# Chapter I

# A BRIEF SURVEY OF AMERICAN POETRY AND JOHN UPDIKE

#### **CHAPTER I**

### A BRIEF SURVEY OF AMERICAN POETRY

The discovery and the settlement of the western continent is only the first part of the American story. America was a new world of mind and spirit. The complexly changing nature of American life and the vigorous versatility and all encompassing spread of the written record are the marks of American literature.

The social forces have made their imprint in the mind and spirit of America over seventy five years. It started to reflect in the contemporary American writing. In America, the democratic process brought the people into immediate familiarity with these changes. The contemporary literature quickly responded to such pressures. These three quarters of the century have experienced world – wide upheavals such as the two world wars, the spread of communism, and the rise and fall of fascism. Nevertheless, the increasing urbanization and the concentration of population in suburban areas, the advent of the automobile the radio, the moving pictures theatres and the electrification of rural America have been factors modifying not only social but cultural and literary life of the nation.

William Cullen Bryant (1794 - 1878) carried the American poetry out of the stiff straits on the Augustan mode into a simplicity and delight. The new spirit and mind of America reflected in the works of frontiers. Bryant anticipated need for a courageous originally in poetry. The poets like Longfellow and Lowell followed his prescriptions, and influence extended down the century to form the main – stream of American verse.

William Bryant in 1825 told his audience about poetry. According to him the poetry is a suggestive art. He recommended symbols rather than direct imitation of life. Symbols stimulate the imagination of the readers and take strong hold of his fallings, arousing him to passionate action. Thus, 1825 was time for a poetic revival.

Anne Bradstreet (1612 - 1672) and Edward Taylor (1642 - 1729) are called as puritan poets. They emphasized the personal, and sincerely was the prime characteristic of their

Poetry. A puritan poet like Taylor composed poetry in older idioms because of his isolation. But poets like Philip Freneau (1752 - 1832) and Joel Barlow (1754 - 1812) were in touch with the mother country.

American Renaissance is again on the turning point of history of American poetry. The Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 - 1882) was a rebel poet. According to him, poetry is moral, but it is not didactic. To him, the poet is very important to his age because the experience of each new age requires a new confession and the word seems always waiting for him.

Nextly Emerson's contribution to American poetry was his use of symbols. For him, the nature was itself a symbol of spirit. This modern "metaphysical" poetry was Emerson's invention for America. Along with him, Edlgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) contributed American poetry by writing various compositions. His poetry is the insight revealed in music and picture, in rhythm and image. For him, poetry is the rhythmic creation of beauty.

Walt Whitman's actual experience with life in America was limited. He announced ideals rather than facts. His poetry was ideal oriented.

The next upheaval of America is southern Renaissance. The 'Southern Renaissance' carried upheavals in American poetry. The writers started to give shape to literature. The southern started new change to develop his own shape to its literature. In poetry, William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870) was the most versatile and representative of these southern writers. His poems were in Byronic mode.

In poetry, the southern and romantic movement stemmed rather from Byron, Coleridge. The younger poets like Timrod and Paul Hamilton Hayne who were the members with Simms carried the same moody and melodious tradition linking Poe in both the manner and the matter.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), was the most widely read and loved of American poets of his day. His major work includes three narrative poems ,Erangelic (1847),the song of Hiawatha(1855),and the Courtship of Miles Standish(1858).

Nextly, Oliver Wendell Holmes(1809-1894)was the contemporary of Longfellow. He carried the common-sense logic in his poetry. The youngest member James Rusell Lowell(1819-1891), who was also the most versatile. He combined sensitiveness to impressions, historical understanding and ethical judgments.

John Greenleaf Whitter (1807-1812), was the leading literary spokesman of the New England. His poetry was great because it used the language of masses and dealt with common man.

Emily Dickinson (1830 - 1886) was the greatest of all women poets. The universe was that of soul for her. Her special task to make that universe articulate was the chief quality of her poems. Sometime, between 1910 and 1920 American literature "came of age". The actual moment of maturity was set in America. It was a time of youth, and change, and promise. It was the launching of America's second literary renaissance. In this renaissance, American poetry seemed ready to throw off all connections with the past and with tradition. Robert Frost (b 1875) was a conservative as well as an experimenter Poet. To him, the tone of voice was the beginning of poetry. He is the father figure of modern poetry. After this comes Modernism.

Modernism is associated with Ezra Pound(1885-1972) and T.S.Eliot (1888-1965) and the Imagist movement. Imagism basically is a concrete poetry which eschews statement. Ezra Pound is the representative of Imagism. She published the volume Des Imagistes in 1914. Imagism was a radical in its insistence, openness of form and subject, matter or word picture, as the basic unit of poetry. It promoted associated thinking in the poem. Later on, Imagism became a crucial movement and it reflected in the various poems of Frost, Eliot and Updike also.

The anti-universalism and intensified diversity are often associated with post modernism. Post modernism is generally the result of changed psychic, technological and cultural worlds. There is a growth of an ideology and an aesthetic pleasure in the post-modernism. Thus, the structure of feeling progressed at different paces across the arts and various academic disciplines and world culture. Thus, the post-modernism is one significant framework which describes the accounts of the culture in 60s. The post – modernism is a relational term, used to suggest a radical break or some degree of continuity with modernism or social modernity.

Post – modernism appears here as principally the loss of the real, the loss of affect and the loss of historicity in a world of all pervading pastiche and hyper reality. Some of these features are found in the poetry of John Updike. Updike is a representative of post – modernism. He contributed to the American literature by writing volumes of poetry. He dealt with various subject in the poetry and gave new out look to his verse.

The journey of American poetry is note-worthy. It was always under the impression of contemporary society. Thus, American poetry has always carried these impression and effects in its poetry.

## JOHN UPDIKE: LIFE AND WORKS

**John Updike** was born in 1932 in Shillington, Pennsylvania. His father taught Algebra in a local high-school, and his mother wrote short-stories and novels. Updike spent a year at Oxford on a fellowship, and then joined the staff of '*The New Yorker*'.

Up to the age of 13, he lived in Shillington, a smaller city near Reading and then moved away to Plowville, PA. Updike's childhood was shadowed by psoriasis and stammering, but his mother encouraged him to write. In his childhood days, Updike lived in an isolated farm.

After getting straight A's in high-school, he went to Harvard University on a full-scholarship, studying English and graduating summa cum laude in 1954. Updike chose the University because it was the location of the world's oldest humour magazine, the Harvard Lampoon. In 'New York Times', July 4,1965, he says "My inability to read bravely as a boy had this advantage: when I went to college, I was a true tabula rasa, and received gratefully the imprint of my instructors' opinion, and got good marks".

As we know that he remained isolated in his childhood days, he escaped to the world of mystery novels. He read books of *Erle Stanely Gardner*, *Ellery Queen*, *Agatha Christie*, and *John Dickson Carr*. His early reading was English "I am almost an English novelist manqué", Updike said later, however dead authors depressed him.

Updike spent a year at Oxford on a fellowship, then joined the staff of 'The New Yorker', to which he has contributed short-stories, essays and poems. In 1959, Updike published both his books, first book of short fiction, The Same Door and his first novel The Poorhouse Fair. In the same year, he also moved from New York City to a coastal town to Massachusetts, where he lived most of the time of his life.

Modern Fiction Studies has published special issues devoted solely to Updike; an honour bestowed on no other living writer and on only six other writers in the journal's history. These writers are James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, William Faulkner, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf. Updike has also appeared on the cover of Time magazine twice, a recognition accorded only to four novelists namely Joyce, Hemingway, Faulkner and Sinclair Lewis. Updike was no doubt a leading and famous writer of America. It is reflected through his work. In the 1960s ,1970s, and early 1980 s Updike continued to alternate novels and collections of stories, adding occasional volumes of verse, collection of essays, and a play. His novels include:

 Rabbit Run
 1960

 Rabbit Redux
 1971

 Couples
 1968 and

 Marry Me
 1976.

Then followed *Rabbit Is Rich* in 1981 where he continued the story if Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom and won virtually every major American Literary Award for the year it appeared. Updike concluded the series with *Rabbit At Rest* in 1991. Updike's collections of stories include *Pigeon Feathers* (1962), *Museums and Women* (1972) and *Problems and Other Stories* (1981).

He published collection of essays and criticism namely *Hugging* the Shore that offered him award. Again, he published his memoirs, Self-consciousness in 1989. Other recent books are The Afterlife and Other Stories (1994) and Toward the End Of Time (1997). He has written a play entitled Buchanan Dying (1974).

Updike has written volumes of poetry but unfortunately it didn't get as wide publicity as his novels did. There are three books of poetry to his credit:

Hoping For A Hoopoe (The Carpentered Hen) 1958

Telephone Pole and Other poems 1963

Midpoint 1963

Updike himself has collected some poems from volumes of poetry *Telephone Pole and Other poems* and *Midpoint* and published a book, namely *Seventy Poems*. Still, Updike is ignored as a poet.

Updike has received several awards. The names of awards are as follows:

- 1 Guggenheim Award 1959,
  - 2 Rosenthal Award,
  - 3 National Institute of Arts and Letters, 1959
  - 4 National Book Award in Fiction 1964
  - 5 O' Henry Prize, 1967-68
  - 6 American Book Award, 1982
- 7 National Book Critics Circle Award, for Fiction 1982,1990
- 8 Union League Club Abraham Lincoln Award, 1982
- 9 National Arts Club Medal of Honor 1984
- 10 National Medal Of The Arts, 1989.

John Updike became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1976. He received the National Medal for Humanities at the White House, in November 2003. His novels *Rabbit Is Rich* and *Rabbit At Rest* have won Pultizer Prizes.

Updike's literary career has been large, consisting of novels, collections of poems, short-stories and essays. He has written a great deal of literary criticism. He has written reviews on *Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Kurt Vonnegut, Joyce Carol Oates, Iris Murdach, Michael Tournier, Raymond Queneau, Umberto Eco, Milan Kundera, Evgenii Evtushenko, Gabriel Garcia Marquez* and *Isabel Allende*.

Updike's literary work is remarkable and displayed through the comments of contemporary critics and writers. The following comments on the blurb of John Updike's *The Same Door* and *Pigeon Feathers* reveal the greatness of Updike as a major writer.

The New York Times comments "John Updike is the most talented writer of his age in America". San Francisco Chronicle remarks about Updike's literary work" Electricity lights his prose like a Christmas tree--so full of fire and ice that it almost breaks through to some 'fourth dimension' in writing, as do some of J. D. Salinger's stories" Boston Herald comments on Pigeon Feathers, "Some of the most beautiful writing in contemporary American literature is between the covers of this book" while Boston Globe says it is "A Brilliant performance".

Furthermore, there are some comments on blurb of John Updike's *The Same Door* that show Updike as a Literary Legend.

According to the opinion of *Los Angles Herald Express*, John Updike "writes prose that has the sharpness of a surgeon's scalpel, the precision of a fine watch and focuses on the commonplace like the eye of an x-ray machine". Then, *Worcester Sunday Telegram* says that Updike "portrays encounters between strangers and their unexpected effects, either concrete as a bottle of wine or as intangible as a miracle". According to *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, Updike "has an unerring eye—He is a magician whose sleight of hand creates an idea—originality and truth. We can ask for little more" and *The Houston Post* says, John Updike "is one of the finest writers today. Put his name down as someone whose books you will want to read this year and in the future".

All these comments glorify him as a literary legend. When we analyze any poem, it is sometimes an autobiographical. John Updike says, (<a href="www.brainyquote.com">www.brainyquote.com</a>) "But for a few phrases from his letters and an odd line or two of his verse, the poet walks gagged through his own

biography". In the *Seventy Poems* we also get some autobiographical element of Updike.

Updike is greatly influenced by the master voices in American poetry such as *Ezra Pound*, and *T.S. Eliot*.

The following comments on the blurb of Updike's *Seventy Poems* glorifies him as a great poet.

Auden has commented in The Saturday Review "Updike's marvelous versatility is clearly reflected in his poems which range from sheer fun and satire to serious poetry..." whereas *Phyllis McGinley* wrote, 'He is what poetry of this sort ought to be playful, but elegant, sharp-eyed, witty.'

Though, he is ignored by the critic as a poet, his poems are included in the anthologies of American poetry because they are worth-reading. Moreover, his use of imagery is superb and it helps him to assemble form and meaning of individual poems into harmony.

Updike's intelligence and erudition are also critical assets. His appreciation lies in the following words by contemporary writers. *T. S. Eliot* advised critics that "the only method is to be very intelligent." And according to *Amis*, Updike is "a master of all trades, able to crank himself up to Ph. D. level on any subject he fancies: architecture, typography, cave-painting, computers, evolution... and Gospel Scholarship"

This great writer died recently at a hospice, near his home Beverly Farms, Mass on 27<sup>th</sup> January, 2009. He was 76 years old and had suffered from the Lung Cancer at the time of death. It can be rightly said,

"Updike At Rest".

