limitations of African American women in America. She feels that otherwise they have to sit and wait only to be found by anyone/anything.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



Black Arts Movement was the artistic branch of Black Power Movement that attempted to make a place for blacks in literary, cultural and political areas in America from mid-1960s to 1970s. With this movement black people started to establish their own publishing house, literary groups and art institutions. They expressed their feelings through poetry, theatre, dance and visual art etc. Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Mari Evans, Nikki Giovanni, Rosa Guy, Lorraine Hansberry, Etheridge Knight, Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Lorenzo Thomas and Maya Angelou are some prominent thinkers and writers of the movement.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How does the dilemma of choice in the poem “Choices” signify the condition of black women in America?

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2. Jot down few poetic techniques used by Nikki Giovanni in the poem “All I Gotta Do”.

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3. Find out examples from the poems where Giovanni voices the problems of African American women and their dignity

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## 10.6 JUNE JORDAN: LIFE AND WORKS

June Millicent Jordan (1936–2002) was a Caribbean-American poet, playwright, essayist and activist. She was born in Harlem, New York. When Jordan was five years old her family moved to Brooklyn, New York. In her 1986 essay, *For My American Family* Jordan explores the many conflicts to be dealt with in the experience of being raised by black immigrant parents with visions of the future for their offspring that far exceeded the urban ghettos of the present. She was encouraged by her father to face the struggle against racial oppression. She started writing poetry at the age of seven. Her first published book, *Who Look at Me* (1969) is a collection of poems. She has written 27 more books including *Things That I Do in the Dark: Selected Poems, 1954–1977* (1977), *Passion* (1980), *Civil Wars* (1981), *Living Room* (1985), *Some of Us Did Not Die* (2003) etc. Two more books have been published posthumously: *Directed By Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan* (Copper Canyon Press, 2005) and a re-issue of the 1970 poetry collection *Soul Script*, edited by Jordan.

Jordan was known as “the Poet of the People”, and at Berkeley, she founded the “Poetry for the People” program in 1991. Its aim was to inspire and empower students to use poetry as a means of artistic expression. Alice Walker stated: “Jordan makes us think of Akhmatova, of Neruda. She is among the bravest of us, the most outraged. She feels for all of us. She is the universal poet” ([www.junejordan.com/](http://www.junejordan.com/)). Jordan’s poetry and other works reflect her belief in addressing the concerns of audiences of colour, exploring black life, creating better living conditions for black families, and enhancing black culture. While self-realization is crucial, Jordan also believed in shared human goals for a better society; her poetry enabled her to express her political ideas while making art. She was frequently compared with politically conscious black poets such as Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baraka, but her verse bore traces of other influences, including those of white American poet Walt Whitman,

whose self-celebratory poems she admired. This part of the unit will introduce you to the themes and issues of Jordan's poetry and her poetic techniques to express multiple experiences of Blackness.

### ***10.7 READING THE POEMS OF JUNE JORDAN***

In this section let us focus on:

- The difference between the crisp writing of Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni on one hand and elaborate poetic sentences of June Jordan on the other hand.

#### **10.7.1 Reading "Poem about My Rights"**

Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear  
my head about this poem about why I can't  
go out without changing my clothes my shoes  
my body posture my gender identity my age  
my status as a woman alone in the evening/  
alone on the streets/alone not being the point/  
the point being that I can't do what I want  
to do with my own body because I am the wrong  
sex the wrong age the wrong skin and  
suppose it was not here in the city but down on the beach/  
or far into the woods and I wanted to go  
there by myself thinking about God/or thinking  
about children or thinking about the world/all of it  
disclosed by the stars and the silence:  
I could not go and I could not think and I could not  
stay there  
alone  
as I need to be  
alone because I can't do what I want to do with my own  
body and  
who in the hell set things up  
like this  
and in France they say if the guy penetrates  
but does not ejaculate then he did not rape me  
and if after stabbing him if after screams if  
after begging the bastard and if even after smashing  
a hammer to his head if even after that if he  
and his buddies fuck me after that  
then I consented and there was



no rape because finally you understand finally  
they fucked me over because I was wrong I was  
wrong again to be me being me where I was/wrong  
to be who I am  
which is exactly like South Africa  
penetrating into Namibia penetrating into  
Angola and does that mean I mean how do you know if  
Pretoria ejaculates what will the evidence look like the  
proof of the monster jackboot ejaculation on Blackland  
and if  
after Namibia and if after Angola and if after Zimbabwe  
and if after all of my kinsmen and women resist even to  
self-immolation of the villages and if after that  
we lose nevertheless what will the big boys say will they  
claim my consent:  
Do You Follow Me: We are the wrong people of  
the wrong skin on the wrong continent and what  
in the hell is everybody being reasonable about  
and according to the *Times* this week  
back in 1966 the C.I.A. decided that they had this problem  
and the problem was a man named Nkrumah so they  
killed him and before that it was Patrice Lumumba  
and before that it was my father on the campus  
of my Ivy League school and my father afraid  
to walk into the cafeteria because he said he  
was wrong the wrong age the wrong skin the wrong  
gender identity and he was paying my tuition and  
before that  
it was my father saying I was wrong saying that  
I should have been a boy because he wanted one/a  
boy and that I should have been lighter skinned and  
that I should have had straighter hair and that  
I should not be so boy crazy but instead I should  
just be one/a boy and before that  
it was my mother pleading plastic surgery for  
my nose and braces for my teeth and telling me  
to let the books loose to let them loose in other  
words  
I am very familiar with the problems of the C.I.A.  
and the problems of South Africa and the problems  
of Exxon Corporation and the problems of white  
America in general and the problems of the teachers  
and the preachers and the F.B.I. and the social  
workers and my particular Mom and Dad/I am very  
familiar with the problems because the problems  
turn out to be  
me

I am the history of rape  
 I am the history of the rejection of who I am  
 I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of  
 myself  
 I am the history of battery assault and limitless  
 armies against whatever I want to do with my mind  
 and my body and my soul and  
 whether it's about walking out at night  
 or whether it's about the love that I feel or  
 whether it's about the sanctity of my vagina or  
 the sanctity of my national boundaries  
 or the sanctity of my leaders or the sanctity  
 of each and every desire  
 that I know from my personal and idiosyncratic  
 and indisputably single and singular heart  
 I have been raped  
 be-  
 cause I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age  
 the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the  
 wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic  
 the wrong sartorial I  
 I have been the meaning of rape  
 I have been the problem everyone seeks to  
 eliminate by forced  
 penetration with or without the evidence of slime and/  
 but let this be unmistakable this poem  
 is not consent I do not consent  
 to my mother to my father to the teachers to  
 the F.B.I. to South Africa to Bedford-Stuy  
 to Park Avenue to American Airlines to the hardon  
 idlers on the corners to the sneaky creeps in  
 cars  
*I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name*  
 My name is my own my own my own  
 and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this  
 but I can tell you that from now on my resistance  
 my simple and daily and nightly self-determination  
 may very well cost you your life

The poem first appeared in Jordan's famous collection *Passion: New Poems, 1977-1980*. This poem is a concern for basic human rights and justice for all people. She expresses rage and frustration at racial and sexual discrimination. She questions restrictions on women, why they have been taught to give importance to the body and their physical appearance. As a

woman she cannot not go and think and stay anywhere alone. She not only challenges the idea of “ideal woman” but also confronts the distress and negativity of racial oppression: “We are the wrong people /of the wrong skin/ on the wrong continent”. This denial is the rejection of destructive levels. Her choice of words is a conscious attempt to represent the realities of African American women’s lives. She has reinterpreted the terms of oppression by mentioning various instances of black struggle including Nkrumah’s defeat and her familiarization with C.I.A etc. She reasserts the history of rape, the history of rejection and the history of the terrorized and incarceration in white and male dominated society. But she also affirms herself and vows to defend if necessary: “*I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name /My name is my own my own my own*”. She holds on self-determination and self-reliance at last to fight for her own rights.

The rich juxtaposing and combining of free verse, linearly arranged sentences, parallelism, unpunctuated parenthetical remarks, repetition, freely (but not randomly) used, slashes give this poem a unique frame and style. It seems like rambling at a superficial level, but the inherent layers are very much important. It reveals a black woman body speaking up for rights; rights of her womanhood, her national identity and her individual dignity.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



Kwame Nkrumah was the first President of Ghana and also the first Prime Minister of Ghana. On 24th February 1966, the government of Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown through a military and police coup d’état in which the key figures were Col E.K. Kotoka, Major A.A. Afrifa and Inspector General of Police J.W.K. Harlley. The files of the US Central Intelligence Agency declassified in 1999 show that USA has been trying to influence people to overthrow President Kwame Nkrumah since 1964. The CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) backed coup in Ghana was part of the Cold War conflict of the time as President Nkrumah was seen as an ally of Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

### 10.7.2 Reading “Poem for South African Women”

Commemoration of the 40,000 women and children who,

August 9, 1956, presented themselves in bodily protest against the “dompass” in the capital of apartheid. Presented at The United Nations, August 9, 1978.

Our own shadows disappear as the feet of thousands  
by the tens of thousands pound the fallow land  
into new dust that  
rising like a marvelous pollen will be  
fertile  
even as the first woman whispering  
imagination to the trees around her made  
for righteous fruit  
from such deliberate defense of life  
as no other still  
will claim inferior to any other safety  
in the world

The whispers too they  
intimate to the inmost ear of every spirit  
now aroused they  
carousing in ferocious affirmation  
of all peaceable and loving amplitude  
sound a certainly unbounded heat  
from a baptismal smoke where yes  
there will be fire  
And the babies cease alarm as mothers  
raising arms  
and heart high as the stars so far unseen  
nevertheless hurl into the universe  
a moving force  
irreversible as light years  
traveling to the open  
eye

And who will join this standing up  
and the ones who stood without sweet company  
will sing and sing  
back into the mountains and  
if necessary  
even under the sea

we are the ones we have been waiting for

The poem is dedicated to the bravery of South African women. In South Africa, Pass laws were a form of internal passport system designed to

segregate the population, severely limit the movements of the black African populace, manage urbanization, and allocate migrant labor in the apartheid system. The suffering that Africans had to endure during those times so angered them that the first protest march against the ‘dompasses’ occurred in 1956 August when hundreds of thousands of women from all races marched against the Prime Minister’s apartheid government. In this poem Jordan is remembering the courageous step taken by the South African women. Jordan believes in shared human goals for a better society; her poetry enabled her to express her political ideas while making art so she has compared the rising to marvellous pollen that is fertile. This rise is seen as a deliberate resistance in life where no one will be able to claim others as inferiors. The whisper of peace uttered by them will be accepted by everyone. It will be a moving force, unbounded and irreversible. It will be a search or a song for freedom that goes back into the mountains and if necessary even under the sea. She has ended the poem with hope: “we are the ones we have been waiting for”. This hope is an assertion of one’s self or identity. It is an affirmation of power of women, black womanhood.

Jordan’s use of descriptive tone and familiar metaphors makes the poem sweet and remarkable. Use of comparison like “fertile pollen”, “baptismal smoke”, and “light year” adds to the magnificence of the poem.

### **10.7.3 Reading “A Song for Soweto”**

At the throat of Soweto  
a devil language falls  
slashing  
claw syllables to shred and leave  
raw  
the tongue of the young  
girl  
learning to sing  
her own name

Where she would say  
*water*

They would teach her to cry  
  *blood*

Where she would save  
  *grass*

They would teach her to crave  
  *crawling into the*  
  *grave*

Where she would praise  
  *father*

They would teach her to pray  
  *somebody please*  
  *do not take him*  
  *away*

Where she would kiss with her mouth  
  *my homeland*

They would teach her to swallow  
  *this dust*

But words live in the spirit of her face and that  
sound will no longer yield to imperial erase

Where they would draw  
  *blood*

She will drink  
  *water*

Where they would deepen  
  *the grave*

She will conjure up  
  *grass*

Where they would take  
  *father and family away*

She will stand  
  *under the sun/she will stay*

Where they would teach her to swallow  
  *this dust*

She will kiss with her mouth  
  *my homeland*

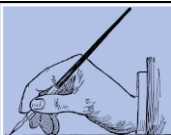
and stay  
with the song of Soweto

stay  
with the song of Soweto

This poem is written in the memory of the Soweto student uprising in the year 1976. On the morning of 16 June 1976, between 10,000 and 20,000 black students walked from their schools to Orlando Stadium to protest

against the *Afrikaans Medium Decree* of 1974, which forced all black schools of South Africa to use Afrikaans and English as languages of instruction. This change of medium of instruction was opposed by the teachers' association also. While marching to the stadium, approximately fifty policemen stopped the students and tried to turn them back. At first, they tried unsuccessfully to disperse the students with tear gas and warning shots. Then policemen fired directly into the crowd of students. Many students were killed. As mentioned above in the context of Sanchez's poem "An Anthem," the official number of deaths was 176 but other sources claim that the figure could have been as high as 700.

The shooting in Soweto resulted a massive uprising that spread to many urban and rural areas of South Africa. Jordan has associated the incident to a little girl's life in the poem. She has mentioned the forced language as 'a devil language' that falls on the life of the little girl. It was her time to learn to sing, to acquire self-identity but the incident taught her to cry blood. She has learnt the meaning of oppression and revolution at a very tender age. She has learnt the meaning of homeland and faced the challenges oppression brought to the lives of black people. However, the poet hopes for a better future as the little girl will always stand for peace and liberty. She would conjure up "grass"; this grass is symbolic of democracy like Whitman in his "Song of Myself". With the song of Soweto, that is remembered by South Africa as Youth Day the spirit of young students of South Africa will also be remembered by people.

	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CHECK YOUR PROGRESS</b></p> <p>1. What are the rights that June Jordan talks about in the poem "Poem about My Rights"?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
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2. How does the poet relate different instances from black struggle to project an identity for blacks in the poems “Poem for South African Women” and “A Poem For Soweto”?

### ***10.8 RACE, GENDER AND RESISTANCE***

The poems of Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and June Jordan touch upon the issues of race, gender and resistance at large. First let us talk about the issue of race in their poetry. Indeed, the black identity is apparent in their poems. With this racial matrix we also see an oppressed identity in the lines. This identity is not the perpetrator, it is the victim. The brutality it undergoes in the name of colour and economy is evident. This brutality is doubled up when we arrive at a gendered plane because black women are victims of their white counterparts and their black male counterparts as well. This is where the issue of gender arrives in our discussion. A close reading of the texts will show that the phrases used by poets are expressions which are outbursts rather than a simple telling. The poets assert their own sexuality to re-write their histories. There is a passion in these expressions, an urgency and more so a resistance. The issue of resistance can be talked about in the aspect of violent opposition to accepting the victim role forever. The poets urge to break apart the stereotyped images of women and black women. Their voices create a chaos in the traditional perpetrator-victim identity. They refuse to comply with the



violence they are undergoing. Thus race, gender and resistance are interlinked with one another.

### **10.9 SUMMING UP**

By now you must have realized why African-American women poets are now regarded as among the best of modern American poets. Their poetry is as very often celebratory of a life that, despite its hardships and injustice, was often upbeat. You must read other poems from Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan and a host of other black American poets and experience the rich variety which not only expresses criticism of discrimination and injustice but also expresses a culture to celebrate.



### **10.10 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

1. What is the chief emphasis in black women's poetry of 1960s and beyond?
2. What are the major themes or subject matters delineated in the poetry of Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and June Jordan?
3. Why black history is important to black poets? How revision of black history is projected to indicate the marginalization of blackwomen in the poems of Sanchez, Giovanni and Jordan?
4. How do the poets negotiate the location of Black American women and racial segregation in their poems?
5. What is meant by 'black womanhood'? How does it relate to the idea of black sexuality? Discuss in the light of the poems of Sanchez, Giovanni and Jordan.



### **10.11 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS**

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### **Web Source**

[www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org) › *Poems* (all the texts of the poems given inside are from this source)

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