

**INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO EMERSON****SARADHA SANKARARAMAN**

Spiller writes, "Literature is any writing in which aesthetic, emotional or intellectual values are made articulate by excellent expression." Other scholars also define the term 'literature' in the same way using different words. To answer the main question, 'What is American literature?' we must go through certain classic American texts of yesterday and today that are spread over a period of 250 years. Howard Mumford Jones and Richard M. Ludwig say that it is an unanswerable question. We need not substantiate the hard line view of these American critics. We can throw a new light on this term and show what it indicates to some extent.

A Typical American literature is not the one that merely describes the geographical features of the new continent, nor is it one that focuses attention on the problems encountered by the settlers. Neither the historical events nor the religious beliefs of the Americans constitute American literature. Literary pieces that highlight the American mind, writings that give new shape and color to American imagination, creative works that deal with American voice may be regarded as American literature. The making of a new nation and the making of new national poetry went hand in hand.

The European immigrants, the Pilgrim Fathers set out on American soil in 1620. The settlers inhabiting a new land, breathing new air, watching strange scenes and experiencing thrill and excitement encountered several problems. They look back with nostalgia to the rich culture of Europe. Commenting on the works of the early American writers, Spiller writes,

"They were more often purveyors of this nostalgia than recorders of the warmth of the American imagination kindling in novel scenes. They believed that their mission was to be importers and middlemen for America of his European culture." Poems written in the early period are evidence of the influence of the English poets, particularly Milton rather than of any distinguishing American culture. Giving a picture of the American scene, a French critic was referring to the economic and political settlers of the new continent; we may take it as a pointer to the budding writers of America. The writers must cut their umbilical cord (that connect them with the English tradition) and write about their experience giving new ideas and new principles. The young writers in America began their work in earnest giving shape and color to their new experiences. The sophisticated European culture of the settlers, slightly modified by the thrilling experiences of them in a

vast and intractable continent, created a new civilization. The chief problem of American literature was that of delivering satisfactory literary forms from this new civilization. The early writers in America followed the English literary tradition because they had no tradition of their own. They were imposing new forms and modes of rigid English. New Classicism on to an American experience. The neo- classical forms of English literature were neither adaptable nor suitable to elucidate the new civilization of the settlers. The attempt of some young American writers who turned to the romantics for guidance was scarcely an improvement over the neo-classical experiment. In 1820 and 1821 appeared some novels, poems and essays with deeper native roots than those of the earlier writers. Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book*, James Fennimore Cooper's *The Spy* and the poems of W.C Bryant inaugurated a new chapter in the literary history of America. Spiller says, "They were nearer to recognition of just what the problem was and were read to deal with it more directly and fundamentally."

Secondly the American soil was not fertile enough for literature to blossom. Explaining the reasons Spiller writes, "There are no annals for the historians, no follies for the satirists, no manners for the dramatists, no obscure fiction for the writer of romance, no gross and hardy offence against decorum for the moralists, nor any of the rich artificial auxiliaries of poetry."

The third step was a focus on the problem of form for its own sake. Poe initiated this step when he published his first volume of poems in 1840. Critics noticed aesthetic materials and methods in his works. In his critical essays he 'proposed the first full length American aesthetic philosophy'. It was no who first recognized the chief problems of American literature. Poe didn't pay attention to the actual, physical and outward aspects of life in the United States. He devoted his thought and feeling to the problems of mankind and the emotion of the Americans. He portrayed the inner voice of the Americans.

The literary historians described the literary scenes of America as if they were the transplanted English flowers and trees. Literary historians at the later stage paid attention to the democratic principles and economic advancement of the new land, ignoring the timeless values of American writing. Walt Whitman insisted that the American should absorb and not discard their European past.

It is an acknowledged fact that American literature is 'a transplanted European culture', bringing with it the richness of its source in the classical world, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The ideals and values developed in democratic society greatly influenced the American writing.

After two centuries (i.e. in the twentieth century) the American literary soil produced great classics, their culture was not immigrant then and they developed their own culture different from the Europeans. American literature depends both upon an imported culture and upon the circumstances of a new world radically different in human experiences from the old.

As Abraham Lincoln put it, America was a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created free and equal. Richard Grey says that “the poetry written in American literature between 1800 and 1900 deserves to be judged according to its intentions and those intentions are so bound up with the ‘new man’ and the ideology of the new republic.” The poetic voice of his infant republic would be radically different from the voice of ‘old Europe.

### **Emerson’s Poetry**

Emerson, one of the most brilliant American poets and thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century inaugurated a new chapter in the literary history of America. His prophetic utterances and gnomic wisdom awakened the spirits of the intellectuals and kindled the feelings of the common man. His poems and essays are provocative, not descriptive or explanatory. He has contributed much to the literary movement of his age - **transcendentalism**. What does the word ‘transcendentalism’ mean? The word ‘transcendentalism’ was derived from German Romantic Philosophy. It was a mode of romantic thought. Elizabeth A. Meese explains this literary concept clearly in her essay on ‘Transcendentalism’. She says “Transcendentalism presents old ideas in new words and new categories in an effort to locate the past within the present, hoping thereby to make each richer.” According to Sampson, transcendentalists such as Margaret Fuller, Henry Thoreau, Elizabeth Peabody met at Emerson’s house regularly to discuss abstract questions and in particular the new German idealist originating with Kant. Dickens writes humorously in his American Notes “the whatever was unintelligible would be certainly transcendental” and the novel believed that the transcendentalists were the followers of Carlyle. The sect, according to Dickens, has its occasional vagaries, but it has good healthy qualities. They published a journal called “The Dial” and Emerson was the main move behind this journal for literature, philosophy and religion. Margaret Fuller was the first editor and after her resignation, Emerson took charge of the journal, which drew the attention of the intelligentsia of America.

Emerson has not formulated any philosophic theory of his own, According to some critics even his thought is not original; but he gave them freshness by his handling. He has drawn materials from various sources such as New England Religious thought, Scottish

realism, French and English skepticism, Neo - Platonism and oriental mystic writings. He has polished his raw materials and has given them a new shape and colour. Most of his works appear to be an amalgam of all these doctrines. Emerson believed that there are two levels of reality - the **supernatural and the natural**. The supernatural is 'essence', 'spirit' or 'over - soul', as Emerson calls it. It is an impersonal force 'that is eternal, harmonious and beneficent in tendency'. The individual soul is part of the over - soul and man has access to it through his intuition. Emerson attempts to explain the relation between the spiritual and physical levels of being taking examples from the opposite things such as One and Many, Cause and Effect and Unity and Diversity, etc. As a typical western scholar he combines physical laws with spiritual truth. He holds the view that 'the study of physical laws can generate intuitions of spiritual truth'. The most important function of nature according to Emerson is to excite the intuition. Nature always speaks of spirit and it suggests the absolute.

It is an acknowledged fact that the critics do not read his poetry with the same attention and interest as they do with his prose. He began writing verse as a young boy and continued to write till his declining years. His essays continue to dazzle and provoke the readers, but his poems do not evoke much response from the readers. Many critics hold the view that he was gifted in one genre (prose) but not so in another (poetry). Paul Kane Says. "Like P.B. Shelley's, Emerson's notion of poetry is broad and embraces the realms of prose. His poems are often mistakenly read as **pale versions of the prose**." Some critics hold the view that his poems are **technically inept**. Whatever may be the views of the critics, it is clear that Emerson writes, "I am born a poet, of a low class without doubt, yet a poet. This is my nature and vocation. My singing, be sure, is very 'husky' and is for the most part in prose". Emerson was a prolific writer in verse and composed 1500 pages of poetry. He was a poet of **many moods and many modes**. He published his poems in 'The Dial' and other journals and newspapers. He called his journals his 'Savings bank' because he drew materials from them for his poems and essays. His use of **concrete image, apt symbols and appropriate words** gave remarkable evidence of his versatility and fluency. He had used the conventional method to present his peculiar ideas in his poems. It is true that he was not an expert in using rhetorical figures, but he conveyed his message clearly through his apt expressions. His use of symbols certainly gives an emotional intensity to his poetry. Quite early in life he developed an interest in Bhagavad - Gita and Vedanta Philosophy. In some of his poems he attempted to explicate the Indian doctrine. A few poems such as 'Concord Hymn' and 'The Snow Storm' celebrate local events. The poem 'Brahma' gives expression to elements of his philosophy. The poem 'Each and All' suggests that the beauty

and meaning of each is dependent upon its content or the 'all'. Commenting on his works, Hawthorne said that he 'admired Emerson as a poet of deep beauty and austere tenderness but sought nothing from him as a philosopher'.

He believed that 'the great work of art is not an imitation of Nature but a symbol of Truth realized intuitively. He gives us a new definition for a poem. "It is not meters but a matter making argument that makes a poem". According to him 'a poet must first of all be the seer' intuitively experiencing the absolute of the over - soul and secondly a seer communicating these absolutes to the reader.

He didn't like the government formed by the people because the wealthy would be the materialists without intuitive insight. But he was not against the rule by the wise, temperate and the cultivated rich people. He believed that such cultured rich people would protect the poor and the weak against predators. He argued vehemently in favour of child labor legislation and the abolition of slavery. He was more practical in his approach to the problems of his days. He argued that slavery was basically an economic matter. The southern landlords spent a huge sum of money on slaves and that was the reason they were against slavery. If the northern church people really wanted to emancipate the slaves, they should sell their church silver, buy up the slaves and set them free. Right thinking and clean living, according to Emerson takes pain to show that the moral law of the universe is as clear as the physical law and will affect the soul of man just as gravitation and chemical forces affect his body. He regarded **theology as the rhetoric of morals**. Lowell's statement that 'Emerson had a Greek head on right Yankee shoulders' gives us a clear picture of Emerson.

The poet explains with illustration how the beauty and meaning of 'each' is dependent upon its content or the 'all'. The poet believes firmly that God has placed everything in its proper place and background. If you remove or displace anything from the place assigned to it by God, it loses its beauty. The poem opens with an image of **distant and unapprehended vision**. The farm boy (red - cloaked clown) does not know that he is being watched or seen and is therefore a part of a larger scene. When the young cow lows loudly in the upland farm, the pleasant sound was heard far and wide, but when it lows into your ear (out of upland farm), you are missing the sweetness of the sound. The sexton doesn't know when he rings the bell at noon, which Napoleon listens to it eagerly, thrilled by the bell sound, have done to strengthen the creed of your neighbor. **The fact is that all things are necessary for each other and nothing is good or beautiful in its seclusion.**

Excited by the sweet voice of the sparrow that was singing at dawn on the alder bough, the speaker brought it home along with its nest. The sparrow still sings, but it does

not enchant the listener. The song was lovely in its proper atmosphere. The speaker has brought home the seashells. When the shells are separated from the natural atmosphere and from the whole of its contexts, they lost their beauty. The poet emphasizes the point that everything has its beauty in its natural atmosphere. The bride looked so beautiful when she was in the midst of maidens, wearing bridal garments. But she had lost her magnetic appeal when she was separated from the ceremonial environment. She has become gentle wife and no one calls her a fairy now. The speaker understands the fact that no image of beauty, whether it is the sparrow's song or the seashells, will delight us if it is abstracted from the whole of its context. Turning away from the pursuit of beauty, the speaker focuses his attention on knowledge. Beauty disappears with age and it is just a game of youth. According to the Romantic poets, truth is connected with beauty and beauty with senses. the speaker sees "the ground - pine curling over club - moss", smells the violet at his feet, hears the morning songbird and becomes aware of the context of forest, sky and river. The poet says,

"Beauty through my senses stole;  
I yielded myself to the perfect whole".

The poet finds through the agency of the senses of sight and hearing a unity of thought and impression, of the individual with the universal and of each and all. He repeats the idea that nothing is fair or good alone. Influenced by the Gita and the Upanishads, Emerson stresses the importance of soul's immortality the poem, 'Brahma'. Brahma is the speaker of the poem and he addresses the readers directly. The poem throws light on the Hindu doctrine, i.e., the soul has no death and what appears to be real at all. (Advaita philosophy says - the whole world is Maya - illusion and the only reality is God). According to Vedantic Absolutism, "Brahma is the impersonal supreme being". Emerson uses the word 'over - soul' in his essays when he discusses the one great unity. People do not understand the subtle and mysterious ways of Brahma. The slayer thinks that he is going to kill and the one who is to be slain thinks that he would be killed. According to Brahma there is neither the act of killing nor the death. The implied meaning is that the soul is immortal and no one can annihilate it. The Supreme Being does not find contradictions in the world. Never does Brahma find any difference between the two things that are diametrically opposed to each other. Since Brahma is out of time and space, nothing is far away from him and nothing is forgotten. To him both the shadow and sunlight are the same. The vanquished and the departed ones appear as present and there is no difference between fame and shame. No one can ignore Brahma or run away from him. When they fly, he propels even the wings that carry them. Brahma is the doubter as well as the doubt. Brahma is the hymn, the Brahmin sings. Those who don't understand Brahma will find only chaos and

disorder in the world, but those who enter the abode of Brahma will find harmony, order and perfection in the world. Even the strong gods are pining for his abode and the seven holiest saints of the Hindus strive to attain Heaven. Addressing the readers, Brahma says that they should seek to find him (Brahma), turning their back on Heaven. The poet doesn't use the word 'God' in this poem. His knowledge of the Hindu Scriptures made him believe that Brahma (over - soul, Supreme Being, Supernatural, the One Great Unity) is harmonious and eternal. The poem suggests the enclosure of all diversity in the One Great Unity.

Bewitched by the exquisite loveliness of the Rhodora, the pink - colored flower that grows on a thorny shrub, Emerson admires its unusual and exciting beauty. In this poem the poet fuses nature and philosophy into one. The beauty of the flower transcends description. In the month of May, when the poet was pierced by the severe sea - wind, he saw the flower in full blossom. Not only did the leafless flower that blossomed in the unfrequented part of the desert, kindle the feelings of the poet, but also made the place and the sluggish brook appear lovelier. The purple petals of the flower fallen in the pool made the black water of the brook look beautiful. The flower enchanted the red bird that had come to the brook to cool its head and feathers. It made the bird's colourful feathers look cheap. There was no one in the secluded part of the place to admire the beauty of the flower. Did the flower waste its beauty and charm in the unfrequented part of the wood? The poet said that it was an irrelevant question because, "beauty was an end in itself having its own existence for itself". The poet believed that the supreme power that had created him also created the flower. God did not discriminate between objects, animate or inanimate. The poet focused his attention on the creator and all the mysteries of nature. It was too difficult for any one to understand the mysteries of nature. Man and the Rose, though they were together in one place, were not rivals. God was the central force, whether it was the world of human beings or the world of nature. But Man living in the world of ignorance could not understand this central and governing principle of the universe.

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