INTRODUCTION

Updike said in 1996 in an interview with Jane Howard that ‘My subject is the American protestant small town middle-class. I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules.’

For an American writer to know the sensitive targets of his nation, be they social or political, trends and movements of every age and their origin, the behaviour and mindset of people from any part of country, nature of culture and society, he should possess a comprehensive knowledge of two great bodies of literature written in England and in the United States. Then only, he will be able to project the inner American mind and construct a seemingly authentic sketch of the idea of America as such. To achieve such accurate results, the writer or the novelist has to ‘drink to lees’ the historic roots of his race and the nation as a whole.

American literature begins with the first writings of the English settlers in James town, Virginia, in 1607. The beginning of their literature saw not only the burst of creative activity as there was in the England of Shakespeare and in the Greece of Pindar and Sophocles but also confronted the harsh primitive physical environment and the stern principles which they adopted to ensure their survival. The development of its ideals and character resulted from an amalgamation of European inheritance going back to Teutonic and Scandinavian ancestors and the influence of a new world environment. America was colonized by Europeans who shed away their own ideals in order to assert their belongingness with the new acquired land; pushed away the native tribes to make room for themselves; struggled for an identity amidst the equally or more powerful settlers’ group in new England. This constant struggle also gave them a feeling of insecurity about their hard earned status which now has important impact on American life.
When an American looks into the rear view mirror spanning the colonization till present age, he can’t help wondering what he must do to shun any disaster that could threaten his country. At the same time, an American, a former foreigner, fears outsiders lest they should snatch his share of America and assert their own right, as he himself once did.

A fearful sense forces the Americans to lead a Marvellian life, where ‘times winged chariot hurrying near; and yonder all before us lie deserts of vast eternity.’ The land, once a wilderness, was gradually inhabited with distinguished groups of people, who, in a mixed society, retained their individuality.

From 1600 onwards, for a century and a half, colonization could not contribute much to the literature of United States of America due to the following reasons:

- The group of English settlers represented religious dissenters, adventurers and coal miners, runaway from factories that were under bondage.
- Primitive wilderness forced polished Europeans to be practical and resourceful to seek mastery over the material environment.
- Different groups of English settlers and hence different living ways, culture and values.

Settlers from different places sought their own purpose for colonization. Therefore, there was little to promise and the way colonial people expressed, is better referred to simply as writing rather than ‘literature’ because there was nothing of much artistic value in it. The writing then consisted of factual prose, reports, letters, sermons and long dry theological argumentation.(G. E. Smith, 1962)

Captain John Smith (1579-1631) sent back to London his *A True Relation of Occurrences and Accidents in Virginia* in 1688 and *General History of Virginia* in 1623. William Bradford, wrote his *History of Plymouth Plantation* which cover the
years 1620-1647. John Winthrop wrote his *The History of New England* from 1630 to 1649 and accounts of Puritan mindset of the time. Thomas Mortan’s account *The New English Canaan* (1637) is quite different and most of the time his group was engaged in disturbing the Puritans.

Four generations of Mather family of Boston (1596-1785) illustrated the gradual declining power of the original Puritanical theocracy in New England during colonial period. Jonathan Edwards wrote his book *The Freedom of the Will* which argued that man does not act by virtue of a free choice but in accord with the will of God.

Benjamin Franklin is famous for his political activities in simple but effective sense. Being a journalist, he had the straightforward style of journalism. His autobiography is a permanent classic and a model for the genre.

The repressive colonial policies of George III and the Parliament gave American colonists a common cause to join forces. The colonists joined hands and succeeded in welding them into common ideal – ‘independence from England and founding of an American Republic conceived in liberty; new concept of freedom and democracy’. In American history, the period from 1765 to 1810 is divided into two parts – the revolution (1765-1783) and the foundation of the American republic (1783-1810).

The writings of the revolutionary period was an outpouring of deep conviction filled with spirit of liberty and political controversies. With ‘Speech Against Writs of Assistance’, James Otis set off a chain of denunciatory expression on British. Other noted writers of this phase are John Dickinson, Samuel Adams and Francis Hopkins.
Patrick Henry is considered the master of fiery oratory whose Speech on Liberty has provided the world with its most quoted phrases on the subject of liberty.

(G. E. Smith, 1962)

America had no novel of its own before 1789 because the novel was classed with drama as one of the sure paths to perdition. However, English romances were bootlegged into various sectors of the colonial ‘female’ society and were being devoured as far as North most inhabited areas. In the southern colonies, certain English books were largely dependent on the fact that whether the clergy liked to read them or not, e.g. Richardson’s Pamela (1740) was considered a book of moral instruction and was reprinted by Franklin, the first novel published in America. Other similar examples are Robinson Crusoe, Rassela’s The Vicar of Wakefield and the works of Sterne. The first American novel ever written by Mrs. Sarah Wentworth Morton The Power of Sympathy was written in the form of letters, in imitation of the English Richardson’s work. It set the tone for other late 18th century romances like Charlotte Temple (1970) and the Coquette (1979), both written by female writers. All the novels were of the sentimental or the gothic type, popular among the ladies of London and proclaimed their purposes in regard to the dangers of ‘seduction’.

The gothic romance of wild and improbable incidents gained fame in America along with sentimental novels with such thrillers as Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764). Its chief claim to fame was its speedy narrative, with exaggerated happenings succeeding each other rapidly. The gothic school in England greatly influenced American first serious novelist Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810). Apart from some scattered poems, he wrote a pamphlet The Dialogue of Alcuin (1997) which argued for women’s rights. His major work is Wieland relating the story of a flash back by the sister of protagonist. In Edgar Huntley or Memories of a Sleep
Introduction

Walker (1799) Brown portrays America as a wild and exotic piece of nature. He introduces American Indians (natives) as brave but no match with white settlers. Brown is the best fiction writer until Poe, Cooper, Hawthorne and Melville.

St. John de Crevecoeur (1735-1813) and Hugh Henry Breckenridge (1748-1816), were two European born writers and left most interesting accounts of the rural background and of the Western frontier life. Both writers possessed charming prose style and one captures what the other misses in the colourful realities of the Western fringes of early America; both were interested in manners.

By 1815 United States stood on its own feet and now it was time to join the world stream but not to give up its native self-reliance and individuality. By that time, 12% of the population were Negro slaves and the political power was shifted with the admission of slave and non-slave states.

By 1830 Philadelphia, Lancaster, New York and later Mississippi valley opened educational institutions to educate the common people. Newspapers and magazines flourished due to the revolution and interest in political issues. In the meantime an article by Sydney Smith not only echoed down through the century in America but also thrashed its literary prestige. Smith abused Americans as people whose literary or artistic works are not acknowledged anywhere, laughed at the nothingness of their own literature as it was all imported. The American intellectuals admitted the truth and gradually a school of American literary criticism was formed.

While European romanticism had been a reaction against classical and neoclassical norms, in America it’s not a revolt but the beginning of a genuine literature.
American romanticism is divided into two periods:-

1. The first period represents the beginning of a national literature and its writers of
   New York and Pennsylvania were greatly influenced by English romanticism.

2. The second period, ranges from 1830 to the outbreak of civil war, centred in a New
   England school of writers.

The first period writers landed to fall into sectional groups with marked distinction as
to attitudes and development of themes. The New York group, popularly known as
‘knickerbockers’ from the use of the term by Washington Irving in his historical satire
of the Dutch in 1809, had their activities revolving around New York city. The group
was hardly a literary ‘school’; in that they brought to their creations, diverse and
scattered tendencies. Washington Irving is known as the first American romantic. He
is the first writer of short fiction tale with an American background and the first to
win European approval. In his first work, A History of New York (1809), he put his
heart and soul gathering data about the early Dutch settlers. He produced the first
issue of his literary masterpiece, The Sketch Book (1819-20) whose comic tales and
sketches enjoyed a tremendous popularity both in America and England.

(G. E. Smith, 1962)

James Fennimore Cooper (1789-1851), like Irving was as much at home in
Europe as in America. His personality was a mixture of the aristocratic and the
democratic. He experimented with every form of prose and produced pioneer
American novels of at least six different varieties. Cooper started his literary career
with Precaution, a novel about cross-section of English genteel society. His second
book The Spy (1821) was an immediate success in America and in England. The
Bravo, The Heidenmauer and The Headsman were written in Europe, praising
American democracy as contrasted to a decadent European feudal aristocracy.

The
Monikers written after his return from Europe is a bitter satire on the American institutions which he had once praised in his novels. Cooper’s position in American literature depends upon five novels written at various periods of his career, collectively called The Leather Stocking Tales for the Frontiers man; Natty Bumppo, one of the most famous fictional characters. These novels are considered in the sequence which follows the life of Natty Bumppo: The Deer Slayer (1841) shows Natty as a frontier scout in his youth. The Last of Mohicans (1826) is the strongest of the five novels, shows Natty as a rescuer of commander’s daughters but who are again seized by the invaders and the last members of Mohican aristocracy are killed in another dramatic rescue. The Pathfinder (1840) shows the scout as strong as in the Mohicans. In The Pathfinder and The Pioneers (1823) he is as old as forty years and more but his adventures continue throughout the novel. In The Prairie(1827) Bumppo is nearly ninety years old but still active in his contribution toward pushing civilization westward. In this part Natty dies surrounded by people who were sometimes good and evil at some other times, the Whites and the Indians.

Two great figures of the second period were Herman Melville (1819-91) and Walt Whitman (1819-92). Most of Melville’s work is autobiographical and pessimistic. Most of his novels revolve around his harsh experiences of whalers’ ships going South Sea and pleasant and serene feelings among the natives of the Island somewhere near South Sea.

His first novel Typee (1846) and Omoo (1847) are autobiographical. Typee deals with Melville’s experience after abandoning the Whaler in mid Pacific. The first book finds more than once, Melville’s literary efforts against the evils that civilization has brought to the spoiled natives of the Pacific Islands. Omoo deals with his escape aboard the Australian whaler where he leaves the ship of Tahiti. These two books had
some theme and content matter as in *Omoo* also Melville deplores the harmful effects which the interbreeding of native with foreigners has brought to the purity of Island character. *Red Burn* (1849) deals with his first voyage and presents character studies of various crew members. *White Jacket* (1850) records author’s life aboard the United States frigate on his return from Australia. It’s a powerful novel, although laden with propaganda for correction of novel practices, such as flogging.

In *Mardi* (1849), he gives a symbolic allegory to form the framework of *Moby Dick*. The allegory concerns man’s fruitless search for beauty and happiness to appreciate its power. *Moby Dick* appeared between (1849 and 1852) but attracted little notice. In *Pierre* (1852) he gives unrestrained vent to his pent-up anger at the failure of his efforts in the face of the blasé public contempt that was shown to his master piece *Moby Dick*.

Walt Whitman wiped out all the doubts that American literature was capable of seeking its own path into the future. With him, American poetry received its strongest injection of robust vigour. Whitman’s hypodermic was laden with robust and optimistic individualism, frank and outspoken idea, radical departures from classic form.

Whitman was fiercely proud of his origin whose roots were as fearless and adventurous as the rough Vikings of North Sea. He was a true American who worked on exploring its landscape, inhabited areas, wilderness, classical literature, etc. He did this leisurely by wandering across American subcontinent and gradually assimilated the entire America which he revealed in bits and pieces throughout his life in his poetry. Finally, after grounded in knowledge and inspired by the stirring ideas, he produced his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) which underwent eleven revisions throughout his lifetime. The first seven editions follow an expanding
America, portrayed in its joy and its sorrow. *Leaves of Grass* covers 1850-80 America in its expanding aspects: national and international issues, city life, wild frontier and people. Whitman’s *Song of Myself* is the longest poem and his most representative one of American life.

In 1880, with the declaration of Washington as capital, all the politics, culture and commerce moved either towards North through New York or South through the New Orleans.

Two Southern centres maintained and nurtured a literary tradition during the rise of American romanticism with writers such as Edgar Allen Poe, Richmond and Charleston. After the war, in Virginia plantations, life became more leisurely with better transportation and cooperation thus giving more time for contemplation and developing cultural interests. For about quarter a century, Virginia produced literature which idealized their land of plantation.

John Pendleton Kennedy, a novelist, presented best view of a section of early America which took on many characteristics of feudal England. He presented an idyllic view of plantation life but his view of early American life gives little of democratic vision.

Edgar Allen Poe (1809-49) was the exception who treated the ‘Plantation tradition’ in the rosy haze of historical romances and sketches. Poe was the first genuine literary critic of America. Before that, American criticism had been an emotional and biased matter. Poe introduced an analytical approach to criticism based upon wide knowledge of literature and a sure sense of weighing values.

As an artist, Poe produced more than sixty stories and forty-eight poems. His shorts stories were also a source of inspiration to the great French master of the genre, Guy de Maupassant. He gave this genre a definite form. His shorts tales – *The Fall of
the House of Usher, The Cask of Amontillado, The Tell-Tale Heart, The Black Cat, The Masque of the Red Death and The Bit and the Pendulum carry considerable elements of supernatural and all are a masterful creation of a mood of fear and terror.

Poe also created the modern mystery tale which established the modern detective story. The Murders in the Rue Morgue, The Purloined Letter and The Mystery of Maria Roget are examples of such tales. The Old Bug is a tale of cryptology and its use in locating a buried treasure shows Poe’s employment of ratiocination in his plots, a sharp and logical process of reasoning.

The West was still a developing civilization and scanty production of literary works led to the favourism towards Eastern writings. The Westerners were living romanticism because it was a period when writers were awaiting a new generation and anticipating writings about the end of great conflict between the states in 1865. Timothy Flint, David Crockett, Augustus Longstreet and Alexander Ross were among the notable writers.

Two chief elements of literary romanticism were – a gospel of individualism and a search for man’s peace and happiness. A true American literature began in New York and Pennsylvania, but in the second and third decade of 19th century, both intellectual and aesthetic revolt was seen in New England more than other sections of America.

The intellectual atmosphere of New England romanticism consisted of three aspects:

- Revolt against Calvinistic theology resulting in Unitarianism.
- An idealistic philosophy-transcendentalism-primary ideas of which were imported from Europe and adapted to the local American impasse.
- An anti-slavery or abolitionist element.
The common emphasis was that of the worth of individual, man’s free will, salvation, goodness of man. These were the elements of romanticism which gave rise to romantic literature in New England. William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) was the early leader and helped in awakening New England.

Transcendentalists were interested in individual and developed their ideals from European philosophers, English romantic poets, French revolution and their own interpretations for living of good life. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the chief figure of this movement and defines the new American thought in his essay – *The Transcendentalist*. What was Transcendentalism for New England is Idealism as it appears in 1842.

Growing side by side was the abolitionist doctrine on demand to free the Negro slaves. In New England, this political and social issue entered literature and produced a great mass of anti-slavery works. Poets like Long Fellow, Whittier and Lowell contributed to this branch of a particular romanticism. In the field of prose fiction, the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* fanned the fires. ‘Stowe made of uncle Tom’s ‘cabin’ both the title and the central symbolic place. The cabin, in the novel, is replaced by Quaker farmhouse where the mixed-race American family, sits down to eat. Stowe’s claim is that, although separated, yet such dwelling places like Uncle Tom’s, are all really rooms of one national house through whose corridors narration and feeling follows.’ It contributed in abolition of slavery and helped in producing a mass of orations, tracts, essays and argumentative speeches. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* aroused a moral indignation. It was the first social novel which treated a major problem of America some fifty years before social novel came into being. Stowe wrote two more antislavery works – *A key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853) and *Dred, A Tale of the Great*
Dismal Swamp (1856). Her other works are popular romantic novels – The Minister’s Wooing (1859), The Pearl of Orr’s Island (1862) and Old Town Folks (1869).

(Philip Fisher, 1999)

By 1810, old Calvinist dogma and tradition died and new theological philosophies giving worth to individual rose. As a result an all enveloping romanticism and aesthetic literature began to rise. The chief figures John Greenleaf Whittier, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth, Longfellow, James Russell Lowell and Oliver Wendell Holmes. These figure are not all found in a group or ‘School’.

Hawthorne wrote legendary sketches Twice Told Tales (1837); allegories and parables – Sights from a Steeple, The Minister’s Black Veil, The Toll Gatherer’s Day. His most famous works The Scarlet Letter (1850) hailed as an ‘American novel’ for the portrayal of dark and foreboding shadows of the Puritan past and The House of Seven Gables (1851) treating evils of inbreeding and the sins of heredity. Blithedale Romance (1852) deals with the surroundings of Brook Farm, a transcendental retreat. The Marble Faun is laid in Italy. His short stories Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment, The Birthmark, The Ambitious Guest, The Maypole of Merry Mount, Rappaccint’s Daughter, Lady Eleanor’s Mantle.

With the end of the Civil War, romanticism from Europe served as a primer for the beginning of a true national literature in America. Only Walt Whitman spanned civil war years with his booming pride. Romanticism became a major characteristic of American literature after 1865 along with the new elements of ‘Local Colour’ in a frontier literature and realism. People came to demand a literature that would give them a colourful and entertaining view of life as it was happening about them in the nation. The local colour school contributed a great deal towards
uncovering valuable sources of American themes for literature. Their efforts had great influence upon realists of this century but the writings of the local colourists are shallow and sentimentally romantic.

Mark Twain was born in Missouri in Mid West and was moulded by the American frontier. He began his writing career as a western humorist, hoping that his permanent literary genius would lie in the direction of social satire. Being a sensitive observer of the realities around himself, Twain became disillusioned with the materialism of the age. As a result he became bitter and his optimism faded to reflect a profound pessimism towards the human race. His recollections of his boyhood surroundings and the rosy dreams of his youth produced his masterpieces – Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn and Life on the Mississippi. His work consists of humorous writings, sketches, travel narratives, lectures, auto biographical fiction and historical romances. His final writings are predominated by black despair of his spirit due to his loss of faith in God and man. His best work of this period is The Man that Corrupted Hadley Burg (1900).

Materialism discouraged the lucid flow of life. The life was no longer romantic in its national aspects. Romanticism was ‘gilt and tinsel’, artificial and shallow, filled with colour, side – splitting laughter, exaggeration and a forced recentness. About 1890 industrialism and the disappearance of the frontier brought the feeling that the individual freedom and romance had disappeared from national life.

William Dean Howells, Henry James and Hamlin Garland were not pioneers of realistic creed but before they had ceased to write, the realistic method was the major trend among the greatest fiction writers.

Howells is an important name in American literature as a novelist and a literary critic. He preached the realistic creed in many critical works, for e.g. Criticism
In all Howells wrote twenty-five novels, eight of which deserve to live as landmarks in American literature’s climb to realism. Two novels are of great significance – *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) which relates the story of self-made colonel Lapham and his reaction at the loss of his fortune and prestige in Boston society. *A Modern Instance* (1881) is a problem novel which deals with the deterioration of marital life when two young lovers discover their incompatibility in marriage.

Henry James spent most of his life out of America because he felt that American culture was shallow, materialistic and hypocritical. In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), the heroine is an American woman who lives in Europe. In *The Ambassadors* (1903), the intellectual American hero discovers in Paris the satisfactory cultural values which he missed in America. In *The Golden Bowl* (1904), an American girl, married to an Italian Prince, is called upon to face the adultery of her husband with her own step mother.

Garland was son of mid-west and was impressed with the drudgery and misery attached to middle border farm life. He wrote his first book, *Main Travelled Roads* (1891), a collection of stories and sketches of many miseries and few joys of mid-western farm life. Gradually he became concerned with reforms of farm conditions and his auto biographical narrative *A Son of the Middle Border* (1914) is an important and well balanced account of pioneer life on the western farm.

Rise of industrialism, business, disappearance of the frontier and of free land, concentration of political and economic power in the hands of big business sectors and attendant corruption, rise of organized groups, advances in science and technology particularly in the field of biology with the theories of Darwin and its easy promulgation of deterministic ideas from which man would appear to be a victim of
circumstances and be able to control his own destiny, the resulting spirit of pessimism, advancement in transportation, dissemination of facts and ideas, national unity, breaking down of the influence of eastern aristocratic group and their traditions, rise of international arrogance and display of imperialistic policies in the Spanish American war (1898) the Panama Canal acquisition, the ‘big stick’ policies of Theodore Roosevelt and influence of European literatures dedicated to realism. In spite of that, a ‘Pseudo Romanticism’ had continued in American writing but the major portion became increasingly realistic in its presentation of both pleasant and unpleasant aspects of the society. (G. E. Smith, 1962)

To define realistic fiction, certain terms used, are – Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism and Expressionism. Many of the writers’ lesser ability has departed from the realistic method. Such techniques obviously lead to the opposing technique of romanticism – sentimental fiction, sentimental realism, social fiction, regionalism, exoticism and the historical approach.

**Developments in Fiction**

The concentration of population in industrial centres, the dying spirit of individual independence in the face of a vanishing frontier and industrialization brought the spirit of helplessness to America. Man came to be considered by the writers as automation. This fiction technique of disillusionment and pessimism dominated the best writers of prose and some poets from 1890 to 1930. Naturalism caused the reflection of American life as harsh as the writers saw it. Stephen Cranes wrote *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). His interest in the sordid and brutal aspects of New York’s Bowery district, which he observed on his beat as a news reporter, led him to pen down his episodic analysis of slum conditions in the form of a novelette. Crane’s another novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) is an
impressionistic masterpiece of war. It is American literature’s first attempt to a direct and impersonal view of civil war conditions. The protagonist, Harry Fleming, like Maggie, is a victim of circumstances which leads to his moral disintegration. The young New York lad, who has volunteered with the Union forces, gradually goes to pieces under gunfire. Another genre of Crane’s production is short story. One of his famous stories is *The Open Boat*, a tense and graphic account of four men in an open boat, the only survivors of a shipwreck of the Florida coast.

Theodore Dreiser wrote his works at the height of receptivity to the naturalistic technique in America and became the most prominent writer among naturalists. *Sister Carrie* (1990) is his first experiment in the European style Naturalism where a working girl jumps from one lover to another for a cradle of success but the ultimate success gives her nothing except loneliness. Dreiser wrote his most famous novel *An American Tragedy* (1925), a long and sprawling chaotic narrative built around a very flimsy plot.

The spirit of naturalism, which reached its peak of development with Dreiser, has had many followers among American writers. After Dreiser, the naturalist writers drifted towards a very subjective treatment of their material. But the general tone of pessimism and disillusion, continued to be characteristic of a large body of American fiction until very recent years. The social ills treated were – corruption in politics, individual greed of speculators and industrialists and a misdirection of American basic democratic concepts.

In fact, within the period following the civil war, writers such as Mark Twain, Hay, Adams and Howe had written novels which had a sociological purpose to analyse evil within American economic and social structure. This social novel was a form of realistic novel but it did not attempt to suggest remedies for the conditions
described. Theodore Roosevelt angered at the efforts of these writers, probing into economic and social institutions to expose the malodorous facts, and referred to them as ‘muckrakers’. The earliest of the muckraking movement were the journalists and their studies appeared in magazines. Among these studies were such exposes as Ida Tarbell’s *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904) and Lincoln’s Steffens’s *The Shame of the Cities* (1904). In 1920s, the ‘muckraking’ crusade and much of the fiction, devoted to the analysis of social problems, had subsided and had given way to a more artistic type of realistic delving into American social structure to expose its weakness. In 1930s, the economic depression kept the sociological novel in the forefront of American realistic writing as it treated the social miseries induced by the depression.

Upton Sinclair is the greatest and most representative of the ‘muckraker’ aspect of the social novel. *The Jungle* (1906) is an expose of the filth and corrupt practices he found in the meat-packing plants. *In King Coal* (1917), and *The Profit of the Religion* (1918), he attacked the religion as a tool in capitalistic hands to keep the poor in contented subjugation. In *The Goose Step* (1923) and *The Goslings* (1924), he attacked the regimentation and one-sided educational diet imposed upon the school systems by capitalist manipulators. In *The Flivver King* (1937) he turned his searching technique upon the automobile industry. In *World’s End* (1940) Sinclair began to trace the career of his hero, the illegitimate son of a munitions manufacturer and an international beauty. In *The Lanny Budd* series, Sinclair carries his hero through every major world event from World WarI to 1953.

The social novel’s temper took new directions, mainly that of a dissection of attitudes and institutions of bourgeois society. The focus of attention was principally the small town and the village with attacks on the spirit of narrowness and smug
Introduction

Puritanism. But the picture of the realist novelists of the twenties, of the American small town, was a different one. They pictured village life as dull and resistant to change.

Sinclair Lewis, a social realist, produced three novels of excellent standard. *Main Street* (1920) brought him international fame as a realist and a satirist. The novel is a sociological study of rural Midwestern town. *Babbit* (1922) is a penetrating study of smug middleclass respectability and *Arrow Smith* (1952), a conflict between personal high in an individual doctor versus the narrow bigotry in medical practice which would reduce the high minded scientist to a sordid conformist level of sham and avarice.

Sherwood Anderson, unlike Lewis, became concerned with the inner conflicts of his characters. He saw the American small town as a seething cauldron of individual frustration and passion. *Winesburg Ohio* (1919) is the collection of short stories which are studies of human behaviour, of confused and frustrated personalities. During the years of economic depression, most enduring social fiction came from writers whose attention was drawn to the wide gulf between the average middle class Americans and certain groups of under-privileged individuals. The fiction in the period between the two World Wars was devoted to the studies of migrant agriculture workers, the sharecroppers and the tenant farmer groups of the South, workers in the Eastern textile mills, minority racial groups and city slum population. (G. E. Smith, 1962)

John Steinbeck’s liberal and humanitarian views have found expression in his best novels as an ardent desire for agrarian reform in the direction of more widespread individual land ownership. Steinbeck’s notable works are *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and *Of Mice and Men* (1937) *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is one of the most convincing
social novels that raised Steinbeck to the level of great prose fiction. This story of the
migration of a farm family from the Oklahoma dust bowl to a fertile California valley
is a work of masterful descriptive power and artistic realism in character delineation.

The sociological novel continued on a minor note as the war focussed sharp
attention upon the American rift between ideals and practice in treatment of the major
American minority racial group: the Negro. In *Strange Fruit* (1944) by Lillian Smith,
a Georgia social workercharged both Negro and white with responsibility in the
solution of their mutual difficulties in living together and sharing equally the fruits of
Democracy. Richard Wright’s vivid and forceful narrative tends to concentrate upon
the viewpoint of the Negro. His *Native Son* (1940) brought him immense fame and
*Black Power* (1954) is a study of Negroes in Africa.

Apart from Negro minority, the war also brought two other social problems
into sharp focus: the social effects of atomic war fare and crime in the younger age-
groups. The most sensational fictional treatment of juvenile delinquency was *The Bed
Seed* (1954), a highly naturalistic treatment of an eight year old murderess.

**Genteel Realism**

Standing at the opposite pole of naturalism, within the meaning of the term
realism as a straight forward presentation of life as it is, there has been a 20th century
group of writers who followed in the footsteps of Howells and James – ‘The Pioneers
of genteel tradition’. This group has attempted to present a realistic view of life, but
they have carefully chosen their materials from selectareas of American Society. They
are aristocratic writers who cultivate themes related to the conventional and
established codes of upper class morality. The leading figure of the tradition of
genteel writing has been women.
Edith Wharton was mildly satirical. Basically she was concerned with the beauty of expression and refinement of theme. One of her best novels is *The House of Mirth* (1905), which is the story of a girl who is ostracized from her group because of her unconventional behaviour. *Ethan Frame* (1911), her masterpiece, is a novelette dealing with simple New England people.

Willa Cather began her writing career with the recollections of her childhood which she spent among European immigrant groups. Her best novel of early period is *My Antonia* (1918), the tender and sympathetic tale of a bohemian immigrant girl and her hardships on the Nebraskan frontier. When the store of recollections from her past exhausted, she turned her attention to the efforts of Catholic Church in the Southwest and in Canada. Her best known work from this period is *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927).

Some novelists purported to present American life as it is but coloured their efforts highly with personal pride, patriotism and optimism. Booth Tarkington produced novels which are representations of surface reality, biased towards an abiding American faith that virtue and integrity always emerge triumphant. One of his best novels is *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918). Other writers are Edna Ferber, Kathleen Norris and Fanny Hurst.

In the few years to come American better creative writing had been a realistic one with the author’s approach being objective or subjective. The subjective approach was very strong in regional novel. Naturalism, objective or subjective realism, and the more genteel and sentimental approaches came to be found in American regional fiction.

The historical novel also gained steady popularity. Many writers of popular fiction produced a plethora of sub-literary historical novels. The most popular of the
sub-literary, ‘historical romances’ was the single work of Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (1937) a long narrative dealing with the Civil War and the Reconstruction period. The historical novel continues to hold popularity of a blending of realism and romanticism even in today’s American writing which is the interest of Americans in the rich resources of their soil and people of past and present. Some distinguished writers are: Zane Grey, Emerson Hough, John Fox, Owen Wister, Winston Churchill, Kenneth Roberts, etc.

Along with realism and naturalism, there came a corresponding surge of exotic and imaginatively fanciful fiction. To many, the new realistic methods produced only sordid pictures of life and demanded optimism and the thrill of high adventure. Many were tired of the local colourists’ versions of the American scene and yearned to be stimulated by the call of far-off places.

American readers were also excited by the wave of exotic fiction and poetry which poured in American bookstores from England. Such fiction and poetry was carried to the South Seas by Stevenson, to India by Kipling and to Japan by Hearn H. Rider Haggard, Sir Anthony Hope and others. H. G. Wells had begun to produce a type of scientific fantasy which reached into other worlds. Conan Doyle had created his super detective, Sherlock Holmes, who was gifted with uncanny powers for ferreting out the weird and exotic crimes of master criminals.

In America, Lew Wallace had carried readers back into the splendour of Aztec Mexico through *The Fair God* (1873) and to the glories of ancient Rome in his *Ben Hur* (1880). Charles Major’s *When Knighthood was in Flower* (1898), Booth Tarkington’s *Monsieur Beaucaire* (1900) and George Barr McCutcheon’s *Graustark* (1901) precipitated a revival of romance, a false or ‘Pseudo’ romanticism of escape to alien and fanciful realms of imagination. James Oliver Curwood exploited the theme
of the north woods of Canada and Alaska; Nordof and Hall took the South Sea in their works, Edgar Rice Burroughs found escapism in Neo-primitive Superhumans such as ‘Tarzan’. Today the detective story and the historical romance are the most exploited themes which provide escape from reality for American readers. From 1903 to 1950s the popular novel attempted to create revived sense of Christian spirituality by the exploitation of New Testament themes. *The Robe* (1942) has been the most successful to treat biblical themes in an exotic manner. The two most successful writers of the exotic fiction in the century have approached their escapist matter from widely differing directions. Pearl Buck has devoted most of her production to Chinese peasant life. In *The Good Earth* (1931), she manages to make this ancient culture comprehensible to western readers. *Jurgen* (1919) is James B. Cabell’s representative work. He creates a mythical middle-aged country of Poictesme to which he returns to develop his dream-like tales of fantasy.

Beside novels, short fictional forms gained popularity since the times of its pioneers Hawthorne and Poe. Such writers as Frank Stockton (*The Lady or the Tiger*) and Richard Harding Davis (*Gallengher*) began to exploit sentimentality and normal human curiosity in their themes. During the first decade of 20th Century, a phenomenally successful short story writer was William Sydney Porter who wrote under the pseudonym O. Henry. His most famous collection is *The Four Million* (1906).

Throughout the 20th century and till today, the novel and short fiction have continued to be the most exploited form of creative writing. Beginning with Washington Irving till today, America has given birth to some top ranking essayists, short story writers and novelists. All sorts of novels – historical, series of novels constituting a saga of generations, science fiction, novels dealing with dilemma
related to faith or Godlessness have been written by American novelists who know the very threads of their nation in its most changing times. Most of the novelists resort to superficial rebukes to project the negative reality of the nation. They also deal with the problems and issues satirically, picking up events from middle class families, town talk and daily incidents.

One of these prolific writers is John Updike who possesses the deepest knowledge of every shore of the American subcontinent. Besides treating America as a continent, Updike can easily tackle domestic, religious and national issues by making death, sex, doubt, faith and reason as his themes. Whenever and wherever needed, he widens his spectrum towards adultery, escapism, insecurity and lack of satisfaction. Taking the above mentioned aspects he manages to merge them slowly but steadily with the domestic, social, political, religious, and national and even with the universal content. Each of his works has its own stream to follow; but some deal very smoothly with more than one issue. In some other work, loss of one aspect leads to the loss or destruction of the other. For Updike, life is like a human body with God as its guide whom the creature seeks whenever he is helpless before worldly as well as unworldly things. Just like the human body, the crippling of any one aspect in one’s life, leads to the ‘malfunction’ of the entire life. Updike longs for a Utopian America. Therefore, the reader can feel a helpless rebuke calling for help and reformation, because Updike had a strong belief that the world can always be brought out of its cloudiness and made fair in a season. Therefore he populated his fiction with character that frequently experience personal turmoil and must respond to crisis relating to religion, family obligations and marital infidelity. His fiction is distinguished by its attention to the concern, passions and suffering of average Americans. Basically a writer begins with his personal truth, with that obscure
vulnerable and once lost previous life that he lived before becoming a writer: but those first impressions discharged a process of years – he finds himself though empty, still posed in the role of a writer, with it may be an expectant audience of sorts and certain habit of communion. It is then that he dies as a writer, by resubmitting his ego, as it were to freshen-up drafts of experience and refined operations of mind. The human inside the writer wants to relive his past, this time with a difference. He desires to redeem his repentant soul by equipping his character with the worldly and unworldly things that he missed in his own time, thus conveying a profitable message to mankind. In words of Updike, ‘Energy ebbs as we live. . .almost alone the writer can reap profit from his loss.’

(Picked Up Pieces, 1975)

In his foreword to Olinger Stories 1964, he characterized his early stories as ‘crystallization of memory’ a most apt description of stories collected in The Same Door (1959) and Pigeon Feathers (1962) collections. It is an important designation not only for his short stories but also his novels ranging from the most autobiographical The Centaur (1963) Of the Farm (1965) to the futuristic, The Poor House Fair (1959) and others. As he later remarks, ‘I was full of Pennsylvania thing I wanted to say’and it’s evident that Pennsylvania thing of his youthful memory informs almost the fiction of 1955-65 decade. The Olinger of Updike’s stories is evidently the Shillington, Pennsylvania, where Updike himself grew up. Some of the early short stories during this period figured a young boy as a protagonist who is, in fact, an alter ego of Updike himself. Like ‘Peter Caldwell’s father in The Centaur, Updike’s father too, was a High School teacher and Updike himself, as one can guess from his stories, was the brightest boy in the local high school an image of his
childhood which he presents in ‘Terrorist’ along with droplets of dew perfumed with imagination, where a reflection of an ideal father is seen through ‘Jack Levy’.

(The Paris Review, 1968)

Aware of the tendency that might have led some critics to dismiss The Centaur and many of his stories as little more than surrogated glimpses of the past, Updike defends it as an honoured tradition in American culture, ‘I’m still running on energy lay down in childhood. I really don’t think I’m alone among writers in caring about what they experienced in the first 18 years of their life. Hemingway cherished the Michigan stories out of proportion. I would think to their merit. Look at Twain, look at Joyce. Nothing that happens to us after twenty is as free from self-consciousness because by then we have the vocation to write’.

(Jane, Howard and Samuels C. T, 1966)

Updike released more than sixty books in a career started in 1950s. He won every literary prize, especially two Pulitzers and two National Book Awards. He wrote novels, poems, criticism, the memoir Self-Consciousness and an essay about great baseball player, Ted Williams, with its immortal line about the surely slugger who refused to tip his hat to his fans: ‘Gods do not answer letters’.

Endowed with an art student’s pictorial imagination, a journalist’s sociological eye and poet’s gift for metaphor – John Updike was arguably America’s one true all round man of letters. He moved fluently from fiction to criticism, from light verse to short stories to the long distance form of the novel. In his most resonant work, he gave ‘the mundane its beautiful due’ as he once put it, memorializing the everyday mysteries of love and faith and domesticity with extraordinary nuance and precision.

Updike summed up his love for his vocation: ‘To distribute oneself... as a kind of confetti shower falling upon the heads and shoulders of mankind out of book
stores and the pages of magazine is surely a great privilege and a defiance of the usual earth-bound laws whereby human beings make themselves known to one another’.

(NewYork Times, 2009)

Basically Updike was always proud of autobiographical element in his work. He always acknowledges the connection between his autobiography and the novels. His novels *The Centaur* 1963 and *Of the Farm* 1965 both are laden with autobiographical element and the latter seems to be sequel of the former. Updike supports the suggestion that Joey Robinson from *Of the Farm* has taken up Peter’s pen.

By comparing Updike’s interviews with his fiction and stories, we find that much of his fiction is thinly disguised autobiography whether it is *The Centaur* or *Of the Farm* or *The Dogwood Tree* or *Terrorist*, where fatherly feelings of Jack Levy are translated into an ideal father who really longs for a stable family, though at the cost of bringing his own marital life at the verge of break-up. In the novels whether the hero is ‘Allen Dow’ or ‘Clyde Behan’ or ‘John Updike’, the facts are always the same.

The years 1964-66 mark an important transitional stage in Updike’s progress and so are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of his writing career. Updike wrote the foreword to Olinger stories in 1964 with attention of saying farewell to Pennsylvania and to his boyhood memories. After the novel *Of the Farm* his fictional locale moved from Pennsylvania to New England and his themes came to reflect adult concerns instead of boyhood recollections.

*The Music School* collection holds a distinctive place in Updike’s writing because it contains several stories that in addition to more familiar Updike’s themes, deal with the issues of artistic self-consciousness and the act of composition itself. In
the story The Bulgarian Poetess (1965), Updike created a spokesman who would explicitly engaged these issues with Henry Beach. Later, these stories were compiled and published in a book form, Bech: A Book; the second series was named, Bech is Back and his third series, Beck at Bay. Of these stories, Updike said, ‘. . .at any rate, I have used the writer in Bech: A Book as a subject in order to confess sterility in truthful way. . .In my book, I tried to. . .and I believe I did pack and dispose of a certain set of tensions and anxieties which I have as a practicing writer. (Frand Gado, 1973)

In the decade 1965-76, the tension of marriage, the process of dying and the varied losses of faith – religious, political and sexual became his central themes. However, he himself observed that ‘the difference between Olinger and Tarbox is much more than the difference between the childhood and adulthood than the difference between two geographical locations. They are stages on my pilgrim’s progress not dots on the map.’ (The Paris Review, 1968)

Midpoint, though a lesser known work, is another milestone in Updike’s career in which he sets forth his outlook on life and art. In an interview first published in 1972, Updike’s said, ‘When asked about what my philosophy was, I tried to write it down in Midpoint.’ (PickedUpPieces, 509) The philosophical and theological concerns which form an integral part of the poem, offer an insight into the underlying intent of Updike’s novels from The Poor House Fair (1959) to The Roger’s Version(1986) to In the Beauty of the Lilies (1996). The commitment Updike sets forth in his poem provides the screens through which we may sift the complexities of his seventeen novels. Throughout the five cantos Updike reveals that he is committed to the centrality of the reality of the material world, and a life of mystery and faith. In
the poem, he clearly aligns himself to the theology of Kierkegaard and Karl Barth and sings praises for them.

In Updike’s less autobiographical fiction, themes from the Olinger stories recur in various forms. Instead of personal nostalgia, there is nostalgia for pre-urban America. The dominant characters in the later fiction are old men or young ones who feel at odd against the modern world. Instead of the efforts to capture one’s past, there is a quest for permanence that involves religion. *The Poor House Fair* (1959) is quite unusual for a first novel, but it has the germs of Updike’s mental and spiritual concerns which were later explored in his novels especially ‘*The Scarlet Letter* trilogy’. It’s set twenty years in future and is written as an anti-1984 (George Orwell, *1984*). In this novel, there is ongoing debate between Conner, the perfect old age home, who in fact, stands for the humanist approach to life, and Hook, the 94 years old protagonist who shares Updike’s views on faith and spirituality. Conner represents the secularization of American life, the increasing concern with material values, an idealist dedicated to his duties and responsibilities. The key to goodness is faith. Novels of Updike make a quest for a set of values – religious, ethical or social that could give meaning to the flux of existence.

Updike’s other concerns are themes of love and marriage that have occupied his interest from the beginning of his literary career. Updike was acclaimed as master of this genre with the publication and overwhelming success of *Couples* in 1968. *Marry Me*, a romance, published eight years after couples in 1976 deals with the same theme of adulterous sex lives of young couples in their thirties. Both protagonists Jerry Conant and Piet Hanemma believe in God, fear death and seek release in adultery. The reason of this is that the bulk of *Marry Me* was written before *Couples*. The action of *Marry Me* occupies the year from the spring of 1962 to the spring of
1963. The events of Couples fill the months from the spring of 1963 to the spring of 1964. These novels deal with marriage in progressive states of deterioration in small town Eden. As in The Poor House Fair, in this novel also, a question exists, ‘After Christianity what?’ Updike in the sixties felt that a new kind of religion might be emerging, not like the rational, socially engineered welfare state positioned in The Poor House Fair, but rather a religion of human interplay including sexual interplay. Marry Me was followed by The Witches of EastWick in 1984. It is the third of Updike’s New England novels dealing with deteriorating marriages. It is also set in 1960’s and probes American culture’s attempts to find a replacement for an abandoned Christianity.

To the question, ‘After Christianity what?’ the novel suggests that the attempt to find a successor to Christianity is futile. Throughout his writing career, religious faith has a dominant aspect of Updike’s writing. In his early twenties, when he was facing a religious crisis, he read such theologians as Karl Barth and Kierkegaard whose religious views left an indelible impression on his consciousness. His love for Barth finds an obvious expression in such full blown characters as The Reverend, Thomas Marshfield and Professor Roger Lambert. His religious views are reflected in these three novels – A Month of Sundays (1975), Roger’s Version (1986) and S.A Novel (1988). Updike’s trilogy is a transformation of Hawthorn’s masterpiece. He joins his predecessor in investigating adultery, sin and salvation, but the trilogy is as much as contemporary musings on Hawthorn’s themes as an adaptation of the Hawthornian dilemma. Updike confirms his sympathy with Barth’s argument that humanity cannot reach God, only God can touch humanity. The result is that the element of faith always outweighs good works. Marshfield is a minister caught between the apparently conflicting demands of stern faith and insistent eroticism. He
engages himself in adulterous affairs with his parishioners. When discovered, he is sent to a rest home for disturbed clergymen, where he is suggested to write for therapy. Still he is far removed from pangs of consciousness suffered by Hawthorne’s Dimmesdale. Instead its Barth’s definition of faith that sustains him during his sojourn in the desert. Confident of his belief, Marshfield unifies the material and the spiritual and emerges victorious.

Updike’s position on the unimportance of ethics has its source in Barth’s assurance that evil is always relative because it’s not part of God’s positive creation. Such an opinion does negate the necessity for faith. Bernard Schopen has given the soundest analysis of the relationship between religion and Updike’s fiction. He says that the faith discussed in the novels, ‘is one to which many of the assumptions about the Christian perspective do not apply, especially those which link Christian faith with an absolute and divinely ordered morality.’ (Bernard Schopen, 1978)

The next novel in the trilogy, Roger’s Version (1986), portrays Roger Lambert, a dry bookish scholar, a professor of early Christian heresies, who is drawn after Hawthorne’s Roger Chillingworth. The main action of the novel consists of large discussions between Roger and a 28 year old student Dale Kohler, possessing a startling idea put as ‘God is breaking through’. He seeks to prove his creations and His existence through an advanced computer technology. With Roger’s help he obtains a grant from the university to pursue his project. The clash between two contrary thoughts – Lambert’s Barthianism – God is beyond all human understanding against Dale’s insistence that he is knowable and even tangible. But Roger maintains that to reveal God is to eliminate God’s majesty. Dale may be a believer but his effort to reveal God’s face makes him an anti-Barthian heretic. In keeping with the erudition of Chilling Worth, Updike directs Roger’s Version with intellectual intensity. Another
feature that the novel shares with Hawthorne’s masterpiece is Roger’s reaction on discovering Fake’s affair with his wife Esther (HesterPryne). The older man uses the relationship to irritate Dale’s conscience as Chillingworth did Dimmesdale’s preventing any open confession that might bring repentance and release to the young man.

Updike turns to Hester’s version of *The Scarlet Letter* with *S: A Novel* in which he investigates rebellion from a disgusted wife’s point of view. Updike’s Sarah (Hester) pursues mystical eroticism with an oriental flavour. Calling attention not to Hester’s artistic skills but to her sexuality, he stresses her association with the serpent in Eden when he designs the letter S on the book cover to resemble a snake.

Sarah worth, the protagonist deserts her ‘dark and unheeding philandering’ physician husband Charles to join an Ashram in Arizona desert. Her search is for enlightenment beyond highly privileged but suffocating upper middle class life. The Ashram is an object of satire but it soon becomes clear that what has actually misled Sarah is another form of antinomian feminism. When Hester’s adultery is discovered, she retreats to a cabin in the forest and keeps silent, while Updike’s Sarah travels to her Ashram and speaks up. The epistolary style in *S* gives Sarah the voice that Hawthorne denies to Hester.

Unlike the predecessor, Sarah escapes with her eroticism. Both women reflect their cultures, but Sarah has the advantage of knowing much of the society and this supports her rebellion. Barth’s theology is not an issue in *S. A Novel* more the dominant concern is feminism. Updike’s insistence is on the unification of body and soul, separated by the Puritans and kept asunder by Hawthorne even in his radical transformation of the scarlet letter. Marshfield, Sarah and Roger Lambert pursue freedom to extremes because they know with Updike that Barth’s formulas are apt.
Since only God is perfect, humanity by definition is free to transgress. To remain human, humanity must resist God’s perfection.

*In the Beauty of the Lilies*(1996) is a four-generation saga which is partly a fictional version of Updike’s family history, partly account of the decline of religious faith in America, and partly a reflection of Updike’s angry, personal struggle to find religious meaning. Updike told ‘Publishers Weekly’ that in this novel, he has attempted ‘to make God a character, although in ways that illuminate spiritual emptiness in American life’. (James M. 1996) The Revd. Clarence Wilmot loses his faith and consequently his career in ministry. Updike also links Wilmot’s loss of faith to the rise of movies.

In this way, as a writer, Updike was remarkably prolific, his reputation secured by the Rabbit Angstrom series, *Couples* and his three episodes of *Henry Bech*. His novels examined life on socio-economic terms and brought a new frankness to sexuality, infidelity, and family betrayal. But they also deal head on with Updike’s concern for American tradition and the social and religious values that he grew up with. *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the first of his quartet series on former high school basketball star Harold Angstrom, inflamed readers with its portrayal of an average, middle class American who is spiritually and mentally eroding. This series, ending with *Rabbit at Rest* in 1990, is a lifetime of spiritual crisis that ranges over Updike’s entire adult life. Harold Angstrom is seen trying to uphold his notion of self-worth while dawdling through a society that is overpopulated, oversize, overmechanized and with under-achievers left to rot.

Working in a materialistic context, Updike’s fiction was still based on a protestant, depression era viewpoint. Updike matured during a period of economic scarcity, an individual’s reliance on the community at large and religious
As the U.S. advanced through the 1960s, 70s and 80s, his novels featured characters with eroding family bonds and who seem to be drowning in late 20th Century affluence. Updike experienced the sixties life style first-hand (his first marriage ended in divorce), lived through the turbulence of Vietnam and, therefore, showed a keen interest in human failure. Updike’s novels have been described as crass, in poor taste, weighted down in their hopelessness, harsh descriptions of everyday life, portrayal of women – always sardonic and often brutal – had not placed him in good stead during an era of female equality. Updike’s existing readership also declined over the years as a Christian perspective and focus on white, middle class America grew increasingly quaint. However Updike still has a devoted group of readers and is frequently the topic of conversation at literary gatherings, but public support has never equalled the quality of his writing.

The question that will be answered in decades to come is, whether Updike wrote for all eras or if he simply wrote for his own. Not one to self-promoter, Updike shrugged at the idea of posterity and viewed his reputation after death as fully in the hands of others. He insisted on honest trials to amuse others.

Even with his recent success, years must pass before a sound evaluation can be made of Updike’s work. The American population has changed shape in the decades since his first novel and there is nothing to suggest that what remains of Depression era; ideologies will be carried on. Still, Updike’s commitment of portraying American life has secured fame in his own lifetime and will provide his best chance of remaining in libraries. Updike documented the national situation like few have and he has provided us with a detailed road connecting us from past to present.
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