

A New Historical Identification Of The Influence Of National Political Situation On American Literature

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Abstract

American literature manifests the experience of being a part of America and the current political scenario of every period makes the most part of this experience. The influence of the prevalent political, social, economic conditions can be recognized and traced throughout the history of American literature. Through the lens of New Historicism which advocates a close scrutiny of the historical and cultural background of every piece of literature, the current research provides a comprehensive outline of significant literary works of every era. The research-based profiling of literature starts from the early seventeenth century, the period of colonization in America recorded to be, "The Colonial and Early National Period." The research moves ahead and covers the period of increased nationalism, its criticism and then the advent of transcendentalism that concerned itself with nascent political debates greatly. From there the genre of social reform writing is covered that emerged in the antebellum period and the literary criticism on political corruption, immigration and slavery. Moving forward the greatest economic crisis in the history of America, The Great Depression's influence on the production of naturalistic novels is studied. The 1900s witnessed the advent of modernism in American literature and it featured harsh commentary on political discourse of state-backed racism, political terrorism and the 'melting pot' America. The postmodern American literature mostly has prompts of politically fueled literary movements and incorporates criticism of governmental policies around ending social stigmas and failures of the American government.

Keywords: American literature; New Historicism; social reform; political discourse; tradition

Introduction:

American literature is an imprint of the evolution of diverse cultural and ethnic traditions that American values are made up of. The early American literary tradition was created in the image of very well-established literary traditions of Europe, particularly England. Therefore the literature of the Puritan age consists of devotional and religious topics that were written to seek the truth of the spirit. Next to this was the Age of Reason when the euphoria of nationalism took over the American nation and literary figures. The literature that was produced advocated for a rejection of British authority over literary styles and topics. The rejection of British literary traditions marked the start of American authors' journey towards a period of exploration of creative potential that was unique to American literature. From there on, the nineteenth-century literature featured snippets from American colonial and social history. The poet and short story writer, Edgar Allan Poe and transcendentalists such as Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman and Emily Dickinson fueled the fervor of American nationalism by addressing national politics and social issues of the American nation. With a freshly bestowed self-confidence, novelists Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway created fictional narratives and characters that were distinctly American in their essence and revolved around themes that were American. American literature foregrounds the characters interwoven into the fabric of American history and society. The central idea of this inspiration is that all produced works of literature are influenced by a scenario or a predecessor text as literature is a record of the world. This creates a general relationship between the body of knowledge whether it is in the form of texts or ideals. This linkage of influence has been studied by literary critics and theorized as theories of influence. "The metaphor of influence says that literary history is like the natural flow of water and that there is a unidirectional 'current' or relationship between an anterior text and a posterior text" (Morgan, 1989). Therefore, it is very much possible to recognize a recurrent pattern of style, ideas or politics in a body of literature of a certain era, nationality or civilization. American literature has always featured and continues to do so in the postmodern era the influence of literary movements inspired by current political fervor, societal issues, humanity crisis or historical and scientific discoveries. Human rights and the struggle for it has been a part and parcel of American politics as the footstone of the establishment of the land of America was the rights of man and this revolutionary idea has collided with the stigma of slavery since its birth. Next to racism, the influence of capitalism on the American literary canon has been so profound that the texts that inculcate the success of the American Dream are considered 'sacred texts' and generations live by them. American literature has always mirrored the cultural influences of its society and every literary period has witnessed texts that were either written in advocacy or condemnation of a certain social norm. In this sense, American society in terms of its taboos, norms and values have always been the center of attention of American poets and authors and this recurrent theme has been dealt with by various literary figures of every period in their distinct styles. The current research endeavors to identify the influence of national political situations on the literature of every era after providing

a review of the literature that discusses all the kinds of influence that American literature manifests.

Literature Review

The study and outlining of the evolution of American literature is an extensively researched topic in scholastic studies where it has been studied from diverse perspectives. The roots of American literary tradition are embedded into the European literary traditions in British, French, Russian, German, Italian and Greek literature. Therefore, American literature is studied in terms of being inspired by diverse ethnic influences in order to “explain the intra- and inter- literary relationships between American and English writers as well as among American writers themselves” (Yousef, 2006). American literature has developed a distinct literary style that is an amalgamation and one such aspect is highlighted in *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture* (2003). The publication identifies the influence of the theory of evolution and particularly the idea of Eugenics perpetrated through American literature in a quite imperceptible way. America’s social history has been stained greatly by its xenophobic and elitist tendencies that were propagated by “white men from privileged class” (Cuddy, 2003). Taking a view upon the problematic aspects in the evolution of American literary history, another influential aspect that emerges is of ‘race’ that has been persistent in all eras of American literature. Even though American race culture has never been able to distinguish itself from the indigenous and Black race, still American literature has been greatly shaped by racism as the book *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993) entails. The study has taken a deep dive into American culture, literature and politics to identify the role of diversity of races in shaping the American nation and subsequently its influence upon American literature (Sundquist, 1993). American literature has always mirrored the cultural influences, therefore scholars have identified the presence of puritan influence in American literature they state “that when the entire system of thought and life which was New England Puritanism is faithfully comprehended, its pervasive presence in American literature and culture becomes apparent” (Elliott, 1980). This kind of influence of conservative Christian school of thought revolves around the study of religious, political and speech liberty. The treatment of society as a receptacle of human folly and as a correspondent of pitfalls of human nature was explored extensively in the period of realism in American literature. As the research article, *Social Themes in American Realism* records, “From the 1890s to the present, American realistic novels have tried to tell something of the story of the cost of American civilization in terms of human and personal consequences” (Farrell, 1946). The settings of realistic novels were of war and themes were of development of awareness in the protagonist, all that is distinct as well as common to American fiction. The topic of the social conditions available to humanity and the influence of capitalistic ideals of success is very much evident in the realist novels. The story of individualism is entwined with the notion of climbing the social

ladder and “American literary canon contributes to defining, constructing, and sustaining the basic principles of the American dream, in which each individual has the unlimited opportunities to achieve personal freedom and prosperity (Izaguirre, 2014). This obsession of the American nation with capital gains can be traced in taking a historical perspective upon the evolution of American literature. The commercialization of daily life by the constant involvement of corporate brands of service and consumer industry has its influence upon popular American literature. As commercial advertisement and social media continue to affect language and literature, critics are concerned about the quality of literature produced in the United States in the post-war era. The commercial area gets diffused into non-commercial territory i.e. literature, therefore, “the brands most frequently mentioned in the texts of the popular literature in the postwar era represent products high on the psychological dimension of value expressiveness” (Friedman, 1985). The need for incorporating commercial means into American literature because advertising agencies appeal to masses of every age, gender and origin. As America is a ‘melting pot’ land, it is formed of diverse cultures, ethnicities and traditions. The current situation of diversity is not only due to the immigrants from all over the world but the presence of multiple kinds of nations to whom the American nation can trace its ancestry to. This plethora of diversity has touched American literature as well as it has been the recipient of literary styles and traditions from various nations and eras. The expressionistic drama in American literature, crafted and mastered by the dramatist Eugene O’Neill has been supervised by “the influence of Continental expressionistic drama and dramatists (Blackburn, 1941). This claim is backed by O’Neill’s acknowledgement of August Strindberg, the father of expressionism’s indebtedness to his craft. In a similar way, J. T. Reid’s Indian influences in American literature and thought (1965) documents the incorporation of ancient Indian civilization and mythology into American literature that has been interpreted both in the terms of exoticization of the other and the dehumanization of the orient. This interweaving of ancient cytology’s symbols in the American literature is not limited to Indian civilization; rather the occurrence of Egyptian Hieroglyphics has been traced in American Renaissance literature. The nineteenth-century American writers had a keen interest in symbolism and Egyptian mythic symbols left a great imprint upon the classic works of American authors such as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville (Irwin, 1974). The nineteenth-century American is a great record of the discoveries that were being made, ranging from the excavation of ancient Egyptian tombs to the groundbreaking discoveries in the field of medical science. Very much into the nineteenth century, the nervous system in the human body had not been studied wholly thus leaving grounds open to fantastical speculations and garnering public interest. The nervous system became the source of understanding a possible explanation for the happenings inside the human mind, body and through it, the historical world. American writers “used the nerves as a metaphor to re-imagine the

role of the self-amidst political, social and religious tumults, including debates about slavery and the revivals of the Second Great Awakening” (Murison, 2011).

Research methodology

The theoretical framework was selected for the current research is “New Historicism” which has been called “the textuality of history and the historicity of texts.” Therefore the research proceeded by outlining the historical and political contexts behind the literary works produced in American literature. The qualitative research has been carried on through textual analysis of the selected literary works from distinct literary periods that manifest influence of political and social scenarios on American literature.

Textual analysis

The history of American literature can be traced down to four hundred years in which every literary work has been an image of American history. In order to dilute down the literary trends and movements of four centuries, the whole body of literary works has been divided into five distinct periods that are marked by certain characteristics unique to every period. Chronologically, the earliest piece of American literature was produced in the early 1600s, the 17th century that has been named “The Colonial and Early National Period.” The literary works of the said periods mostly deal with the greatest political phenomenon of American history, colonialism. A great deal of literature is a record of the colonial experiences of the European settlers in North America during the 1600s. John Smith, the earliest British explorer and the founder of the Jamestown colony has written several records of his experiences with the indigenous tribes. The non-fiction books that he produces are *A Description of New England* (1616), *the Map of Virginia with a Description of the Country*(McCary, 2003); *The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624)(Street, 2016) and many others. As the biggest political reality of Smith’s literary time period was colonialism therefore nearly all of his works are a product of colonialism and the associated ramifications. Smith’s account of the young native girl, Pocahontas and her role in saving his life and developing friendly relations among the natives and the settlers is also a link in the chain of colonialism and the resulting literature.

“The Colonial and Early National Period ” had been commenced since the start of the 1600s and continued till the 1800s but in 1776 America declared its absolute independence which had a major influence upon the literature produced following. Alexander Hamilton published *The Federalist Papers* (1787)(Hamilton, Madison, & Jay, 2009) which are a major insight into the political situation and also played a role in shaping future politics. While working with the lens of New Historicism it is necessary to look at the political context of America. In 1792, Hugh Henry Brackenridge wrote the satirical novel *Modern Chivalry* (Brackenridge, 2009)which portrays the follies of American democracy. The novel also became the source of the idea that fiction can be “an ideal mode for carrying on political debate” (THOMAS, 2015). Brackenridge counters Republican print culture and portrays the intensifying of conflicts between

competing regional and critical groups by criticizing the political discourse of the classical Republic. Modern chivalry not only reflects the political context of its time but also sets the genre of the novel as a creator of discourse about what was prevalent in the political public affair in early America (THOMAS, 2015). Another dominant political discourse of the era was Afro-American racism, slavery and the contrasting stances on its abolition among states. Therefore, Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative* (1789) (Equiano, 2001) is a significant record of the political contention and the surrounding debates. Working with the lens of New Historicism it is necessary to look at the cultural and political context that was surrounding which also includes the political literature that was being produced at the time. The 1780s witnessed a surge in the publication of racist and pro-slavery political pamphlets that were meant to challenge the abolitionist narrative of James Ramsay. These pamphlets depicted Africans as savage and uncivilized individuals for whom the slave trade has been beneficial for bringing them into civilized Americas. Equiano managed to highlight the debilitating and inhumane circumstances of slavery and presented a progressive image of Africa by writing about his Igbo childhood and battled White supremacy by resisting the idea of essential race (Boulukos, 2007).

The 1800s saw a diversion from the British literary tradition and forms that had been consistently present in the earlier American literature and from there on quintessential literature started to be produced. This change in focus paved the way for literary chauvinism in the name of newly found nationalism which was countered by the most significant poet of American Romanticism, Edgar Allan Poe. Poe spent a larger portion of his life in Britain which made him endorse the idea of true nationalism and defy the blind faith in European cultural norms and literary traditions. Poe often criticized the foibles of the American Dream and the political consequences of it, he wrote, "We have no aristocracy of blood, and having therefore as a natural, and indeed as an inevitable thing, fashioned for ourselves an aristocracy of dollars" (Poe, 2015). He contested the oppressive idea of political aristocracy and called it "an evil growing out of our republican institutions" that was becoming nascent due to a well-formed democratic republic. Mellonta Tauta (Wang, 2022) an 1849 short story of Poe contains a remark that is a biting commentary upon the evils of democracy, "As for republicanism, no analogy could be found for it upon the face of the earth [...] that democracy is a very admirable form of government—for dogs." This advocacy on the part of Poe is a revolutionary idea that he aspired to plant in the heads of people and makes them aware of the unquestioning obedience to the democratic form of government. He was severely against Thomas Jefferson's ideal notion of democracy and contested it with the British politician Edmund Burke's ideal democracy (Merry, 2018).

After the 1830s when American literature experienced a wave of romanticism it also experienced nationalism that was greatly reflected in literature. In the period, transcendentalist poets took center stage and advocated the philosophy of a unified whole that can strengthen America. The transcendentalist poet, Walt Whitman and

his radical ideas as expressed in his literary works and mostly in poetry are a characteristic of this school of thought. As it can be stated that "Whitman's adulthood coincided with an extremely tumultuous time in American politics and society" (Panish, 1998). Whitman was a bard that addressed the political debates on slavery, institutional corruption, prohibition of alcohol, class distinction and the rights of women in his poetry. During his time the American public was anxious about these political issues and Whitman's ideas were labeled as radical. Whitman was a loyal Democrat but lost his faith in politics as an institution when witnessed the complicity of the party in endorsing slavery and joined the radical wing of the party. The ideas expressed in Whitman's poetry are of such radical and political nature that his works were not considered at par with his contemporaries because his poetry was concerned with the issues of lower-class Americans as he refused to work along the lines of British literary conventions. He invested in the idea that the only benefit of a rightful democracy in America is the faith in "the ability of the American people to construct institutions that will allow and encourage the formation of a moral and spiritual society" (Panish, 1998).

Another great novelist of the time Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote about the landmark, *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850) in 1850 which was a criticism of the female oppression in Western culture. It was set in a seventeenth-century fictional village which is the epitome of Puritan beliefs and criticizes the brutal practice of Salem witch trials in the seventeenth century. Salem witch trials are an event of political and cultural significance in the history of America that denotes the public hangings of people, especially women in the Province of Massachusetts Bay. The novel being a work of the romantic era and antebellum period carries a strong sense of social reform as retaliation to the oppressive political regime that has been a characteristic of American literature. The genre of social reform writing concerned itself with important political and social causes such as, "the rights of women and native peoples, to prisons and mental institutions, to temperance and other health reforms" (Petruionis, 2021). This initiative by the authors of the romantic era termed fiction as a propaganda tool that was meant to raise political awareness in the American public. Forward to this was the era when America was head one with the abolition movement and bloody civil war. Therefore, most of the fictional and non-fictional narratives that poured out of these years were about the inhumane treatment of African-Americans under the practice of slavery.

Therefore, the greatest American novel that was produced in the era, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Clemens, 1884) carries the tones of political and social criticism. Mark Twain the author, has received much criticism for the morally questionable terminology which is considered severely offensive in modern-day, therefore, the novel has been banned and restricted many times. The literary work paints a scenario of the antebellum period, the period before the civil war which was marked by a debate over the practice of slavery and contention between North and South of America. Huck Finn, the protagonist of the novel, travels down the Mississippi

river and his journey is the symbolization of America towards emancipation and enlightenment. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Clemens, 1884) was published towards the end of the nineteenth century (1885) although Twain had set it a few decades earlier when slavery had not been abolished completely. The fact that Twain had written the first draft of the novel in mid-1870s but abandoned it due to the uproar of civil war and then finished it later carries political implications. Although northern states had abolished slavery in 1804 but the institution of bonded labour had not been abolished completely as forced employment and harassment continued. Until and unless, the whole of America abolished slavery and condemned it as illegal, Black people could not enjoy emancipation completely. This ambivalence towards emancipation act and then violations of abolition law is reflected in the melancholic emancipation of Jim, the slave in the narrative of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Clemens, 1884). The freedom that Jim got out of the journey had cost him his integrity and incomplete emancipation where all of his family is still in the shackles of slavery and all the other Black people they had met on their way “*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Historical Context Essay* (SparkNotes”, 2022). *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1985) is often categorized under the umbrella of the beginning of realism in America. After the blood loss in the American civil war when “more than 2.3 million soldiers fought in the war, and perhaps as many as 851,000 people died in 1861–65 (“*Periods of American Literature*”, 2022) the rise of realism was inevitable as writers began to put the reality of life in America to paper. War became the mode of expression and the epitome of the grim reality of life and Walt Whitman's claim came true that “a great literature will...arise out of the era of those four years,” (Barber, 2016). Literary realism in America trickled down from realistic ideals propagated generally in Europe and especially in France during the nineteenth century. The post-civil war realism in America concerned itself with a critique on political corruption, governmental policies on immigration and the politics behind emancipation proclamation (Habib, 2013).

The 1900s records a tendency towards modernity in American literature and the event of the utmost political, economic and national significance was the Great Depression. The devastating low-point of America's economy and the deterioration of the lower class and forced migration to more prosperous parts of the country have been documented in the best way possible by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) (Steinbeck, 1939). It is a piece of political confrontation that reflects upon and comments upon President Roosevelt's New Deal economics. The Great Depression was countered with the “policies of a greater minimum wage, expansion of public health services, and redistribution of wealth by taxing the 1%” implemented by President Roosevelt's New Deal. This kind of political assurance of a government to its public finds its placement in the narrative of *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939) when the family Joads find refuge in the government camp (Punch, 2020). Most significantly the novel addresses the working class issues which are the biggest political concern as they continue to face mistreatment at the hands of government

and law enforcement institutions. Other than this, T.S. Eliot wrote the modernist poem *The Waste Land* (1922) (Eliot, 1964) which captures the moral and social decay of humanity at large. It mourns the commencement of the war and the atrocities and disillusionment it left behind, the war that is always the result of political terrorism. *The Waste Land* (Eliot, 1964) is the description of “a failed cultural and political leadership, a land laid waste by war and the impotence of grief” (MAMBROL, 2020).

The postmodern and contemporary period in American literature also serves as a critique on American society and politics' pitfalls and its grave effects on the lives of citizens. “*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*” (Little, Haley, & Davis, 1999) is a biographical narrative that addresses racism, islamophobia and political concerns. “The black man here in America, in every way he can be looked at and examined, is in a pitiful state of sickness. Sick economically, Politically, Mentally, Socially. Spiritually [...] this so-called ‘melting pot’ country.” This statement of the Muslim, African-American minister is an insight into the state-backed racism and the complicity of law-enforcement institutions for the prevention of systemic racism against minorities. The ‘melting pot’ situation of America has it subjected to diversity and systemic racism that displays itself in the most brutal forms. Due to the surge of political movements such as, “Black Lives Matter” and cases of police brutality has gotten writers to register their protest through their literary works. Postmodernism features the heaviest critique on politics in an attempt to offer awareness about the masses. This has trickled down to the genre of Young adult literature that offers narratives and characters belonging to the teenage age group in order to be relatable to teen issues and offer representation to various age groups. *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2021) is a very recent example that addresses the issue of police brutality against Black people in the light of recent events.

Conclusion

American literature deals with the idea that what it is like to be an American and the politics of America has never been separate from the lives of Americans. As literature is a projection of society therefore American literature demonstrates the country's political situation in the literary works from time to time. In the whole course of American literature's history of four centuries, political context has been the most alluded one. The above research has endeavored to trace down this political projection spanning the literary periods of American history. In this process the research has begun from “The Colonial and Early National Period” and followed into “The Romantic Period”, “Realism and Naturalism” and “Modernism” finally culminating into “Postmodernism.” all these eras and beyond them have produced diverse genres of literature that have performed the role of political and social commentary. American literature has adhered to these eras or digressed due to certain literary political and literary movements (absurdist, feminist, metafictional, stream of consciousness) which have also served the purpose of political and social critique thus retaining a vast territory of future research.

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