

American Literature and Culture in the Post-War Years

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Abstract

The brilliance and diversity of American writing since World War II are at once testimony to the ideals of inclusiveness that inform our civil culture and an intense exposure of our limitations. At once celebratory and feisty, argumentative and lyrical, our writers identify and express the living contradictions of our culture. Throughout the article that follow it emerges a collective portrait of a period and place marked by every conceivable fault and virtue, split by differences of wealth and position, by habits of outrage or praise, by ethnicity and race, by agendas of the left and right, by narrative realism and innovation, but nevertheless united, if by nothing else, by a sheer intensity of creative drive. The purpose of this article is to provide a guide through that creative ferment, describe its shaping ideas and the writers who represent the variety of its energies and achievements. Emily Dickinson's praise of that certain "Slant of light" that sharply exposes "internal difference, / Where the Meanings, are" underscores the power of "difference" to inspire. Out of the argument between the artist and business culture, between those on the margin and those in the mainstream, post-war United States culture has forged dynamic new fusions and combinations. The United States that emerges through our fiction, drama, music, and film is a rhetorical figure for modernity in all its disruption and progress. A nation whose cohesiveness relies on consent to and interpretation of the ideals of its founding documents has nourished an art animated by the power of those ideals to accommodate change and dissent, to provide strategies for the recognition and reconciliation of differences.

Keywords: American Literature, post-war period, polarization, internal difference, diversity

Introduction

The growth of American writing in the post-war period has been affected not only by sharply depicted polarizations, but also by the ability to sustain variety and dialogue in the constructions of art. That power animated Walt Whitman's quest for "the fusing explanation and tie – what the relation between the (radical, democratic) Me . . . and the (conservative) Not Me . . ." might be. Taken together, those competing urges are reflected in the power of American cultural ideals to legitimize dissent, to recognize and embrace both the innovative artist and the traditions art disrupts. Post-war art illustrates the prominence of an ever-greater

diversity of voices and perspectives. The construction of this work pays homage to that diversity in formulating the categories and dialogues shaping the consideration of post-war writing.

The United States undoubtedly contributed to the end of the World War II by the support given to the Allies. 1945 is the year of the end of the war but at the same time it is the beginning of the United States' domination almost on all fields on the international area. Before the World War II the cultural centre of the world was Paris – after the war it was New York. That happened mostly because of the intellectual emigrants from Europe, who strengthen intellectual position of the United States. The best evidence of the United States' domination in literature can be the number of literary Nobel Prizes. First was given to William Faulkner in 1949 and then to Ernest Hemingway in 1954, to John Steinbeck in 1962 and few more.

Major Trends and Themes after World War II

Because of the great development of American literature after 1945 it is hard to distinguish the most important theme, but I think that I should first write about post-modernist fiction. After the World War II writers started changing their way of writing from strict realism in American fiction to this post-modernist fiction, also known as 'irrealism' or 'fabulation'. One of the first postmodernist writers was William Burroughs. In his books he is presenting a science – fiction world, probably created under the influence of his drug and alcohol addiction. In my opinion one of the best-known writers of this literary genre was Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut had his own experiences connected with the war. In 1943 he was sent to Europe to fight on the war. A year later he was captured and taken to Dresden, where during the day he worked in a factory whereas nights he spent in old slaughterhouse. In February 1945 he was the witness of bombarding and these events were the main inspiration to write one of his best works 'Slaughterhouse-five, or The Children's Crusade'. This book, similarly to others, has the structure of the Bible – it is divided into numerous, short chapters. It is also full of grotesque characters and strange situations. In this novel Vonnegut combines the events that took place during the World War II, the bombing of Dresden, with some absurd and science fiction elements when he is meeting with Tralfamadorians. This book is showing the reader how huge and destructive is the power of war. We see a man that survived the War and his after-war life is quite successful, but in fact it is superficial. The huge human tragedy that he witnessed changed his attitude to life. He is escaping into created world in order to escape from cruel reality, from the world that he cannot understand. His book 'Breakfast of Champions or Goodbye Blue Monday' could be also called a science fiction novel. This is a story of two lonely men living in a created city. This book is a critique towards American way of life.

Years after the World War II are the years of great development of American drama. Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams are called the best dramatists of the 20th century. After the World War II writers started to show an individual character in a completely different way than this character used to be described in thirties. Now an individual is an 'alienated' character that does not belong to any group or society and this character's biggest problem is his loneliness. One of the Williams' characters complains that, "We're all of us sentenced to

solitary confinement inside our own skins – for life”. Arthur Miller is best known because of his cooperation with great theatre and film director Elia Kazari and of course because of his marriage with Marilyn Monroe. In his works, Arthur Miller concentrated on the life of the individual, who must face with some difficult decisions. Miller’s works touch on social and political themes. His best-known book ‘The Crucible’ is the author’s interpretation of the Hollywood events in 1950s concerning the searching of the communists. The other dramatist Tennessee Williams in his works concentrated mainly on showing sudden changes in American society in 1940s and 1950s. His works are full of eroticism and homosexual characters (he was also gay). The action of his works is usually placed on the South of the United States. One of his best-known works is ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’. The main character, Blanche Dubois, is a woman destroyed by life, that lives in a world of unreality, in which she is happy, “I don’t want realism...I want Magic! Yes, yes magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth, I tell what ought to be the truth”. All the Williams’ characters are afraid of the real life and of the destructive power of life. The way that they look at the world is quite different. Williams’ world is irrational whereas Miller’s world is quite rational, and all things happen for a reason.

The other important theme in the American literature is the literature of the fact. The writer that represents this trend the best is Truman Capote. He is famous mainly because of his two subtle and poetical works ‘Other Voices, Other Rooms’ and ‘The Grass Harp’. But undoubtedly his best-known masterpiece is *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*’ wrote in 1958. Truman Capote is the precursor of documentary novels. In 1966 he wrote ‘*In Cold Blood*’ – the first novel of this literary genre. In this novel he describes a bloody crime committed by two young people and their later execution.

Another important literary genre at those times was detective novels. Although it is said that the inventor and the father of the modern mystery was Edgar Allan Poe in fact detective novels started to develop from the 1920s through their golden age in 1950s. At those times these novels were printed as cheap books. People used to buy them, read them and usually after few hours they threw them away and that is why only few examples of the oldest detective novels survived. One of the most famous mystery writers was Mary Roberts Rinehard. All her stories are very similar – the action takes place in some old house and the main character; the detective is an intelligent lady. Rex Stout is also worth mentioning, when writing about the authors of the mystery stories. He created a well-known character Nero Wolfe, commonly compared with Sherlock Holmes. In 1950s Dashiell Hammett created a new kind of detective story. In Hammett’s books a detective is no longer a brilliant hero but a common person. Crimes occur in all parts of the society and even a detective must act as a gangster in some situations to solve the mystery. Hammett’s most famous detective character is Sam Spade, played by Humphrey Bogard in a famous movie ‘*Maltese Falcon*’. Also, another writer, Raymond Chandler, tried to create a similar character and he created Philip Marlowe. In fact, Marlowe is not exactly like Sam Spade as he is more romantic and idealistic.

Regarding the war novel specifically, there was a literary explosion in America during the post–World War II era. Some of the best known of the works produced included Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). The *Moviegoer* (1962), by Southern

author Walker Percy, winner of the National Book Award, was his attempt at exploring ‘the dislocation of man in the modern age.’

In contrast, John Updike approached American life from a more reflective but no less subversive perspective. His 1960 novel *Run*, the first of four chronicling the rising and falling fortunes of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom over the course of four decades against the backdrop of the major events of the second half of the 20th century, broke new ground on its release in its characterization and detail of the American middle class and frank discussion of taboo topics such as adultery. Notable among Updike's characteristic innovations was his use of present-tense narration, his rich, stylized language, and his attention to sensual detail. His work is also deeply imbued with Christian themes. The two final instalments of the Rabbit series, *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), were both awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Other notable works include the Henry Bech novels (1970–98), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984), *Roger's Version* (1986) and *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), which literary critic Michiko Kakutani called “arguably his finest.”

In the literature after World War II we can also find novels of manners, usually with philosophical message of how to be happy in life and that all people should be surrounded by beloved people. The best example of the writer of this literary genre is William Wharton. His best-known novel is ‘*Birdy*’, which is mainly appreciated for the psychological layer and the creation of the main character. For this novel Wharton was given a National Book Award.

Conclusion

As I wrote at the beginning of this article after World War II United States started to develop culturally, mainly because of the emigrants from Eastern Europe. It is especially well seen in the number and the extend of the literary genres used by writers. The most innovative was in my opinion the fact that writers started to write fiction, the fact that they decided to resign from complete realism in their works. The American literature after 1945 is more various than it has been ever before. The sheer variety of writing in the post-war United States pays tribute to the endless strength of human creativity. It expresses in its multiplicity of forms and voices a full spectrum of experiences. With roots of heritage extending around the world, post-war writing in the United States flourishes as a bountiful art nourished by diversity. It joins in serving and contributing to a global ideal: the power of art to inspire recognitions and dialogues across cultures.

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