



## Assignment B: Analyzing the Basic Narrative of *Appalachian Spring*

**Research the following background information topics and questions within your groups. Be prepared to share your information with the rest of the class.**

Note: The American poet William Carlos Williams once commented that ultimate simplicity is the expression of ultimate complexity. The statement takes on special significance in exploring specific ways Martha Graham and Aaron Copland forged a “transcending” simplicity out of the incredible complexity of forces shaping America in the time period between 1730 and 1850.

As orthodox Puritanism “crystallized, cracked, and crumbled”, spurred by many competing forces, especially the push into the Frontier, a new “American” man/woman emerged, encased in a groundswell of spirituality, optimism, idealism, self-belief, and independence. The following activities are designed to help you grasp the nature of these complex forces, and thus enhanced understanding of the “transcending” simplicity that helps give the dance and music scores their majestic beauty and enduring power.

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### Activity 1:

Gather background information on the history of the First and, particularly, the Second Great Awakening, including the nature of Revival meetings and Revivalists preachers. How did these “Awakenings” backfire? What was the general impact of the “Awakenings” in shaping American culture?

Collect data on the Utopian communities and related religious groups that formed between 1730 and the first few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – for instance, the Ephrata Cloister; Quakers; United Society of Believers in the Second Coming (Shakers); Amish; Moravians: “New Lights”. Give special attention to:

- historical background of their formation (what group(s), for instance, splintered from another group)
- prevailing geographical location of their communities (note that the Ephrata Cloister in Pennsylvania incorporated Quakers and segments that would splinter into Shaker groups. (There is a provocative Nathaniel Currier lithograph of a Shaker service in about 1838 being held near Lebanon, Pennsylvania - New York Public Library)
- nature of central philosophical beliefs of each group
- cultural habits and achievements
- prevailing occupations
- characteristics of religious gatherings
- common denominator(s) of belief among the groups

As a group, negotiate some conclusions about the following references. Prepare to share your conclusions with the class.

- a definition of the term “Utopian”; also a brief account of origins of the term (Plato’s *New Republic*; Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*)
- a definition of the term “theosophy”; clarify how the term relates to the various “Utopian” communities and religious groups that formed in America between 1730 and 1850.
- an explanation of the reference, “New Eden”; some thoughts about how the term aligns with perceptions inherent in the American Frontier “myth” and the “American Dream”.

- a brief overview of the American Transcendental movement that began to form in the 1820's and ways various aspects of the Transcendental beliefs and outlook matched that of some of the early Utopian communities and religious groups
- a summary of the contributions of Utopian communities and early religious groups to the shaping of an agrarian culture. What groups were particularly invested in agriculture?

How would you describe the geographical features of the American interior around the Pennsylvania area as it would have existed in the first few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? What cultural forces were at work that would spur people to push into the wilderness?

## Activity 2:

The spirituality, idealism, and optimism, as documented in Activity 1, that characterized the first few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America are beautifully captured in the music and dance of that time period. Much of the force of the “transcending” simplicity of *Appalachian Spring* comes from the integration of early American song and dance into the music score and text of the choreography.

To better understand the background of *Appalachian Spring*, and how the music illuminates many elements of the choreographic text, explore the following:

- general background information on American composer, Aaron Copland
- forces behind the development of a large collection of hymns in the early history of America, particularly in the Ephrata Cloister (Consider, for instance, some of the purposes hymns serve)
- the background and lyrics of the Shaker/Quaker song, “Simple Gifts”  
(Note that “Simple Gifts” was a work song composed by a Shaker Elder, Joseph Brackett, Jr. Shakers, while singing, danced the movements articulated in the song. Perhaps because of the early alliance of the Quaker/Shaker communities and/or the alignment of the outlook and values expressed in the lyrics with Quaker ideals, the song –in addition to being part of Shaker “ritual”- became an intimate part of the song “bank” sung at Quaker meetings; it is consistently sung even today.)
- it has been stated that hymn-like music such as that embedded in Aaron Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* score can evoke “relationship with a high spiritual intelligence”, can serve as a “medium between this world and a spiritual world”, “make connections to celestial planes”. Operating on the assumption that these are valid assertions, craft an explanation of how the music “matches” and/or supports one of the following:
  - the exposition of the choreographic narrative, i.e. the “aura” of the American Frontier wilderness in the 1830-40 time period
  - Utopian and Transcendental beliefs about how man establishes relationship with a spiritual force
  - the “New Eden” image related to the Frontier
  - the tone of optimism and confidence that prevails at the end of the narrative

Prepare for a discussion of the lyrics of “Simple Gifts” and a full class performance of the song, by shaping brief written conclusions to the following questions:

- What values are projected in the words and phrases of the song?
- What is the basic affirmation of the song?
- What is the implication of the word “gift”?
- What directions for movement are given in the song?
- How do the defined movements support basic assertions of the song?

Note that five variations of the melody of “Simple Gifts” are integrated into the seventh section of Aaron Copland’s music score of *Appalachian Spring*. After viewing a film of a performance of *Appalachian Spring*, draw from your notes on the above questions to develop a short paper of comparative analysis in which you define specific ways the lyrics of the song reinforce threads of the narrative and your perception of the central theme of the choreography.

### **Activity 3:**

Explore some background on early American Frontier “country” dancing.

How would you characterize the spirit of the movements (if possible, demonstrate a few steps); type of music used

What prevailing instruments were used for accompanying?

What were the prevailing ethnic origins of the “country” dance movements?

In viewing *Appalachian Spring*, see if you can identify any specific steps that fit with your experience with “country” dancing.

### **Suggestion for a Special Project:**

Define the term “patron” as it relates to art; if time allows, briefly cover some historical background of ways “patronage” has supported art. Develop a brief account of the role of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge in the development of *Appalachian Spring*.