

Objectives:

- Gaining knowledge and understanding of African American Literature

Overview of African American Literature

Introduction

African American literature traces its beginnings to the latter half of the 18th century when the African American population was still an enslaved one. Slaves were viewed as subhuman and incapable of mastering “the arts and sciences.” Their inferiority was even reinforced by prominent white philosophers of the time, like David Hume and Immanuel Kant. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie McKay note in their introduction to *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Hume suspected “negroes . . . to be naturally inferior to the whites” with no “ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences” (xl). However, as Gates and McKay further note, “African American slaves, remarkably, sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American belletristic tradition” (xxxvii). The main goal of early African American writing was to demonstrate that they could create literature that rivaled or surpassed that of the white community, proving African Americans to be “full and equal members” of society (xxxviii).

Even after African Americans began producing a body of creative literature, they still faced criticism from prominent members of white society. Thomas Jefferson, for example, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), made disparaging remarks about the poems of the first published African American female poet, Phillis Wheatley: “Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry. . . . Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet” (qtd. xl-xli). Moreover, African American writers struggled for recognition as authors. Wheatley, for example, had to go to court in Boston in 1761 to prove that she was the author of her poems (xli). Unfortunately, having the court verify her authorship did not help because Boston printers continued to be dubious. Therefore, she had to get her work published in London first.

Since Wheatley’s appearance on the literary scene, African American writers have continued the struggle to define themselves, their craft, and their culture, and to face resistance from a predominantly white reading public. Even as late as 1970, at Kent State University, a well-known scholar and member of a thesis committee resigned when Ralph Ellison became an approved dissertation topic. The dissenting member stated that Ellison was not a literary heavyweight and that to focus an entire dissertation on him would be like addressing the “wings of a gnat” (qtd. xliii). Only in recent years have we encountered mainstream acceptance of African American authors, such as poet Maya Angelou, who spoke at President

Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993, or Toni Morrison, who won a Nobel Prize for literature in 1993 (xlii-xliii).

Despite the rising status of African American literature, black authors have shared a common burden over time, that of representing not only themselves but the African American race as well. Maintaining the position of what it means to be black in America allowed authors to establish an African American identity that transcended the individual. By cultivating what Carter G. Woodson referred to as “the public Negro mind” (qtd. xlv), authors were able to prove the intellectual potential of blacks.

In sum, African American history and literature are intrinsically connected. African American literature, as a genre, “testified against [African slaves’] captors,” “bore witness to the urge to be free and literate, [and] ... embraced the European Enlightenment’s dream of reason and the American Enlightenment’s dream of civil liberty” (xxxvii). This growing body of work meant that the African was indeed human and should not be enslaved. African Americans today continue to write in an effort to honor and acknowledge that legacy. The “black voice” (xlv) that Wheatley aimed to unearth is the same voice that is present in the works of artists like Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison. Despite changes in American culture and the passage of time, the themes that were present in the 18th century slave writings continue to be explored and discussed in contemporary works.

The Vernacular Tradition

Oral traditions exert a strong influence on African American culture and literature in particular. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* defines the vernacular as that which “refers to the church songs, blues, ballads, sermons, stories, and ... hip hop songs that are part of the oral, not primarily the literate (or written-down) tradition of black expression” (3). Defining the scope of African American vernacular as well as its specific aspects has generated much discussion and debate. One major quality of the vernacular is its disregard for the rules of grammar and high style. Zora Neale Hurston, in her “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), describes African American vernacular as “angular” and “asymmetrical. Subject matter often involves facing the troubles and hardships of life and the possibility of overcoming them (6). Gates points out the competitive and subversive nature of the vernacular, using the term “signifying.” In his argument, writers like Toni Morrison signify by drawing on past traditions while reinventing them for their own purpose (7)—itself the art of the vernacular.

African American vernacular dates back to the oral and musical traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Early anthologies of black literature, such as *The New Negro* (1925) and *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931), discuss the importance of black songs and stories to many black authors, especially poets. In the late 1930s, there was an attempt not only to imitate vernacular, but also to improve upon it. Authors such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison invited authors to do for black literature what T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein did for white—that is, to capture the essence of vernacular, enrich it, and turn it into

something new. The Black Arts Movement reflected this interest in the vernacular in its (re)discovery of Hurston, Hughes, and Wright.

The Literature of Slavery and Freedom, 1746-1865

Early African American authors such as Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, David Walker, and James M. Whitfield “challenged the dominant culture’s attempt to segregate the religious from the political, the spirit from the flesh” (152). Their literature was an instrument used to voice the injustices they experienced and observed, and written language—especially the slave narrative—was a valuable tool for black authors who strove to end slavery through the dissemination of antislavery propaganda throughout the North and South. Ideals from the Bible along with America’s most sacred, prized documents and songs—the U.S. Constitution and “America the Beautiful,” to name two—were used by African American writers to prove the hypocritical standards, behaviors, and beliefs white Americans exhibited to African Americans (152-153). With regard to spirituality, writers like Wheatley and Equiano appealed to their readers to heed the Christian message of brotherhood regardless of race or ethnicity (151). Authors such as Walker and Whitfield pointed out the irony that white Americans, who fought and struggled against tyranny, subsequently imposed a tyrannical hold on African Americans (152). The justifications that white Americans used to enforce slavery—that blacks were subhuman, unintelligent, pagan, and immoral—were obstacles that early African American writers sought to disprove. The writings of early African American writers proved that blacks were capable of “literary expression” and thus possessed “civilized mind[s]” (152).

Arising out of these conditions, beginning in the 1830s the fugitive slave narrative emerged as a popular literary form. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was published after Nat Turner was hanged for leading a bloody uprising against white slave owners in Southampton, Virginia, in 1831, and was the most widely read African American personal narrative of its day. Although Turner’s revolt and *Confessions* led to even more repressive conditions for slaves, slave narratives continued to dominate the black literary landscape and counted among its leading figures Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano, and William Wells Brown (158-159). In 1845, Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* offered a significant break from tradition by not allowing his story to be written, transcribed, or edited by a white supporter as was often the practice during the time (159). “Written by Himself” marked the beginning of a show of independence and self-reliance that had not been evident in the black literary community before. The act showed that a black person could produce eloquent prose without the assistance of a white sponsor and could take part in the abolitionist press on his or her own terms. The era also saw the emergence of black women slave narrators such as Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. These authors gave new dimension to African American literature, bringing a black woman’s insight and perspective to the forefront in a way that male authors had previously failed to do (159-160).

While the slave narrative was by far the most common form of African American literature, fiction was also important, with the period between 1850 and 1860 being known as

“the first African American literary renaissance” (160). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published in 1852, and William Wells Brown is credited with publishing the first full-length African American novel, *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1853), and travel book during this time as well. What’s more, Samuel Delaney offered readers “the first black nationalist culture hero in African American literature” in his novel *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1859), while Frances E.W. Harper gave readers the first short story in African American literature, “The Two Offers” (1859) (159-160). Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (ca. 1853-1861), Julia C. Collins’s *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride* (1865), and Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) vie for the honor of being the first novel published by an African American woman.

Literature, whether autobiography, fiction, or journalism, was a key weapon in combating slavery during America’s antebellum era. Literature spoke for millions of African Americans who did not have a voice. Without the contributions of black authors such as Douglass, Brown, Jacobs, and others, the unjust realities of slavery might well have been kept in silence.

Literature of the Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance, 1865-1919

Following the Civil War, many Americans struggled to adjust to the aftermath of slavery and the influx of immigrants to the United States. Americans were trying to decide how best to achieve a greater and better United States of America that included equal rights for freed slaves, women, Native Americans, and recent immigrants (541-542). Despite the pressing need to make the nation whole—and despite the passage of important laws to protect African Americans—black people faced new oppressions and discriminations, problems that made the sustenance of an African American literary presence particularly difficult.

After the abolition of slavery, the Republicans passed the Reconstruction Act in 1867 to protect freed slaves from the white supremacist ideologies and policies being enacted in the former Confederacy. The act also established the Freedmen’s Bureau, a federal agency that, in addition to other efforts, opened 4,000 schools—including Fisk, Morehouse, Howard, Atlanta, Talladega, and Hampton— between 1865 and 1870 to help educate the newly freed slaves (544). From 1865 to 1870, the Reconstruction Congress also passed the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments (1870). Unfortunately the newly passed legislation making slavery illegal, establishing equal protection under the law for African Americans, and enfranchising black men was not enforced throughout all parts of the states, and the lives of many freed slaves differed little from when they were enslaved.

In 1877, the Democrats regained power, and they did very little to protect the rights of the freed slaves. African Americans were then assaulted by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. These violent acts and forms of oppressions were supported by the Jim Crow laws, which legalized segregation and racism. The decrease in rights for African Americans was also impacted by the fact that many abolitionists, though they condemned slavery, did not believe

in equal rights for blacks (544). Furthermore, the deaths and illnesses of influential African American leaders such as Fredrick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Frances E.W. Harper cost blacks important national voices, losses that hampered the fight for equality (545).

Although African Americans continued to contribute much to the progress of the United States during this time, it was a time of disappointment, discrimination, and danger. For example, historian John Hope Franklin notes that more than 2,500 lynchings, mostly of blacks, occurred in the South in the last two decades of the 19th century (547). Despite this dire period in African American history, many black authors were still able to publish their work in magazines, newspapers, and occasionally through an established press (551-552). African American literature was marked by tales of overcoming trials and hardships while demonstrating the capabilities of African Americans as authors despite difficulties being published. Because African American authors had more difficulty getting their work published, many turned to the African American press, an institution heavily reliant on African American church leaders. Through presses such as the National Baptist Publishing Company, many writers published songs, poems, fiction, and autobiographies (554).

In slavery, African Americans overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to survive. During Reconstruction, former slaves drew on their past as motivation to overcome the current injustices which they suffered as free men and women and to inspire others to do the same. Whites could put up a wall, but blacks would climb over it again and again. They demonstrated perseverance in their lives and in their writing.

Harlem Renaissance, 1919-1940 :

“Harlem Renaissance, 1919-1940” The 1920s in Harlem, New York, as well as in other northern metropolises, was blooming with African American creativity. This era juxtaposed the poverty and racism African Americans faced with avant-garde advances in music, dance, art, and literature (953). Although the exact origin of this artistic resurgence is unknown, many believe that New York City enticed frustrated African Americans who were fleeing from the segregation and violence of the South. In search of a better life that included quality housing and decent wages in the industrial factories, African Americans migrated in droves. The “Great Migration” exponentially enlarged black communities across the North, creating a bigger market for black culture. Jazz and blues, the black music of the South, came to the North with the migrants and were played in Harlem’s nightclubs and hotspots. At the same time, whites were becoming increasingly fascinated by black culture. As all Americans grew more interested in African American culture, Harlem was dubbed “the Negro capital of the world” by James Weldon Johnson (954-955).

Alongside newly established cultural and political organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, African Americans worked hard for cultural awakening. Writers for periodicals like *The Messenger*, *Opportunity*, and *Negro World* did their

part to uplift black Americans and develop literary and artistic traditions in which African Americans could take pride. One breakthrough in African American history came in the form of a white writer, Ridgely Torrence, who wrote a series of plays entitled *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre*. These plays were the first to ignore the stereotypical characterizations of black Americans and to depict them as people with complex human emotions (955). Many writers followed suit, including Johnson. The author of the avant-garde *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) encouraged black writers to extricate themselves from the stereotypes that had imprisoned African American literature for years. In Johnson's important anthology, *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), writers like Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, who later would lead the movement, were showcased (956).

Both Hughes and Cullen believed that black writers should stay away from too much focus on "the political constraints that an older generation" (959) had emphasized.

Although it ended with the advent of the Great Depression, the Harlem Renaissance was a remarkable time when African American artists created positive and memorable standards in all the arts (961). Challenging white paternalism and racism, African-American artists and intellectuals snubbed mere imitation of the styles of Europeans and white Americans and instead celebrated black pride and creativity. Declaring their freedom to express themselves as artists and intellectuals, they explored their identities as black Americans, celebrating the black culture that had emerged out of slavery and their cultural ties to Africa. The images created during the Harlem Renaissance and represented African American culture served as inspiration and comfort to the black artists that succeeded the movement.

Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, 1940-1960

Many literary historians use the terms realism, naturalism and modernism to categorize the various writings produced during this time. "Realism" is defined as the "faithful reproduction" of reality while naturalism refers to the "franker, harsher treatment of that reality" (1356). Modernism, at its most basic level, denotes "a break with purely representational aesthetics, with the familiar functions of language and conventions of form" (1356). Before this time period, particularly during the 1930s, many black writers focused on the rural South still imprisoned by Jim Crow and racist violence. Now authors took a different approach with their writing, and it was clearly very northern and urban. Cities like Chicago, Boston, and New York served as settings for much of this new writing.

This period of writing created a rift in the African American literary circle. While the Harlem Renaissance had celebrated blackness in an age of debilitating segregation, mid-century writers wrestled with the production of art in an era moving toward desegregation—an era when black writing, many believed, could not disengage itself from politics. Many literary historians and critics credit Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) with setting the tone of this period. They assert that Wright's book changed American culture and African American writing. Wright himself was critical of the African American writing of the past, especially the Harlem

Renaissance. He believed that some black writers were more concerned with acceptance and doing what white America wanted them to do instead of social protest. Other writers of the time also voiced protest. William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941), examined the Great Migration from the South to the North after World War I. The novel was deemed one of the most intricate looks at the exploitation of black American workers in northern steel mills. Chester Himes, in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), illuminated the animosity an educated, northern-born black man faces from lower-class, southern-born whites as they struggle to work together in a Los Angeles shipyard at the height of World War II (1945-1949).

Even though much of the writing of this time was proletarian in nature and sought to raise social consciousness, many writers who grew up and lived during the Depression had an "integrationist" attitude and started writing on nonracial subjects. Zora Neale Hurston's final novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), was labeled as "non-Negro" because its characters are white and its setting is rural. Others, like James Baldwin, wrote essays attacking the protest form of writing. It was not until Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) that many critics believed African American writers were able to "liberate" themselves from naturalism and the protest narrative (1360). In writing *Invisible Man*, Ellison argued that his literary style was not simply influenced by other notable African American writers such as Wright and Hughes, but also by prominent white authors such as T.S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway. Because of his admitted influence by the "Western modernist tradition," Ellison received harsh criticism from other African American writers for "failing to understand that 'plight and protest' ... 'are inseparable from [Negro] experience'" (1361). Ellison combated these attacks by stating, "I am a human being, not just the black successor to Richard Wright" (1362). In a similar vein, the poetry of the time dramatizes the tensions. Many African American writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden combined technical skills formed in the modernist tradition with the themes of protest (1364). As the 1960s began, more African American writers answered a resounding "No!" to his corollary question, whether "it [shall] continue begging the question of the Negroes' humanity" and a resounding "Yes!" to Wright's question whether "'Negro writing [shall] be for the Negro masses, moulding the lives and consciousnesses of those masses toward new goals'" (qtd. 1368).

The literary conflict that arose during this period of history was engendered by the oppressive relationship between African Americans and European Americans, a relationship whose histories and realities emerge in today's multiracial classrooms. The conflict highlights the animosity that some feel toward anything, literature included, that identifies or affiliates with the white majority. Educational researcher Patrick Finn echoes this idea in *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest* (1999). Finn states that many African Americans associate developing traits of the white majority as "adopting a characteristic of the enemy" (46). Therefore, prominent African American writers who implement traits of prominent white writers into their poems and prose get labeled as traitors. Some see this assimilation as a rejection of their own culture and criticize those who veer too far into the already paved road of literary tradition. Likewise, some teachers believe that teaching African American students the literature and speech of the white majority would

oppress them further. However, educational researcher Lisa Delpit argues that minority students must be exposed to the language of the majority in order to compete with them and have access to the same economic opportunities. This is precisely what writers such as Ellison and Brooks (winners of the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize, respectively) have exhibited in their works—a marriage of culture and convention. Their writings encompass the strength and pride of African Americans while embracing the style and technique of the distinguished literary figures of their time.

The Black Arts Era, 1960-1975

The Black Arts Movement came out of the turbulent 1960s when social commotion existed both at home and abroad. On the one hand were the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power agitation, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., President John F. Kennedy, and Malcolm X; on the other hand, the Vietnam War and problems with Cuba. The Black Arts Movement spawned writers who encouraged social revolution, even by violent means. There is perhaps no better example of this violent tone in black literature than these lines from Amiri Baraka's signature poem, "Black Art" (1969): "We want 'poems that kill.' / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot" (ll. 19-20). The Black Arts Movement set the tone for a new era in the lives of many African Americans. The main aim for African American writers was to write literature that enthroned blackness (1367). Writers turned their pens into swords to portray the injustices against the African American race and called for African Americans to unite as a strong force against white supremacy.

In the Black Arts movement, it is essential to note several important figures. Fannie Lou Hamer, co-founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, was an "unschooled" leader in the Black Arts Movement. Prominent and powerful poets Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, and Quincy Troupe found expressive poetry as the best way to communicate a political message to an African American audience (1837-1838).

One way to distinguish the Black Arts Movement from African American artistic and literary production before 1960 is in the different orientation works have toward both Africa and America (1844). Before 1960, black artists were not focused on Africa as a place of origin. After 1960, black artists wanted an original aesthetic that emphasized black personhood as different from that of white personhood. Africa often served as the source of inspiration for these artists. African Americans celebrated "Afrocentricity" by showing African pride through poetry, drama, and fiction, as well as through traditional African clothing and "Afro hairstyle[s]" (1843).

During the Black Arts Movement, writers recuperated the vernacular of the black community (1840-1841). Hailing Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, who, like their artistic ancestors, wrote using black vernacular and developed themes of spiritual and political liberation, the leading voices of the Black Arts Movement were interested in building a black audience, not in pandering to a white audience. They found support in the proliferation of new

publishing companies and periodicals that focused on the black experience. Established publishing companies began pulling from their archives out-of-print works by African American authors (1844-1845). The Black Arts Movement also was strengthened by the advent of black studies in American universities. There were now university-trained scholars reading, interpreting, and teaching works by African American artists (1847).

The Black Arts Movement would prove to be the provocative starting point for a new way of being considered an African American. The year 1975 is an arbitrary endpoint for the Black Arts Movement whose aesthetic and accompanying themes continue beyond 1975. Any black artist who, through the “construction of hybrid genres, mythic landscapes, vernacular styles, and revised genealogies of the Americas” (1849), is finding innovative ways to explore issues within the African American community follows in the footsteps of the Black Arts Movement.

African American Literature after 1975 :

By the close of the 20th century, African American culture was represented in literature, theater, television, and film. In the 1990s, Toni Morrison became a Nobel laureate and August Wilson won a second Pulitzer Prize in drama for *The Piano Lesson*. Writers of this period produced work that was “determined to cure what Morrison deemed the ‘national amnesia’ around the history of slavery” (2130), and slave narratives became a part of the American canon. Other African American authors reshaping the canon included Pulitzer Prize winners such as Rita Dove and Yusef Komunyakaa in poetry, Charles Johnson and John Edgar Wideman in fiction, Ntozake Shange and George Wolfe in theater, and Alice Walker in fiction and nonfiction. These writers produced work distinguished by:

- (1) “the acknowledgement of the multiplicity of African American identities;
- (2) “a renewed interest in history, as writers imagine the psychological and spiritual lives of African Americans during slavery and segregation;
- (3) “the emergence of a community of black women writing;
- (4) “a continuing exploration of music and other forms of vernacular culture as springboards for literary innovation and theoretical analysis; and
- (5) “the influence of African American literary scholarship.”

Ultimately, the African American renaissance of the late 20th century grapples with the diversity of the African American experience. Inspired by their literary forefathers and foremothers, contemporary African American authors, while innovative in their own respective ways, echo the strife and raw emotion expressed by their predecessors. Alice Walker, for instance, comments that *The Color Purple* (1982) is her “‘love letter to Zora [Neale Hurston]’”. Gathering inspiration from those who came before them, African American authors of the contemporary generation frequently engage in scholarship, learning from the past in their writings while simultaneously enriching it for future generations.

Thus, present-day authors raise searching questions about African American identity. Their work reexamines racism and allows readers to view its social, economic, and political ramifications. Slavery, though abolished in the nineteenth century, is not an ideological construct barred from the American consciousness. Additionally, issues as recently as the 1980s and 90s were “divided substantially along racial lines,” most notably the reactions to the O.J. Simpson trial (2134). African American society, as a whole, has progressed fruitfully over the past few decades, and the voices of African Americans are finally being heard.