

MEDALLION EDITION • AMERICA READS

# UNITED STATES in Literature



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James E. Miller, Jr.  
Carlota Cárdenas de Dwyer  
Robert Hayden  
Russell J. Hogan  
Kerry M. Wood



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\*The MEDALLION EDITION of *United States in Literature* is available in two versions, one containing *I Never Sang for My Father*, the other presenting *The Glass Menagerie*. Thus two listings appear in the Table of Contents above and in the index although only one of the two plays will be found in this book.

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\*Items in *Definitions of Literary Terms* when introduced in the editorial material accompanying selections are printed in **bold face**.

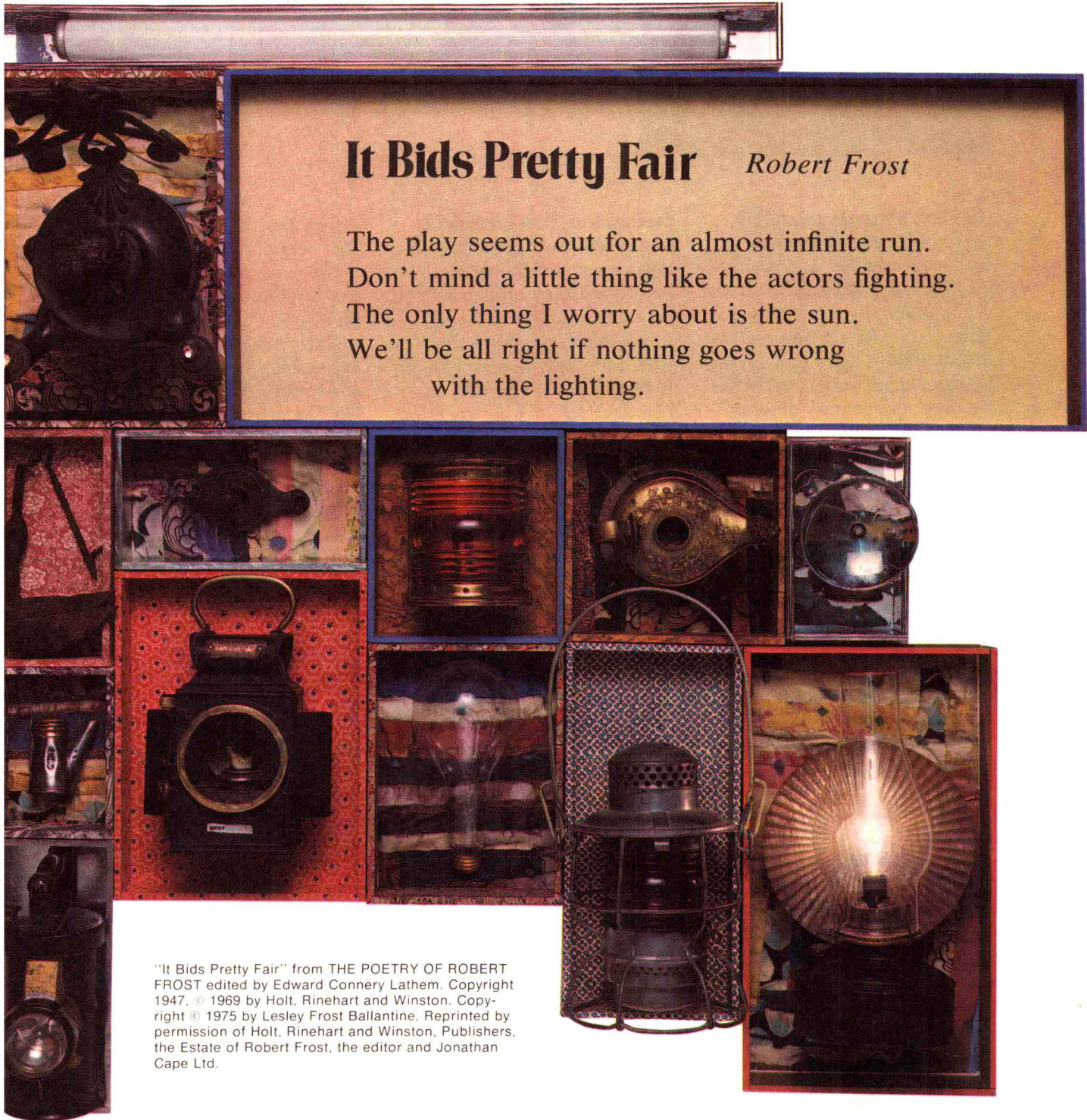
Unit 1.



# American Mosaic

## It Bids Pretty Fair *Robert Frost*

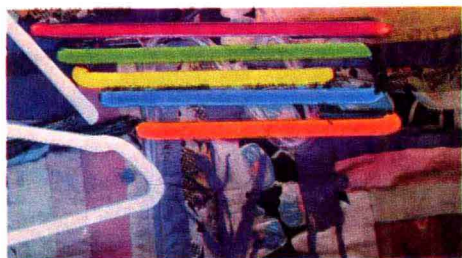
The play seems out for an almost infinite run.  
Don't mind a little thing like the actors fighting.  
The only thing I worry about is the sun.  
We'll be all right if nothing goes wrong  
with the lighting.



"It Bids Pretty Fair" from THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1947, © 1969 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Copyright © 1975 by Lesley Frost Ballantine. Reprinted by permission of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Publishers, the Estate of Robert Frost, the editor and Jonathan Cape Ltd.



# Background: American Mosaic



*United States in Literature* surveys American literature from the speeches and oral poetry of native Americans to the rich cultural diversity of contemporary writing. “American Mosaic” introduces that survey by sampling a variety of works by twentieth-century authors from different parts of the nation and different ethnic backgrounds. A mosaic is more than a mere collection of bits and pieces: its various parts must form a harmonious whole. The “pieces” in this “American Mosaic” have been organized to suggest, not a formula, but some useful approaches to a wide-ranging literature.

Many observers, both foreign and American, have suggested that America is a land of practical dreamers. We optimistically trust in a future we cannot know, and we are eager to seek it, to grasp it, to mold it to fit our often conflicting dreams.

The theme of discovery runs throughout this unit—discovery of self, exploration of the meaning of being human, discovery or rediscovery of ties with a past, an ethnic identity, a cultural heritage. All of these are needed to build a future.

Optimism is, however, not always easily seen, probably because events of the past century forbid easy optimism. Yet, the traditional optimism endures, expressed in the cautious and wryly humorous tone of Robert Frost’s poem, “It Bids Pretty Fair,” on the title page of this unit.

In “My Mother Pieced Quilts,” by Teresa Palomo Acosta, the quilts become much more than quilts—they become family tradition, history, art, life, singing, love. Acosta is exploring her heritage, and in choosing the symbol of a quilt—itsself a mosaic—she builds on a folk art once practiced by women throughout a growing, developing America.

The selections by Steinbeck and Momaday also portray people seeking personal identity from and within their respective traditions. But these traditions represent the rival sides of an American epic: the bitter struggle of tribes of the West to hold their lands against pioneers from the eastern United States and Mexico. Steinbeck’s old “Leader” of the wagon trains laments the clos-

ing of the frontier, the end of the “westering,” the death of the pioneer spirit; while Momaday celebrates the vitality of his Kiowa “centaur culture.”

Other works explore different problems of being human in our society. E. B. White insists that the spirit of our language transcends mechanical readability formulas which seem to be a mania of this computer age. Lorraine Hansberry recounts youthful experiences of the pain, pride, toughness, and final triumph of being black in a predominantly white society. Bernard Malamud depicts the struggle of a European Jewish immigrant and his daughter, caught between the marriage customs of the Old World and the New. In a magical plant from Puerto Rico, Jesús Papoleto Meléndez finds a power to prevail over the grimness of the ghetto. William Saroyan creates “O.K.-by-the-Sea,” a mythical California town whose people challenge with humor and fantasy the ceaseless striving of the “American Dream.” Resourcefulness and determination are the qualities which enable the father in Tomás Rivera’s “The Portrait” to “re-