

MEG-06
AMERICAN LITERATURE
ASSIGNMENT 2020-21
(Based on Blocks 1-9)

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Max. Marks: 100

Attempt all questions. All questions carry equal marks.

1. The poem 'Mending Wall' seeks to project a close link with nature. Discuss. 20

2. Discuss Hemingway's art of storytelling with reference to 'A Clean Well-lighted Place'.
20

3. "Colour Consciousness is a constant presence in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*".
Discuss. 20

4. What is the role of the river in *Huckleberry Finn*? 20

5. Discuss Arther Miller's idea of dramatic form with particular reference to *Death of a Salesman*. 20

ASSIGNMENT SOLUTIONS GUIDE (2020-2021)

MEG-6: AMERICAN LITERATURE

Q1. The poem 'Mending Wall' seeks to project a close link with nature. Discuss.

Ans. Robert Frost was born in California where his father, a journalist with political aspirations and a dissatisfied northeasterner, had moved. He was an occasionally violent man and developed in Frost a lifelong wariness towards destructive impulses. His mother was Scottish and wrote poetry. Through her Frost became acquainted with the Romantic poets as well as New England poets like Emerson. She also introduced him to organized Christian religion. Frost's father died in 1885, the family returned to New England, and Frost finished high school from Lawrence, Massachusetts, (studying classics) as the class valedictorian. Three years later he married his classmate and fellow valedictorian, Eleanor White. Frost studied for a short time at Dartmouth College, taught in schools, and then enrolled as a special student at Harvard (1897-1899) where he was influenced by William James and George Santayana. He took courses in English, philosophy and the classics. From Harvard he entered a completely different world. His grandfather had left him a farm in New Hampshire and Frost, his wife and his four children endured years of hardship there. While he was struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide Frost was also composing poetry and establishing a close link with nature.

"Mending Wall" by Robert Frost is about how everyone needs a barrier. Without one, people would be vulnerable and easy to target, easy to hurt. Then you have "Fire and Ice," which is also by Robert Frost. It is about the two arguments of how the world may end. It is either going to be full of flames and everyone will burn, or it is going to freeze. The theme of "Mending Wall," is that nature is powerful. That could also be said for "Fire and Ice." The author built the theme of nature in each of these poems using imagery and symbol.

Imagery is the use of vivid or figurative language to represent objects, actions, or ideas (The Free Dictionary). In "Mending Wall," there are many examples of imagery. One of them is "We wear our fingers rough with handling them." The speaker is building with his hands and he is saying how tired and beat up his hands are going to be from working so hard. Imagery is used to paint the reader a picture and tell a story. What stands out is when Frost writes, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." This stands out because it is repeated again in the poem, and it is also the first line. When a line, word, or phrase is repeated, it needs to be looked at carefully because there is most likely going to be some importance. You can take away that nature is what does not love the wall because every spring the speaker and his/her neighbor have to rebuild the wall because it has crumbled to the ground. If nature wanted it there, they would not have to constantly keep rebuilding it every year. It would just stay standing. The use of imagery in this poem is really important because it makes the reader see exactly what is happening as they are reading the poem. You can see the "loaves" and the stone wall being built in your mind. You can see the speaker putting a spell on the stone to make it stay, and the speaker laughing alone as the neighbor does not laugh at his humor.

In "Fire and Ice," there is also the use of imagery. "Some say the world will end in fire," is one example. Imagery is used to make the reader really think and be left with the question of how the world will really end. Will it end with fire, or ice? At first, the speaker says he agrees with the side of fire, but at the end of the poem he realizes that ice can be just as harmful. Freezing and burning are two very unpleasant things, and it is hard to pick one over the other. Imagery is important in this poem because when the words "Some say the world will end in fire," appear, the reader is forced to see in their mind, a world of flames. It is horrendous. When he says "Some say in ice," you see an ice age. You see a frozen, still world.

Symbol is something that represents something else by association, representation, resemblance, or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible. (The Free Dictionary). In "Mending Wall," one of the symbols is the fences. In the poem, the line "Good fences make good neighbors," is repeated multiple times. The fences are a symbol of that barrier that everyone has around them. No one wants to be completely exposed. When something can hide who someone truly is, they will feel more comfortable because there is something in front of them that is hiding who they really are or whatever it is that they do not want everyone to see. Without that barrier, people would stand defenseless. Everyone needs some type of armor, even if it is invisible to the naked eye.

In "Fire and Ice," the symbol is the ice. "Some say in ice," does not literally mean cold. The speaker goes on to say "I think I know enough of hate/To say that for destruction ice/Is also great." Since the word "hate" is added to the poem, there is reason to believe that the ice is not actual cold from weather; it is from the cold hearts of everyone. The hate people have for each other can ultimately be the cause of the end of the earth. To prevent the world from ending in ice, people need to be more loving and warm-hearted. In both poems, symbol is used to hide a deeper meaning. It makes the reader really think hard about the meaning of the poem.

The use of imagery and symbol are used in each poem to build the theme of nature. Each poem talks about something nature related, and each is about the destruction of nature. In "Mending Wall," you see that nature does not want the wall there since it is being taken down by the forces of nature every year. People should take their barriers down sometimes and let people get to know them more often. The connections people make with others means a lot and that is how they get to where they end up in the world. In "Fire and Ice," you see that the world may end in either fire or ice. Right there is an example of the destruction of nature. In one case, ice, the world will end from hatred. There is not enough love in the world, and that could end up leading to the end of the earth. In both poems, human connections are what is considered when talking about nature. Barriers are there for people to take down. Only take them down for people who matter. Hate is strong, and if everyone keeps hating each other, the world is going to be a cold and lonely place.

Q2. Discuss Hemingway's art of storytelling with reference to 'A Clean Well-lighted Place'.

Ans. "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is one of the best examples of Hemingway's distinctive style: objective point of view; short, active declarative sentences; frequent repetition of key words; heavy reliance on dialogue in which the characters speak in short, clipped sentences or fragments, an impressionistic representation of everyday speech: "This is a clean and pleasant café. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, now, there are shadows of the leaves."

In *A Moveable Feast* (1964), Hemingway identifies one of the key elements of his technique as recognizing that what is left out of a story is just as important as what is included, as when Nick Adams's recent return from the chaos of war is not directly mentioned in "Big Two-Hearted River" (1925). This approach can be seen in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" in which there is no overt reference to the disappointments the young waiter will certainly experience, the nights he will not be so eager to run home to his loving wife, there is no explanation of why the old man attempts suicide, no evidence of what has specifically taught the older waiter about nada. Considerable dramatic tension, as well as universality, is created by revealing so little about the characters and the time and place.

A corollary to this technique is that everything in the story must be there for a reason. A brief reference early in the story to a soldier and girl, apparently a prostitute, passing by the café is significant to illustrate the younger waiter's concern only with the practical,

the immediate: "He had better get off the street now. The guard will get him." The older waiter's view is more worldly: "What does it matter if he gets what he's after?" As the couple pass, "The street light shone on the brass number on his collar." By ignoring the rules, the soldier has captured a moment in the light. Ironically, he is similar to the young waiter so restless to join his wife in bed. Such economic, perfectly controlled storytelling is the epitome of Hemingway's style at its best.

Q3. "Colour Consciousness is a constant presence in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*". Discuss.

Ans.

Toni Morrison is an American novelist who writes against racism, sexism, slavery, etc. She is greatly influenced by the Black Aesthetics Movement. Though she does not call herself as a Black Feminist, she writes more about the problems faced by the black women and girls in the African American society. Her novels portray the American reality with 'visionary force and poetic import'. (Grimes, 1993) "The Bluest Eye" is her first novel. "Sula", "Song of Solomon", "Jazz", and "Beloved" are considered to be her masterpieces. She has won the Pulitzer Prize for "Beloved". She has also won the most prestigious Nobel Prize for literature.

Double-consciousness is an important term invented by W. E. B. Du Bois. Afro-Americans have a "peculiar sensation of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity". They always feel "twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder". (Bois, 2008) The term 'double-consciousness' describes the dual identity of Afro-Americans and portrays the psycho-social divisions existing in the Afro-American society.

Double-consciousness is the main theme of Tony Morrison's "The Bluest Eye". Frieda MacTeer and Claudia MacTeer are sisters who love the little girl Pecola Breedlove in spite of her ugliness. Claudia MacTeer is the narrator of the story. She narrates the story of Pecola Breedlove who is a serious victim of double-consciousness. Pecola is a little black girl 'who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes'. She believes that everybody hates or abuses her because of her darkness. She wants blue eyes just to make her parents, schoolmates, and neighbours love her as they love white girls with blue eyes. She 'yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment'. (166)

Afro-Americans face serious problems like 'being hated by white people' and 'being despised by their own black people'. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove is treated badly both by the white people and dark-skinned people. Even her mother Pauline Breedlove hates her for being dark, dirty, and ugly. Her father Cholly Breedlove is a drunkard. He abuses Pauline and Pecola physically, mentally, and emotionally. Pecola envies the white girls with blue eyes who are treated kindly by the world. She prays to God to give blue eyes. She thinks that the way in

which the world sees her will change if she gets blue eyes like white girls. Towards the end of the novel, she gets blue eyes, but at the cost of losing her mind.

Frieda MacTeer, Claudia MacTeer, and Pecola Breedlove study in the same school. Pecola comes to Frieda's house, and Frieda gives her biscuits and milk. Pecola is not interested in the milk, but the 'blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup'. She drinks three or four cups of milk just to see and hold the Shirley Temple cup in her hand. Mrs. MacTeer scolds Pecola indirectly for drinking too much milk. Pecola and Frieda discuss how 'cu-ute' Shirley Temple is. (*The Bluest Eye*, 13) Claudia doesn't like the conversation because she dislikes Shirley. She does not envy her white skin and blue eyes. But she grudges her for dancing with Bojangles who is her favourite uncle.

Unlike the dark girls like Pecola, Claudia hates the black people's admiration for white beauty. For this reason, she hates white girls and white dolls. When black girls admire and adore white dolls with blue eyes and blonde hair, Claudia examines the white doll's nose, blue eyeballs, and yellow hair to find out 'what it is that all the world said is lovable'. Being unprejudiced and rational, she doesn't find anything but 'a mere metal roundness' in the white dolls. (16)

Claudia destroys white dolls and abuses white girls. She wants to know what makes people admire white girls and say "Awwwww" and ignore black girls on the streets. (17) She strongly believes that dark girls are as beautiful as white girls. When everybody hates Pecola for her darkness, Frieda and Claudia love her and provide her with good friendship and emotional support. Their white neighbour Rosemary Villanucci spies the girls and make frequent complaints about them to their mother. Frieda and Claudia manage to scold or beat the white woman to take revenge.

Claudia has a lot of sympathy for the Breedloves who suffer from self-hatred and double-consciousness. She explains that they live in a storefront not because of their poverty, but because they think that they are ugly. "Their poverty is traditional and stultifying; it is not unique. But their ugliness is unique." (30) She wants to find where their ugliness lies but couldn't find the source. She further says, "It comes from conviction, their conviction. It is as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question." (30)

Pecola Breedlove wants people to love her as they love white girls. She goes to a white shopkeeper. He looks at her angrily, and this makes her sad. She thinks that he hates her for her blackness. "It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness." (40) She buys Mary Janes candy and admires the beauty of the white girl printed on the wrapper. She eats the candy as if she is eating her eyes. She wants to be as beautiful as Mary Jane. Her passion for blue eyes and white skin is described obscenely by the narrator: "Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named." (42)

When black girls are disgraced, light-skinned rich girl Maureen Peal is considered superior in the school. Frieda and Claudia hate her and try to find mistakes in her. All the others in the school seem to respect her for her light-coloured skin. "When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids." (50)

Maureen Peal saves Frieda, Claudia, and Pecola from the abuse of school boys who feel hatred and shame for their own blackness. Pecola is attracted towards her while Frieda and

Claudia become angry at her comment that they are black - "Black? Who you calling black?" "You!" "You think you so cute!" (59) They try to hit Maureen and shout her nickname "Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie!" (59) They hate her for being light-skinned, speaking about blackness to them, and talking about nakedness to Pecola.

Geraldine's is a wealthy neat black woman who loves only her cat for its 'cleanliness'. She instructs her son Junior to play only with white kids and not niggers. "She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud." (70) According to her, she and her family belong to the first group as they are rich and neat. Though Junior wants to play 'King of Mountains' with his black friends and feel the dirt while rolling down on the soil, he avoids everything for the sake of 'cleanliness'. Initially he likes Bay Boy and P. L. Slowly he convinces himself that Ralph Nisensky is good for him and remains doing nothing. (71)

Junior wants to be a nigger, but he is compelled to behave like a white boy. He longs for true affection from his mother and hates her cat. Getting frustrated, he develops the habit of abusing vulnerable black children. He calls Pecola to his house and throws his mother's cat on her. He enjoys a lot by torturing her. He laughs heartily on seeing her getting frightened and crying. When his mother Geraldine enters the house, he tells her that Pecola tries to kill her cat. She gets terribly angry and shouts, "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house." (76) Pecola is deeply offended by the physical and verbal abuse in the wealthy black household of Geraldine.

Frieda and Claudia go to see Pecola in the white household where Pauline Breedlove works as a maid. Pecola becomes sad while hearing a white child calling her mother 'Polly', even when Pecola calls her mother Mrs. Breedlove. (85) Out of anger or nervousness, she drops the silver dish with boiling berry cobbler on her feet. Instead of applying medicine on her burn or consoling her, Pauline beats her and warns her to leave the room immediately. She curses her for making her 'clean' room 'dirty' with berry cobbler. "Crazy fool... my floor, mess... look what you... work get on out now out crazy... my floor, my floor... my floor." (85) A little white girl in the white household cries and Pauline convinces her by saying that she will make fresh berry cobbler for her. She utters 'honey' words to the white child after throwing words like 'rotten pieces of apples' on her own black child and her black friends. (86)

Pecola's mother Pauline Breedlove herself is a victim of double-consciousness. Her sense of beauty is shattered by her deformed foot and broken tooth. When Cholly makes love with her, she feels young, pretty, strong, and powerful. After marriage, they go to a distant place for livelihood. She grows disappointed with Cholly's blackness and behaviour. She develops the interest for buying costly clothes to seek constant attention from her neighbours. She adores white people even when she remembers her delivery experience in a hospital where a white doctor explains his juniors that black women 'deliver right away and with no pain... just like horses.' (101) She explains that it doesn't mean that black women don't have pain as they don't 'hoop or holler' in pain as the white women. (101) Being attracted towards whiteness, she becomes a maid, neglects her house, children, and husband, and finds 'beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise' in her white master's household. (104)

Pecola's father Cholly Breedlove is an orphan brought up by Aunt Jimmy. He is compelled to make love with his girl friend Darlene in front of two white men who come in search of their dog during hunting. He believes that the white men are strong and armed, and his anger on them may destroy him forever. So he diverts his anger towards the black girl Darlene. Later he seeks innocent country-love in Pauline. Pauline who adores beauty and cleanliness loves

Cholly as she feels beautiful, strong, and powerful in Cholly's presence. Slowly she hates him for his unclean behaviour. Being attracted towards 'whiteness and cleanliness', she couldn't love the 'dark and dirty' Cholly fully and becomes a maid in a white household. Cholly becomes a drunkard and tortures Pauline and Pecola.

Q4. What is the role of the river in Huckleberry Finn?

Ans. The Mississippi river seems to control the form of the story. In Mark Twain's *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck's adventure is affected by the river in three parts; These parts are before the river, on the river and after the river. Huck's adventure is steered by the river to show that, in any story, the beginning and end are undefined. Before the river, Huck and all of his friends are introduced, and he is in civilization, which Huck despises. Eventually, Huck has to escape. Huck eventually gets to the river, when his real adventure begins. Huck meets Jim on the island where he is hiding for the time being. This is when the river seems to start to influence them. They both decide to go on the raft, and travel down the river, unknowing of what could happen. T.S. Eliot says "What we call its headwaters is only a selection from among the innumerable sources which flow together to compose it" (154.) This beginning of the story starts in the middle, which reflects the river; One does not see the beginning of the river, only all of its sources moving together. Huck's story is just like this. The story also develops and progresses while on the river. Huck and Jim continue on the river as it guides them and forms the story. The river "cannot tolerate any design, to a story which is its story, that might interfere with its pace. Things must merely happen, here and there, to the people who live along its shores or commit themselves to its current" (154). The river surely seems to do this in Huck's adventure, casting them into unsuspected adventures, introducing them to odd new people. Huck and Jim also come across problems that they need to figure out on the fly, problems that seemingly come from nowhere. The river also seems a sanctuary to Huck and Jim. These things are undefined especially because they seem random, or unpredictable. Of course, the river has these paths that it steers Huck and Jim on, and they accept them and go with the flow, no pun intended. Huck and Jim also finish the story with something that doesn't seem to end their story- merely a continuation. A continuation, like the river always displays because "at the end it merely disappears among its deltas: it is no longer there, but it is still where it was, hundreds of miles to the North" (154).

Q5. Discuss Arthur Miller's idea of dramatic form with particular reference to *Death of a Salesman*.

Ans. The article that is frequently referenced when discussing Arthur Miller and his idea of dramatic form is Miller's 1949 essay for the New York Times, Tragedy and the Common Man. In this essay, Miller famously pens his thoughts on why the middle class working man (or woman, although Miller mainly talks about men) is America's tragic hero. (Arguably, this is no longer applicable, as the idea of the 'working man' has

changed throughout America's history.) Of all of his plays, Death of a Salesman most accurately takes the ideas from this essay and puts them on stage.

Some of the most pertinent ideas from this essay are:

- **The tragic hero works against systemic forces.** Miller writes about how the tragic hero tries his hardest, despite system-level forces working against him. In the Greek time, this was often created through the use of the state or gods working against the hero. However, in Miller's plays, it is often modernity and industrialization that works against the hero. Willy Loman works to support his family, but he is ultimately upset.
- **The fear of being displaced drives tragedy.** Miller argues that the everyday man understands fear in American culture like the Greek heroes understood fear. Willy Loman is haunted by a fear that he often feels he cannot express publicly.
- **Tragedy arises out of imbalance.** The American Dream rests on a pursuit of happiness, but Miller's characters in *Death of a Salesman* find it extremely difficult to balance their lives. Miller foresees the shrinking of the middle class in his plays.