

**MEG-11  
AMERICAN NOVEL  
ASSIGNMENT 2020-21  
(Based on Blocks (1-9))**

**Course Code: MEG-11/ 2020-21  
Max. Marks: 100**

**Answer all questions.**

1. Discuss the character of Carrie as one of the finest modern women in American fiction. 20
2. Discuss *The Floating Opera* as a modern novel. 20
3. Discuss the title of the novel *The Color Purple*. 20
4. Comment on the art of characterization in *The Great Gatsby*. 20
5. Comment on the narrative strategies in *Light in August*. 20

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# M.E.G.-11

## American Novel

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**Answer all questions.**

**Q. 1. Discuss the character of Carrie as one of the finest modern women in American fiction.**

**Ans.** The clash of value systems in *Sister Carrie* shows that Dreiser was aware of the various conflicting ideologies at work in American society. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian critic, developed his theory of 'polyphonic novel' based on the novels of Dostoevsky. What makes a novel polyphonic is "the possibility of employing on the plane of a single work, discourses of various types, with all their expressive capacities intact, without reducing them to a common denominator". The novel as a literary form is marked for its 'dialogism', which means its ability to represent varieties of speech at different ideological planes of reality. In a monologic work of art, the author's world-view so much controls and regulates the worlds of characters that their inner worlds never find any expression. In a dialogic text the authorial voice never becomes dominant. David Lodge writes:

*The characters are free to 'answer back', and the reader is confronted with the challenging, disconcerting, ultimately unresolved interaction of diverse discourses representing diverse attitudes and values, sometimes within the same speaking or thinking subject.*

The dialogic nature of *Sister Carrie* also expectedly makes its characters exist as fully realised selves in their own right.

America came in her own as a nation in the late 19th century. American literary Renaissance of the late 19th century thus coincided with the self-discovery of the nation. The American identity was based on diverse ethnic identities which were still discrete and disparate, despite the over-arching structure of the nationalist ideology. Dreiser's own socialisation must have somehow involved 'Americanisation'. His writings extensively dealt with ethnic subjects. Thomas P. Riggio notes: "Even if we put aside all the conspicuously ethnic subject-matter in *Dawn* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, Dreiser could still be listed among the first writers of the modern period to deal extensively and sympathetically with immigrant and ethnic life in America". As a German-American, Dreiser lacked the advantages some of his contemporaries had. Because he wrote within the larger tradition of realism, he came to be accepted as a pioneer of a literary movement that had European roots. This literary radicalism allowed him to question elements in the nationalist ideology which might not have been possible otherwise as an ethnic American. Riggio notes:

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*One can trace throughout Dreiser's career the conflict between his ethnic roots (that is, his sense of being by birth less than 100% American) and his professional role as American Realist.... The point, simply put, is that Dreiser's conception of himself as in the vanguard of American Realism led him naturally away from direct engagement with his ethnic past—as ethnic. However, he did engage his ethnicity in other ways.*

In Dreiser's portrayal of *Sister Carrie* two ideologies—one of his German-American background and the other of the mainstream American – came into conflict. He did not go into Carrie's formative years in Wisconsin because that would have made necessary Carrie's ethnic identity.

The result of this hiding of ethnic background is that Dreiser has to constantly turn to science and philosophy to rationalise Carrie's choices. Carrie, like Dreiser had a conservative background where old world values were upheld. But, Dreiser altogether avoids any reference to such values and employ literary strategies of naturalism to develop her world-view. In this way, he brings into the realm of his narrative, an outsider's view of the emerging new world.

Dreiser asserts that Carrie is a fair example of 'the middle American class—two generations removed from the emigrant'. Dreiser had grown up as a German-speaking Catholic in working class surroundings. The ideological conflict in the novel is inspired by the struggle of the marginalised to enter the mainstream. In fact, this is the journey of Carrie in life. Riggio states: "Carrie's famous rise upward is not simply to material success through men, but through men into the centre of American life." This also brings Dreiser's own love-hate relation with the mainstream life he depicts. As a German-American he finds 'The Walled City' perpetually desirable and wants to make his mark there. But he is also repelled by its ruthless rapacity, which, he thinks, may corrupt his self.

In the narrative of the novel, the authorial voice interrupts and comments on the actions and events but never inhibits the voices of characters who are fully represented in their own voices. The best example is that of Hurstwood, the native American who comes quite alive through Dreiser's skillful narration. According to Mattheissen the central vitality of the novel lies in the Hurstwood. In him the man and the milieu are not separated.

In producing the speech of the upper class, Dreiser differentiates their individual voices and 'generates and sustains a continuous struggle between competing interests and ideas'. He does not impose his values over them. He freely allows them to articulate their own value system.

*Sister Carrie* at its core deals with a world of contingency and flux. The ending of *Sister Carrie* also suggests the open-endedness of the novel. A polyphonic novel has no closure. It does not validate a monologic view of the world. The dialogues between Carrie and Ames in the novel raise another ideological conflict. Ames questions the values of the modern American nation from within as an insider. Carrie who has entered it from the margins after great struggle, is unable to decide for herself the truth of the matter. A dialogic novel makes no attempts to assert a final truth that holds good for all times and all places.

In *Sister Carrie*, there are numerous descriptions of streets and crowds. The novel appears as if structured around the contrast between the closed interiors and open outdoor spaces. This contrast represents a deeper ideological conflict between the private and the public. The mid-Victorian novels evince a fear of working-class militancy in their treatment of crowd behaviour. Eliot Canetti in his *Crowds and Power* distinguishes between the closed and open crowds. A closed crowd comes together for a certain purpose in a defined space while the open crowd gathers spontaneously and behaves in an unpredictable way. Capitalist societies live in constant fear of open crowds because their eruptions can harm the social order and question the very basis of their productive apparatus. In the chapter "The Strike", Dreiser describes behaviour of open crowds. As opposed to this, there are the closed crowds of the theatre, modern worshippers of art, fashion and glamour that have intimate connection with capitalist order. The dark world of under-paid, ill-clad workers is essential to sustain the glamorous world of the capitalist metropolis.

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Many of them end up as tramps waiting for beds near the ex-captain, another scene of crowds, stark in its depiction of deprivation and poverty which Hurstwood joins.

The tramps' dialogue is significant for two reasons. Firstly, Dreiser lets the speech of the tramps enter the narrative. This establishes their humanity. Secondly, their humanity interrogates the very moral basis of the entire society which allows people to end up on the streets as waste matter. The chapter, "*The Strike*" also raises the question of the very structure of power in American society. Its deological function is to put Carrie's journey to the world of glamour in the larger historical context of capitalist expansion and the exploitation of the working class. The novel is polyphonic because of Dreiser's ability to represent the conflicting ideologies in the discursive plane of the narrative. The polyphonic elements of *Sister Carrie* embody mutually exclusive ideological world-views within its narrative discourse.

**Q. 2. Discuss *The Floating Opera* as a modern novel.**

**Ans.** The *Floating Opera* presents a rational inquiry by its protagonist, Todd Andrews into his own life. The inquiry is a realistic and linear presentation, commencing with his childhood. Todd analyzes all major events of his life one by one. He also analyzes every one of his attitudes and opinions. The apparent self-trial, soon turns into clinical examination of various issues like sex, love, friendship, enemy, and socio-political institutions like law in their functioning.

The most crucial issue of the novel is Todd's neurotic inclination to commit suicide. This obsessional neurosis is due to a continual upsurge of nihilism. However, reason rules eventually and aborts the planned suicide. Todd's whole life is rationally organized to the greatest detail. The room at the Dorchester Explorer's club is well organized. He leaves home everyday at the same time, keeps office regularly and carries out the same kind of work everyday. He floats above his life in place of "having it, classifying, categorizing and quantifying" his work and experiences.

Todd's well ordered emotionless life suffers a psychic trauma whenever he comes face to face with an adverse situation. After he learns that his heart is weak, he becomes a rake. His experience with Betty June makes him a saint. His father's suicide transforms him into a cynic. Todd's psychic reaction to the experiences is mainly the burden of modernist angst one faces in the surrounding world. The aesthetic, intellectual and moral correlation that exists between man and the outside world gets seriously ruptured due to materialism ruling over the contemporary world. The outcome is a schizophrenic state of mind, a deep sense of existential vacuum and the attendant dread for Todd.

Todd's problem is that he is unable to intellectually master his personal life. The failure terrifies him. His ability to critically reflect on his life and to deal effectively with many of its absurdities actually becomes cause of dread for him. He is a modern intellectual incapable of accepting any challenge to his own order of rationality. Situations and emotions impinge on him but they can not engulf him, because his irrepressible intellect dares to fight back with cynicism. Even his attempt at suicide is the assertion of his intellect against his person. In the same way, the failure to commit suicide indicates his inability to dispense with an intellect that the suicide implies.

**Q. 3. Discuss the title of the novel *The Color Purple*.**

**Ans.** The ironic mode of the experimental novel, like Beckett's Theater of the Absurd, blurs the generic divisions of comedy and tragedy. True comedy and its delightfulness and the tragedy with its moral affirmation are just not possible in this world that is perceived as an absurdity. The implications of comedy are fearfully tragic and that of tragedy, pathetically or grotesquely comic. The absence of order and rationality in our world are at once comic and tragic and the American experimental novelists, like the European absurdists, look up for humour in every inversion of what is called real, beautiful and delightful. The ironic fictional mode is just to heighten the comic and tragic inversions.

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This is Black comedy. Black comedy or humour traces its roots to the European surrealists of the 1920's who tried to break the traditional modes of perception. This they did by removing the traditional connotations and meanings of words and objects, allowing them to reflect the unconscious strivings and the dream processes. The American experimental novelists do not go for that much but use black humour or comedy as a part of their critical or creative ironic mode to portray the absurdities of American mass society.

Heller's *Catch 22*, where irrational is the rational, is a classic example of American black humour. *Catch 22* is the rule by which the military bureaucracy creates a chaotic world of its own power in which reality has to give way to what it projects as reality. Charles B. Harris writes:

Should reality and official records clash, reality must yield! When McWatt, distraught over killing Kid Sampson, crashes his plane into the side of the mountain, Doc Daneeka, whose name appeared on the official flight list, is declared dead. Though obviously alive, Doc is treated from that moment on as if he doesn't exist. The records are absolute. Mudd "the dead man in Yossarian's tent" receives similar treatment. Because he reported to the wrong tent upon his arrival at Pianosa, Mudd does not receive official credit for ever having reported to the squadron at all. He is killed two hours later over Orvieto but his name can not be from the official roster since it was never officially added. Just as Doc Daneeka, still very much alive is dead according to bureaucratic logic, so Mudd, quite dead, is denied death.

Kurt Vonnegut calls schizophrenia as a boon to modern man. This is because it is through such intense psychic state alone, could he deal effectively the absurd world of contemporary mass society. Thomas Pynchon also writes about a world of multiplicity and uncertainty where negation of humanness equips a person to deal with the world. In black humour, the place of human interaction, there is a feverish psychic activity as a way of ordering the absurd world. John Barth calls it the cosmopsis, an excess of consciousness coupled with a lack of intrinsic values that characterize the protagonists in the post-war American experimental novel. The novel, in fact, does not offer any real perspectives, literary or humanist. It just offers, a sort of wry humour or wild comedy on what has become, afflictively, an obsessive reality.

#### **Q. 4. Comment on the art of characterization in *The Great Gatsby*.**

**Ans.** *The Great Gatsby* is representative of the American 20's before the advent of the 'the great depression' in the 30's. It is a tragic story of interplay of criminality and respectability, of attempts to find fame and fortune on the one hand, but attaining these things by illegal and immoral means. How the efforts take their toll ultimately is the essence of the novel.

The worst of human nature is shown by Fitzgerald when no one turns up for Gatsby's funeral, though hundreds had eaten at his place. It is a sad comment on human nature that when a man dies, he dies alone, absolutely alone. The only thing, thinking in Indian terms, that accompanies him are his good deeds, especially those which had been done spontaneously and without any desire to get something in return. To use an expression of Wordsworth 'The little, unremembered acts of kindness and of love'. Strangely enough this aspect of Gatsby is also present in the novel as he didn't even know who his guests were who enjoyed themselves at his parties.

However, everybody wants to 'play safe' especially a devious character like Wolfsheim. In fact, when Nick goes to New York to see Wolfsheim, his secretary blatantly tells a lie that he had gone to Chicago whereas he was very much behind the door. Nick the narrator knows such tricks of the trade and manages to meet Wolfsheim and invites him to come to the funeral that afternoon but Wolfsheim refuses by saying 'I can't do it – I can't get mixed up with it..... When a man gets killed I never like to get mixed up in it any way, Without sounding sentimental and unduly moralistic, one can agree with Antony in Julius Caesar who says that the evil that men do lives after them whereas the good is often interred with their bones.

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**Q. 5. Comment on the narrative strategies in *Light in August*.**

**Ans.** The tension, the contrapuntal relation between a man's private self and his public social role comes alive in the disjointed, fragmented structure of *Light in August*. There is no direct narration or simple dramatization in Faulkner's novels. There are polyphonic sections representing different narrative perspectives and consciousnesses. Faulkner makes ample use of juxtaposition and counterpoint to tell his story. The structure is based on the principle of dressing a showcase window as Faulkner said in 1959. He was asked why he had placed the chapter on Hightower's early life towards the end of the book and his reply was:

*Unless a book follows a simple direct line such as a story of adventure it becomes a series of pieces. It is a good deal like dressing a showcase window. It takes a certain amount of judgment and taste to arrange the different pieces in the most effective place in juxtaposition to one another. That was the reason. It seemed to me that was the most effective place to put that, to underline the tragedy of Christmas's story by the tragedy of his antithesis.*

This method naturally compels the reader to play an active role rebuilding the various pieces of the story into a comprehensible structure.

The beginning of the novel gives the impression that it is Lena Grove's story. However, soon subsequent chapters prove our expectations false. When we start feeling that it is Byron Bunch's story or Joe Christmas's story, again we get a surprise with the focus shifting from Gail Hightower to Joanne Burden and to the flashbacks. At every turn new expectations rise in our minds only to be unfulfilled like the lives of the characters in the novel.

At the start of the novel, we meet Lena Grove travelling from Alabama to Jefferson in search of Lucas Burch, the father of the child in her womb. There is a slow-moving wagon in the opening chapter reminiscent of one of Thomas Hardy's rural scenes in content, manner, and style.

The first chapter ends with Lena's words "My, my. A body does get around." making it look like a prologue to the novel. This is balanced by the last chapter in which the story returns to Lena's unhurried travel through the Mississippi of her life. This chapter reads like an epilogue and stresses truth of life presented by Thomas Hardy in his poem, "In Time of the Breaking of Nations":

*Yonder a maid and her weight*

*Come whispering by:*

*Wars annals will cloud into night*

*Ere their story die.*

Lena is obviously the eternal female representing the life force. She is never perturbed or affected by violent happenings around her and goes through them all with an unruffled calm.

Subsequent chapters after the opening one take a new direction and, instead of moving forward in Lena's search, go towards the past in flashbacks involving Joe Christmas, Joe Brown, Miss Burden, and Gail Hightower.

As we move away from the flames enveloping Miss Burden's house to Joe Christmas and Joe Brown, we face an air of mystery hanging over them. While we have some glimpses of Joe Christmas's past, there is almost no information on Joe Brown except that his appearance in the stories of Joe Christmas, Joanne Burden and Byron Bunch in a peripheral manner, and in Lena Grove's in a more material way as he is the cause of her journey with which the entire saga begins.

Faulkner also plays upon the names, 'Burch' and 'Bunch', leading to some confusion in the story and, in the end Bunch is clearly taking the place of the elusive Burch.

The story centres on the 'burning house' or the 'burned house'. This house harbours a couple of bootleggers and the lady of the house has an immoral liaison with one of them – a half Negro at that resulting in sinister implications in the action of the story. They are not just bootleggers but are also amoral, greedy and unscrupulous. One of them, Brown, has ditched a girl after making her pregnant, and then changed his name from Lucas Burch to

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Joe Brown to avoid detection, The other is Joe Christmas, the white man with black blood. He is unable to live without extreme. He either gives pain or takes it. Finally, he comes to Jefferson for his tryst with destiny.

Gail Hightower is introduced in chapter 3 and there is yet another flashback about the twenty-five years he has lived in disgrace in Jefferson.

The first three chapters are thus expository. In the fourth chapter, Byron starts telling about the events after Lena's arrival to Hightower. Hightower is now the 'narratee' representing readers responses and doubts e.g. when Byron tells Hightower about the fire and Lena's lover being identified through the scar, Hightower raises the doubts: "The house that burned yesterday. But I don't see any connection between....." It is this very connection that keeps the reader riveted in the rest of the novel. The connection subtly comes alive in Byron's narration slowly unfolding Byron's problem in telling Lena about her lover's illegal activities like bootlegging. This naturally points to Christmas involvement in the same crimes and his further and more serious involvement with Miss Burden. This takes us into Christmas's past and then back to the present, to the central event of the entire story-the burning of the house.

Like a railway train unobtrusively changing its track, the story takes us along a different route each time Byron gives the seemingly simple and routine information: "About Christmas. About yesterday and Christmas. Christmas is part nigger. About him and Brown and yesterday." The whole narrative is encapsulated in such cryptic statements.

A discerning reader would suddenly find his expectations revolving around Christmas ("About yesterday and Christmas," "Christmas is part nigger," and "About him and Brown and yesterday").

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