

Understanding the Literary History of American Novels

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How do literary texts orient their readers towards conflicts over understanding the span in terms of time and era and orient accordingly to understand the literature in the right perspective. If we are successful in orienting the students in line with time and the socio - cultural environment in different eras, we shall be highly successful in making them understand the logic and background behind what and how of a piece of literature existing in any subcontinent.

Our teaching of literature generally tends to be test centric, which means that we concentrate entirely on the text with referring to any other material-social, political, cultural, intellectual or literary which will help us to enhance our awareness of the text There is always the argument that we can get all these literary understandings from the text itself. But from a realistic viewpoint this is not always the case. Students have a limited awareness of alien environments and cultures and therefore their reading of a novel tends to be inadequate because they are unable to link the literary situation to the socio-cultural background. This is exactly the problem that **David Daiches pointed out in his criticism of the New Critics**. Daiches pointed out that the New Critics advocacy of not going beyond the page was putting the reader at a disadvantage because the ordinary reader would not have the depth and width of knowledge that the New Critics, who were very learned men, had. A reader, who would not have the critical insight which the new critics possessed, would therefore never get a complete understanding of the text.

When we teach papers on the literature of a country i.e. English literature, American literature or African Literature, such an orientation is especially useful. A literary history helps the student to locate a particular author in time and space and gives him an idea of the relevant social, political, cultural etc. elements that are embedded in the text. Thus his or her reading tends not only to become easier but also deeper and more insightful. If the teacher can provide this kind of framework, I think it would, to a great extent, put a stop to our students making a mad search for secondary explanatory materials simply because they have acquired new tools which enable them to make a satisfying reading on their own. Many of us think our students don't read because they are lazy but the fact is that they don't read out of a feeling of helplessness.

So providing a simple map that will help to traverse the varied terrain of American literature, that is, to provide a literary history of the American novel, so that the students can approach your texts in a more competent and fulfilling way. Understanding about some of the significant historical & political movements, referring to the significant features of the writings of the age, referring to the major novelists and also talking about some of the novelists that is significant as a teacher and reader of American Literature. In this paper I will try to elaborate the various developments in the American novel for it to be understood with various references.

There are some problems in this process which can be clearly seen when we compare it with a literary history of English literature. In English literature, all the writers under consideration are British, and it is possible to list these writers under "periods" based either on genre, typical characteristics in their writing or on similar content/subject matter. For example, we have the neo-Classical period (1660-1700), in which the main form of writing was the satire, both in poetry and prose. This is because the main belief that all of them shared was that society needed to be improved and that there was no better way of doing this than to hold certain individuals or social institutions up to ridicule.

The poetry was written in a highly polished style- the heroic couplet- the intention being that the contrast between the style and the subject matter would highlight the satire. Or we have the Romantic period, which was a period of poetry in which the general characteristics are that a more natural style than the Neo Classicists would be attempted and the subjects of the poetry would be taken from common life, especially nature, whose significance was recognized in the sordid atmosphere of the Industrial Revolution. An advantage of such a literary history for students is that if they know the characteristics of the age, it is easy for them to fit writers into periods i.e. they would be able to say that Dryden, Pope, Swift and Addison belonged to the Neo-Classical period or that Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats fitted into the Romantic period. Furthermore, writers of English literary histories have come to a consensus about the titling of the periods and therefore we find very little variation in the histories that are available.

When we come to American literature, we are faced with a different scenario. It is difficult to categorize the literary scene into periods simply because the writings are so various that it is difficult to find linkages between the works. In addition to this we also consider ethnic works such as Black writing, Native American and Hispanic (Latin American) writing. So what American literary historians generally do is to make divisions based on history rather than purely on a literary basis.

A favorite way of doing this is to divide a survey of American Literature based on the major wars as the wars made for significant changes in the literature. The major wars were the Revolutionary war (1775-81) also known as the US War of Independence from the British, which won independence for 13 of Britain's North American colonies forming the USA; the Civil War (1861-65), a war between the US Govt and 11 Southern states that fought to Hampshire know as secede from the Union. (Northern's opposition to slavery caused the Southern states to fear a threat to their slave holdings which formed the economic base for their large cotton plantations). The Southern states called themselves the Confederate states and went to war against the Northern states (Abe Lincoln, well known for his stand on abolitionism, was the president) The Southern states were finally defeated but at great cost - 620,000 soldiers were killed and the South was devastated. However the Union was preserved & slavery was abolished); World War I (1914-18) & World War II (1939-45)

Under these broad divisions, several periods and sub-periods of American Literature came to be listed. These terms are diverse in kind: they may signify a span of time (modern, post modern) a form of political organization (colonial, revolutionary), a prominent intellectual or imaginative mode (Transcendental) or a prominent literary form Romantic, realistic).

The Colonial Period, 1607-1775, extends from the founding of the 1st settlement at Jamestown to the American revolution. The period is named so because America was still under British rule. The novel would not emerge in this period or the next known as "The Revolutionary Age", The Period between the Stamp Act of 1765 & 1790 Stamp Act, 1765 A tax on printed matter introduced by the British Parliament to pay costs incurred by the many wars they had fought. This was a common revenue device England, but it was vigorously opposed by the colonists whose representatives had not been consulted. Finally, the British were forced to repeal the Act due to protests from British merchants whose exports had been reduced by colonial boycotts. So from this period, American settlers had decided that they were not going to take things lying down that they were going to fight against injustices of the British and therefore the title given to the age

There was some writing of prose however in the writing of diaries and the early history of the period. The well known historians were William Bradford, the Governor of Plymouth & John Winthrop, the Governor of Massachusetts Bay. Bradford is credited with having written a journal which provided the matter for the first book published on the pilgrim colony. Other well known names of this period are Cotton Mather, a theologian who wrote the ecclesiastical history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) and the philosopher, Jonathan Edwards, the Christian

philosopher who foreshadowed many of Emerson's beliefs. He wrote in his "Treatise of Grace" (published in 1865), that God had a "supernatural grace", a regenerative power, that reached directly to man. But man could not receive this grace by act of will or reason but must passively receive it through the senses. (Emerson's "The Oversoul".) But more importantly, Edwards asserted the persistent reality of sin, he felt that it was inevitable & inescapable. Man was created free & had the power of choice but he had one compulsion laid upon him, he could not overstep his limits. If man commits a sinful act, in defiance of God laws, he must suffer the consequences, this was divine justice. God's sovereignty with respect to salvation & damnation could not be denied. This preoccupation with sin is evident in several American writers, especially those of the Romantic period.

The two best known prose writers, though not novelists, of the Revolutionary Age were Thomas Paine & Thomas Jefferson. Paine, originally British, was advised to emigrate to America by Ben Franklin and together they published pamphlets and newspapers which strengthened the colonists' resolve for independence. Paine later traveled to England and became involved in the French Revolution which led to the writing of his most famous pamphlet "The Rights of Man" (1791-92), a pamphlet which defended the revolution and supported republicanism. This pamphlet had very great influence in America as well, it became the Bible of the democrats & the radicals. He came to be considered as one of the heroes of the American Revolution (The ship in Melville's Billy Budd was called "the Rights of Man"), though he was not an American, he had no real sympathy with the American revolutionists or the learning that other leading colonists such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams or Alexander Hamilton had. Thus, it is truly said that "Of all the writers of the American Revolution, he was least American in background, in spirit & in purpose..... His cause was not America, it was revolution."

The Early Nationalist Period starts from the period of American independence and ends with the triumphs of Jacksonian democracy in 1828

This period signaled the emergence of a national imaginative literature, including the 1st American com Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*, (1787), the earliest American novel, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) & the first American magazine, *The North American Review*. Though there was the impulse to produce an independent, indigenous literature, side by side ran the tendency to carry on the distinguished European tradition. The British fashion at the time was the sentimental novel, the novel of pathos & tenderness, with its favorite theme of seduction, its provision of discreet thrills and finally, the moral message which made this kind of fiction

acceptable. Brown's novel followed this tradition, his story is compounded of seduction, incest, abduction, rape & suicide. The main plot is that of a young man, who, on finding that his sweetheart is actually his half- sister shoots himself.

Therefore, the credit for being the first truly Amn indigenous writer is given to James Fenimore Cooper. He was a voluminous writer, he produced 30 novels of the frontier and of the sea, this was the period of America's expansion. His fame as an Amn novelist is based on his frontier novels, known as "The Leatherstocking Tales" because of the attire worn by the hero. There are five novels in this series based over a period of 18 years and the last novel, the "Last of the Mohicans" is considered the best in the series.

It's popularity lies in the fact that it is a highly suspenseful novel of the kidnapping of two American girls by Red Indians and later rescued by the hero, Leather stocking. But it is the first novel where the white people are seen through the eyes of the Red Indians Here Cooper's sympathy is clearly with the Indians, whom he sees as "noble savages", we are introduced to Indian folkways and see the inevitable conflict between the traditional Indian way of life and the encroaching civilization of the white man. The "Indian" is seen realistically as a human being, capable of bravery, endurance & intelligence and a sense of morality and not as the stereotypical villain. Cooper pointed out that the Indians conflict with the white man was a just fight, a fight to protect their land and their way of life.

In this period, we also see the first of the slave narratives, the most noteworthy being Frederick Douglas' Narrative of the life of FR (1845) and Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861). Mainly autobiographical, they were significant in the fact that the slave had a voice to which readers were willing to listen.

The Romantic Period, 1828-1865, extends from the Jacobean era to the Civil war This period marked the full coming of age of a distinctly American lit. The period is also known as the American Renaissance

The term "romantic" has a different meaning from the one used in British lit, where the genre is poetry and the practice has to do with seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary. In the Amn context, the term is used to characterize a particular kind of novel that did no restrict itself to the probable, it mingled the marvelous & the real. This gave the writer the opportunity to spin allegorical tales, tales about unusual characters and events which however held a message/s for humankind.

The best of the Romantic writers were Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64) & Herman Melville (1819-91).

There are several firsts in terms of Literature during this period. Edgar Allen Poe, essentially, a writer of not very good poetry (known as the "jingle man" by Emerson) and short stories began the

genre of the detective tale and is the acknowledged precursor of the more famous Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In "His Philosophy of Composition", he revealed how the detective story was planned. The writer started at the end, with the solution of the crime & then worked his way to the beginning, the actual enactment of the crime. Poe's one of the famous detective, Inspector Dupin is quite definitely the forefather of several modern detectives, including Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot.

The Realistic Period, 1865-1914, Period of the civil war, reconstruction, industrialism, urbanization. In contrast to the Romantics, the writers wrote about real life & real experience. These novels have a recognizable locale and present penetrating, relevant and sometimes scathing critiques of society.

To my mind, the most brilliant of the writers of this period is Mark Twain. His real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens; he took the pseudonym after having worked as pilot on a river boat, Mark Twain's genius lies in that his superficially humorous tales had depths of scathing criticism of human nature and human society. His Huckleberry Finn is an extraordinary book which tells the tale of an orphan delinquent and a runaway slave, Jim, and their travels on a raft down the Mississippi river. But every time they touch shore, they are shocked & disgusted by some aspect of human depravity-pride, greed, the abuse of power, insensitivity towards both man & animal, cheating and trickery. The message that Twain gives is that those who complacently consider themselves civilized are not even human. The final irony is that the "river rat" and the "nigger", the scum of society, are the only ones who possess human qualities of love, loyalty and forgiveness. The humor comes from the technique that Twain uses-the story is told through the eyes of a young boy, inexperienced in the ways of the world, who cannot believe what he is seeing. The novel is also noteworthy for its use of language, Twain reproduces at least four American dialects with great precision; he has shown consummate skill in reproducing the spoken word in writing.

Another writer of the period who has achieved great eminence is Henry James (1843 - 1916). Though a prolific writer of such celebrated works as *The Europeans* (1879), *The Bostonians* (1886) and *The Ambassadors* (1903), HJ has an elegant and highly stylized way of writing that makes him difficult to read. For eg while describing a scene of only men having tea, he says, that the persons concerned in it "were not of the sex which is supposed to furnish the regular votaries of the ceremony. For "face", he always uses the word "physiognomy." He was intensely concerned with the novel as an art form, he considered his novels models of architecture that must possess a high degree of symmetry, Another of his literary characteristics was to focus

on the individual consciousness of his central characters because he considered the individual mind superior to public or collective values

James' main subject was what he called the "international theme- the innocence & exuberance of the New World (America) in conflict with the corruption and wisdom of the Old World (Britain) is usually the members of the new world that gain the moral victory in this confrontation, The Europeans are seen as sophisticated and worldly wise but sinister & exploitive. In contrast, the Americans are ingenuous, frank and trusting The most readable & charming of his novels is "The Portrait of a Lady" which gives us "the new woman", the woman with a mind, who does not want to be comfortably settled in a suitable marriage, but wants to see, learn and make her own choices. In this novel, we have a charming, intelligent and self-willed heroine, Isabel Archer who comes to England in search of sophistication and freedom from the traditional English set-up. She lives with a wealthy English family, the Touchetts, whose sickly son is enchanted with her ideas, gives her 60,000 pounds from his own inheritance so that she can experiment with life.

Almost as soon as she arrives in England, she has two wealthy suitors, Lord Warburton, an English aristocrat and Caspar Good wood, a self made industrialist. She refuses both, the first because of the "system" he represents, whose traditional arrangements would prevent her free experimentation with life. She rejects the second because she considers him too coarse and insensitive to understand what she wants out of life. Finally she marries a Gilbert Osmond, Because he has, in Isabel's words, "no money, no name, no importance.....It is the total absence of these things that pleases me."Her choice is carried out in defiance of everything that constitutes "society", a choice that is characteristic of a romantic concept of freedom. She wants knowledge, enlightenment & independence, not wealth & position. Later I realizes that she had been tricked into the marriage for her money; Isabel suffers deeply when she realizes that her husband in unfaithful to her, that he is an intolerant egotist who detests his wife's original mind, he wishes her to be subservient to him in all things and even attempts to exploit her for her social connections.

The Naturalistic period, 1900-14

Naturalism extended the tradition of realism, aiming at an even more faithful representation of reality but without any moral judgment. The inspiration for the naturalistic movement was the principles of natural science, especially Darwinism. Characters of naturalistic literature typically illustrate the deterministic role of heredity and environment on human life, in other words, characters are joint victims of their instinctual selves and external sociological forces. The

influences on literary naturalism were the works of the French writer Emile Zola. The result was dark, tragic novels reminiscent of the works of Thomas Hardy. The main exponents of American Literary naturalism were Frank Norris, Stephen Crane & Theodore Dreiser.

The Modern Period, 1914-39

The era between the two World Wars, marked also by the trauma of the Great Depression beginning in 1929 (The crash of the stock market, fall of Wall Street) Literature reached an eminence rivaling that of the American Renaissance. There was a great deal of experimentation that flouted traditional conventions of art & culture and aimed to be "new", whether in subject, form or concept.

The rise of "modernism" owed greatly to the factors that made the era modern industrialization, rapid social change, advances in the sciences & the social sciences such as the theories of Darwinism, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche (extolled reason & science, fulminated against Christianity & announced the death of God), and James Frazer (saw) the correspondence between central Christian tenets & pagan myths & rituals. These thinkers questioned the certainties that supported traditional modes of social organization, religion & morality & also traditional ways of conceiving the human self. This intense questioning led to an accompanying sense of alienation. Modern works tended no longer to speak for a society or a people, but to be either individualistic or idiosyncratic on the one hand or broadly universal on the other.

But it was during this period that American Literature received international recognition and became an influential area of literature. Several major writers emerged, known till today as the American greats. All of them developed varied styles and fictional techniques of their own. The first person narrative either of the character himself/herself or some close observer became popular. Novelists like Dos Passos developed highly individual and unusual styles of presentation incorporating newspaper clippings, autobiography, biography into his fiction to paint a vast landscape of American culture during the first decades of the twentieth century. Faulkner used multiple points of view in *The Sound & the Fury* to give the reader a comprehensive picture of the events taking place.

The literature of this age was sub classed under various titles, the two main ones being the novels of the Jazz Age which refers to those works reflecting the flamboyant, pleasure-seeking decade-the 1920s. The most famous Jazz novelists was F.Scott Fitzgerald (1896- 1940), who was also

responsible for naming the period after a kind of music that was highly improvised and individualistic and used loud instruments like the trumpet and the saxophone.

The Lost Generation was the name given by Gertrude Stein to American writers of the decade following the end of World War 1. Disillusioned by their war experiences and alienated by the crassness of American culture & its puritanical repression, many of these writers became expatriates, moving either to London or Paris in their quest for a richer artistic & literary milieu & a freer way of life but many of them returned to America in the 30s. These writers include T.S.Eliot, Ezra Pound & GS herself, but the notable novelists were Ernest Hemingway who recalls his Paris days in *The Sun Also Rises* and F.Scott Fitzgerald who recounts them in *Tender is the Night*

We also have the novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement of Afro-American writers of the 1920s which includes poets like Langston Hughes and poet-novelists like Claude McKay & Jean Toomer. Generally militant, they wrote novels about the Black experience in America. Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) depicted street life in Harlem with frank depictions of sexuality and the night-life. It became a bestseller and had tremendous influence other black intellectuals. But W.E.B.Du Bois, the African civil rights scholar and activist said of it."for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath"

The story is told by Nick Carraway, Gatsby's next door neighbor, who like Fitzgerald himself, idolized the riches and glamour of the age but was uncomfortable with the materialism and lack of morality that went with it.

The story tells of the lavish parties that the wealthy Gatsby hosts in his mansion, where many of the guests are uninvited. Gatsby is a mysterious character and nobody knows either about his past or the source of his wealth. As time passes and Nick becomes more friendly with Gatsby, he finds out that Gatsby is in love with his cousin, Daisy who is already married to Tom Buchanan. Tom, for his part is having an affair with Myrtle, the wife of a garage owner. One night, there is an explosive quarrel between Tom & Gatsby, Tom accuses Gatsby of being a bootlegger and sends him & Daisy home in his car to prove that Daisy will not be unfaithful to him. On the way back, Daisy, who is driving knocks down and kills Myrtle, who is running out of her hose after a quarrel with her husband, Mad with anger, George Wilson, Myrtle's husband, promises to kill the man who has run over his wife. He goes to Tom's house & Tom reveals to him that it was Gatsby, Tom finds Gatsby in his swimming pool and shoots him, after which he kills himself.

After Gatsby's death, Nick tries to find people who will attend his funeral but nobody is ready to attend, not even his crooked business partners who are afraid that Gatsby has been killed by a rival. Finally, Nick tracks down G's father and finds out that Gatsby's real name was actually Gatz, Gatsby had given himself a new name so that his past would remain undiscovered. Finally only 3 people attend the funeral -Nick, Mr.Gatz and an anonymous party guest.

Ernest Hemingway's works are considered canons of modernist literature. He developed a distinctive style of writing characterized by economy and understatement. This means that the use of vocabulary is highly restrained (somebody who took the trouble to count said that his complete vocabulary consisted of only 5000 words) and there is absolutely no display of emotion.

Coming to the subject matter, H wrote of individuals standing alone confronting the most trying situations but conducting themselves with great courage and dignity. He called this quality in his heroes "Grace under pressure." He believed also that this quality could be best seen on the sports field and therefore many of his novels deal with the Spanish national Game of Bullfighting, where the matador's grace, skill and courage are highlighted. However, the novel for which he won the Nobel prize was "The Old Man and the Sea", a novel of deep sea fishing. Set in Cuba, the protagonist is an old fisherman who is alienated from his community because they believe he is unlucky, not having caught a fish for 84 days. The old man therefore decides to go it himself and spends 4 days and 3 nights on the sea alone, bearing the sun during the day and the intense cold during the night, his hands cut and bleeding from handling the ropes. He nets a fish, a marlin, but on the way back, his boat is attacked by sharks who eat the marlin. The old fisherman is described as Christlike in his tolerance of physical pain and disappointment and he never gives up hope. The end of the novel sees him thinking of planning out his next journey.

The Contemporary/ Post Modernist Period which dates from 1939 to the present The unimaginable horrors of World War II, especially the mass killing of Jews by the Nazi regime became the subject of several novels. One of my favorites is William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, (1979) in which Sophie, a beautiful survivor of the concentration camps of WWII tells of the secrets of the past, of the day she arrived at Auschwitz and was made to choose, by a sadistic doctor, which of her children, a son & a daughter, would immediately be put to death by gassing and which would be allowed to live on. She surrenders her daughter and this leaves her with a sense of guilt she can never overcome, Later, she attempts to seduce her boss, Rudolph Hoss, the commander of Auschwitz so that he son would be released from the camp and brought up as a German child. She fails in her attempts and never learns of her son's fate.

Joseph Heller's *Catch22* (1961) satirical novel about American servicemen during WW 11. The title has now become an idiom to indicate that there is no way out of a difficult situation. The novel follows Yossarian, a US army air force bombardier and a number of other members of a squadron based on an island near Italy. Yossarian struggles to retain his sanity and hopes to get a medical discharge by pretending to be insane. But all his attempts are thwarted by the bureaucracy who find even more complicated reasons for not letting him go. Their point of view is that it takes an insane man to fly dangerous missions, so if a fighter realizes that he is insane he really he c. Finally, the novel is about the insanity of those who create it and of this tragic content however, the novel is extremely the all-time bestsellers of America and has been one of

The 1950s was the period of the "Anti-establishment novel." Though the novel attacked all social institutions, their main characteristic was extreme sexual candour as the novels of Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Vladimir Nabokov. All kinds of sexual orientations and perversions are openly and boldly explored. Nabokov's work *Invitation to a Beheading* is a masterpiece, telling a story of pedophilia, the sexual attraction of an older man for a girl child. For many years after their publication, these books could only be bought under the counter, Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) is a novel of personal disgust at WWII but gives detailed descriptions of the sexual behaviour of the soldiers. Even today it is considered one of the most shockingly obscene novels in American Literature.

The 1960s was the period of the "Counterculture," characterized by rebellious youth movements. There was extreme opposition to the Vietnam war of 1955-75 (Prolonged effort by S. Viet & the US to prevent N & S Viet being united under communist leadership. Ho Chi Minh, the pop leader from N Viet was expected to win the elections but the S Viet leader, Ngo Dinh Diem refused to accept his leadership. At the height of the war, there were more than half a million American troops in Viet. There was huge opposition to the war in the US on moral & practical grounds and finally President Lyndon Johnson began a process of de-escalation. Finally in 1975, after a number of failed peace talks, the S surrendered to the N but the death toll of Americans were 58,000 men.)

A spew of books were published on the Vietnam war, the most notable being Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*. Set partly in the US & partly in Saigon, a story of institutional & individual corruption, mistrust & betrayal where all moral compasses are discarded and the individual is on his own. Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Send Me Home* (1973) is a novel of the moral ambiguity of fighting somebody else's war. Norman Mailer wrote about the repercussions of the Vietnam war in America and with this, he began writing in a new genre called "creative non-fiction"

also called "the New Journalism" or the "non-fiction novel. His *Armies of the Night* (1968) is subtitled "The Novel as History" and deals the Oct. 1967 Vietnam war rally in Washington, DC.

Bernard Malamud looks outward at social problems of rootlessness, infidelity, abuse, divorce and more but he believes in love as redemptive & sacrifice as uplifting *The Assistant* (1957) is a favorite novel in which the protagonist, Frank Alpine, first holds up a shop belonging to a Jew and later, in remorse comes back to run it for him. Soon he begins stealing from the till, justifying his actions by saying that he was bringing in profits. He then falls in love with the owner's daughter and consequent to this, decides to put the money back. While he is doing this, he is caught by the owner who thinks he is stealing the money and dismisses him. Afraid that he will lose his love due to the dismissal, he rapes her. After he leaves, the store is on the verge of closing down & the owner attempts suicide. While he is hospitalized, Frank returns to run the store.

Black novels exploring race identity social discrimination in America are another major category. The best known Black writers are Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Richard

Wright. Ralph Ellison addresses many of the social & intellectual issues of the Blacks, including the search for identity and place in society, racism and its alienating effect and the white American's perception of black sexuality. His most famous novel, *Invisible Man* (1952) is the story of an Afro-American who considers himself socially invisible in that he has to portray himself as a humble black stereotype to get on in white society. Every mistake that he makes is not a human mistake but typically one committed by a black man. But even when he joins Black groups, he is not allowed to take credit for any good that he does but to emphasize the Black brotherhood. Finally, he decides to live underground, in a manhole lighted by over a thousand bulbs powered through a stolen wire, symbolizing his need to find the truth far away from both Black & white communities.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* tells the story of a Black man so debased by racism, violence and debasement that he feels he has an identity only when he kills. The novel is a powerful statement about racial inequality and social injustice. Bigger (the protagonist) as Wright points out, is not guilty, he is merely a product of the society that formed him. His violence is the direct result of the conditions of his life. Among the women Black writers are Alice Walker and Toni Morrison both of whom consider the situation of the Black female. The black male may be powerless but the Black woman is more so, by virtue of her being both black & female. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is the story of utter powerlessness. Pecola is rejected, exploited and violated because she

is a child, black, poor and female. In the story. Morrison emphasises that it is not only white society that is responsible for the condition of the Blacks, the Blacks also act against themselves.

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