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Post World War II: Analysis of American literature

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Abstract

Post-World War II American literature was marked by a number of significant developments and changes. The war had a profound impact on American society and culture, and this was reflected in the literature of the time. Post-World War II American literature is characterized by a variety of themes and styles. One of the most significant developments of this period was the emergence of the Beat Generation, a group of writers who rejected mainstream American culture and sought to explore new forms of expression. The Beat writers, such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, often wrote about experiences of drugs, sexuality, and spirituality, and their work had a significant influence on later writers and artists. Another important trend in post-World War II American literature was the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, which inspired a wave of African American writers who sought to explore themes of identity, oppression, and resistance. Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison are some of the most notable writers of this period, and their work remains influential today. Post-World War II American literature was also marked by a growing sense of disillusionment with the American Dream, as writers began to question the values and ideals of mainstream society. This trend can be seen in the work of authors such as J.D. Salinger and Kurt Vonnegut, who portrayed characters who were alienated from mainstream society and struggled to find meaning in their lives.

Keywords: Post-world war II, American literature, beat generation, modernist writers

Introduction

The post-World War II era in American literature was characterized by a sense of disillusionment and skepticism towards traditional values and institutions. The trauma and devastation of the war had left a deep impact on the collective psyche of Americans, and this was reflected in the literature of the time. One of the most significant literary movements of the post-war era was the Beat Generation, which emerged in the 1950s. The Beat writers rejected mainstream values and celebrated non-conformity, experimentation, and spontaneity. Their works often explored themes of alienation, self-discovery, and the search for meaning in a world that seemed devoid of it. Prominent writers associated with the Beat Generation include Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs.

Another important literary movement of the post-war era was the confessional poetry movement, which emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This movement was characterized by poets who wrote deeply personal and often autobiographical works that explored themes of love, loss, and mental illness. Prominent poets associated with the confessional poetry movement include Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton.

In addition to these movements, there were also many writers who explored the impact of the war on American society and culture. For example, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* satirized the absurdity of war and military bureaucracy, while Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* explored the psychological trauma of war and the nature of time. Overall, the post-World War II era in American literature was marked by a rejection of traditional values and institutions, a focus on personal experience and self-expression, and an exploration of the impact of war on individuals and society.

The Years between the Two World War: "Second Flowering" of American Writing.

The period between the two World Wars, particularly the 1920s and 1930s, is often referred to as the "second flowering" of American writing. This era saw a burst of literary creativity and experimentation that had a profound impact on American literature and culture. During this time, American writers began to break away from traditional literary forms and styles, and instead embraced new techniques and themes. Modernist writers such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner explored themes of disillusionment, fragmentation, and the loss of traditional values. They also experimented with new narrative techniques, such as stream-of-consciousness and non-linear storytelling.

In addition to the modernists, this period also saw the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance, a

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a cultural movement that celebrated African American art, literature, and music. Writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claude McKay produced works that celebrated black culture and identity, while also addressing issues such as racial discrimination and inequality. The "second flowering" of American writing was a period of great creativity and innovation, one that helped to shape the course of American literature in the decades to come.

The literary historian Malcolm Cowley described the years between the two world wars as a "second flowering" of American writing. Certainly American literature attained a new maturity and a rich diversity in the 1920s and '30s, and significant works by several major figures from those decades were published after 1945. Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Katherine Anne Porter wrote memorable fiction, though not up to their prewar standard; and Frost, Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, E.E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, and Gwendolyn Brooks published important poetry. Eugene O'Neill's most distinguished play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, appeared posthumously in 1956. Before and after World War II, Robert Penn Warren published influential fiction, poetry, and criticism. His *All the King's Men*, one of the best American political novels, won the 1947 Pulitzer Prize. Mary McCarthy became a widely read social satirist and essayist. When it first appeared in the United States in the 1960s, Henry Miller's fiction was influential primarily because of its frank exploration of sexuality. But its loose, picaresque, quasi-autobiographical form also meshed well with post-1960s fiction. Impressive new novelists, poets, and playwrights emerged after the war. There was, in fact, a gradual changing of the guard.

Not only did a new generation come out of the war, but its ethnic, regional, and social character was quite different from that of the preceding one. Among the younger writers were children of immigrants, many of them Jews; African Americans, only a few generations away from slavery; and, eventually, women, who, with the rise of feminism, were to speak in a new voice. Though the social climate of the postwar years was conservative, even conformist, some of the most hotly discussed writers were homosexuals or bisexuals, including Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Paul Bowles, Gore Vidal, and James Baldwin, whose dark themes and experimental methods cleared a path for Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac.

Realism and "Metafiction" in Post War American Literature

Realism and metafiction are two literary modes that have played significant roles in post-war American literature. Realism, as a literary mode, emphasizes the accurate and objective representation of the world, often through detailed descriptions of characters, settings, and events. In post-war American literature, many writers, such as John Updike, Raymond Carver, and Richard Yates, employed realism to explore themes of social and cultural change, as well as individual identity and relationships. On the other hand, metafiction is a literary mode that blurs the line between fiction and reality, often by drawing attention to the act of storytelling itself. Metafiction can be self-referential and self-conscious, and it often challenges the reader's assumptions about the nature of truth and fiction. In post-war American literature, many writers, such as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo, used metafiction to explore themes of the fragility of identity, the power of

language, and the nature of reality.

The use of metafiction in post-war American literature was often a response to the changing cultural landscape of the time, which was marked by the rise of mass media, the Cold War, and the rapid changes in technology and society. Metafiction allowed writers to explore the limits of language and the construction of reality, as well as to question the nature of truth and authority.

Culture Change in Post-War American Literature

Postwar American literature also saw significant changes in ethnic, regional, and social character, as writers sought to reflect the diversity of American society and explore the complexities of identity. Post-war American literature reflected the growing diversity and complexity of American society, as writers from diverse backgrounds sought to explore issues of identity, culture, and social change. These changes have continued to shape American literature and culture in the decades since the postwar period.

Ethnic Character Change

The postwar years saw a rise in ethnic literature, as writers from diverse backgrounds sought to tell their own stories and challenge the dominant narratives of mainstream American literature. African American writers such as Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, Chicano writers such as Rudolfo Anaya and Sandra Cisneros, and Asian American writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan all emerged as significant figures in postwar American literature.

Regional Character Change

The postwar years also saw a renewed interest in regionalism, as writers sought to explore the unique cultures and landscapes of different regions of the country. Writers such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor were concerned with exploring the complexities of the American South, while Jack Kerouac and other Beat writers were interested in exploring the landscapes of the American West.

Social Character Change

The post-war years saw significant changes in American society, including the growth of the middle class and the rise of consumer culture. Writers such as John Updike and Richard Yates were interested in exploring the lives of ordinary Americans and the impact of social change on individual identity.

American Literature and Culture in the Postwar Years

The period after World War II marked a significant shift in American literature, as writers grappled with the aftermath of the war and its impact on society.

1. **Existentialism:** Many writers explored the existential themes of meaning, purpose, and identity in a post-war world that had been shaken by violence and destruction. This often involved a focus on individualism, free will, and the search for authenticity.
2. **Postmodernism:** Postmodernism emerged as a literary movement in the 1960s, characterized by its rejection of the modernist emphasis on reason and logic, and its embrace of ambiguity, irony, and self-reflexivity. Writers such as Thomas Pynchon and John Barth challenged traditional narrative structures and explored the relationship between language and reality. In the wake of the war, writers began to challenge the idea of a fixed reality and embraced the idea that truth is subjective and constructed. This led to an emphasis on fragmentation,

intertextuality, and irony in literature.

3. **Beat Generation:** A group of writers emerged in the 1950s known as the Beat Generation, who rejected mainstream society and embraced a countercultural lifestyle. They often wrote about personal experiences, drug use, and spirituality, and their work was characterized by a spontaneous and improvisational style. The Beat Generation was a literary movement that emerged in the 1950s, characterized by its rejection of traditional values and its embrace of counterculture and non-conformity. The writers associated with this movement, such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, celebrated spontaneity, individualism, and an intense engagement with the present moment.
4. **The Rise Of The Suburbs:** In the years following World War II, many Americans moved to the suburbs, and this had a profound impact on the country's literature. Writers such as John Cheever and Richard Yates captured the ennui and dissatisfaction of life in the suburbs, while others, such as J.D. Salinger, explored the tensions and conflicts that arose from the clash between suburban conformity and individualism.
5. **The Vietnam War:** The Vietnam War had a profound impact on American literature, particularly in the 1970s. Writers such as Tim O'Brien and Michael Herr wrote about their experiences in the war, while others, such as Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, used the war as a backdrop to explore issues of morality, trauma, and the absurdity of war.
6. **Civil Rights Movement:** The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, and many writers turned their attention to issues of race and social justice. This included exploring the experiences of African Americans and other marginalized groups, as well as critiquing the structures of power that perpetuated inequality. The Civil Rights Movement had a profound impact on American literature. African American writers such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison explored issues of race and identity in their work, while white writers such as Truman Capote and Harper Lee addressed issues of racial injustice in their own way.
7. **The cold war and the fear of nuclear annihilation:** The postwar years were marked by the fear of nuclear war and the tensions of the Cold War. Writers such as Kurt Vonnegut and Philip K. Dick were concerned with exploring the consequences of this fear and the impact it had on American society.
8. **Social Critique:** Many post-World War II writers turned their attention to social issues, critiquing everything from consumer culture to racism and inequality. Examples of writers who explored these themes include James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison.
9. **Realism and Regionalism:** In contrast to the romanticism of earlier literary movements, post-World War II writers often embraced realism, depicting everyday life and struggles in a more matter-of-fact way. Regionalism, or writing that focused on specific regions or communities, was also popular during this time. Examples of realist and regionalist writers include Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, and John Steinbeck.
10. **The Growth Of Popular Culture:** The postwar years saw the rise of popular culture, including television, movies, and music. Writers such as Sylvia Plath and

Richard Yates were concerned with exploring the impact of popular culture on American society and the ways in which it shaped individual identity.

Key Authors of Post-World War II American Literature

Post-World War II American literature is a rich and diverse field, with many influential authors who have made significant contributions to the literary world.

1. **Jack Kerouac:** Kerouac was a novelist and poet who is often associated with the Beat Generation. His most famous work is "On the Road," which is considered a classic of post-World War II American literature.
2. **J.D. Salinger:** Salinger was a novelist and short story writer who is best known for his novel "The Catcher in the Rye." His works often deal with themes of alienation and disillusionment.
3. **Toni Morrison:** Morrison was a novelist and essayist who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Her works often deal with themes of race, identity, and the African American experience.
4. **Philip Roth:** Roth was a novelist who is often associated with the Jewish American literary tradition. His works often deal with themes of identity, sexuality, and the human condition.
5. **Sylvia Plath:** Plath was a poet and novelist who is best known for her semi-autobiographical novel "The Bell Jar." Her works often deal with themes of mental illness, gender roles, and the search for identity.
6. **Allen Ginsberg:** Ginsberg was a poet and leading figure of the Beat Generation. His most famous work is the poem "Howl," which is considered a classic of post-World War II American literature.
7. **Flannery O'Connor:** O'Connor was a novelist and short story writer who is best known for her works that explore themes of morality, religion, and the human condition.
8. **James Baldwin:** Baldwin was a writer, essayist, and social critic who explored themes of race, sexuality, and identity in his work. His novels, such as "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and "Another Country," are considered classics of American literature.
9. **Maya Angelou:** Angelou was a poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist who explored themes of race, gender, and identity in her work. Her memoir "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" is considered a classic of American literature.
10. **Kurt Vonnegut:** Vonnegut was a satirical writer who explored themes of war, technology, and human nature in his work. His novel "Slaughterhouse-Five" is considered a classic of American literature.

Conclusion

Post-World War II American literature was characterized by a diversity of styles and genres, from the experimental fiction of William S. Burroughs to the darkly humorous stories of Flannery O'Connor. Many writers of this period were also concerned with exploring the human psyche and the complexities of the human experience, as seen in the work of Sylvia Plath and John Cheever. Overall, post-World War II American literature was a period of great creativity and innovation, marked by a diverse range of themes, styles, and voices. It remains an important period in the history of American literature and continues to inspire and influence writers today.

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