

AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE

Afro-American literature after the Depression:

Richard Wright (1908-1960) was born in Mississippi, into an extremely poor family, and experienced humiliation and hatred in a racially segregated South. All these contributed to his sense that the hidden anger of black people was justified, and that only by acknowledging and expressing it they could move beyond it.

Native Son (1940), a novel exploring the psychology of racism. It tells a story of a black boy who is provoked to brutal violence by the oppression, hatred and incomprehension of the white world. He murders two women who have no personal responsibility for his condition. By situating the point of view within his character's consciousness, Wright forced readers to see the world through Bigger's eyes, and thus to understand him.

Ralph Ellison (1914): *The Invisible Man* (1952), a novel covers American Negro history from the time of slavery to the racial unrest of the modern period. The hero of the novel is socially invisible, the whites do not see him, they see only a stereotype that is in their minds.

After World War 2 blacks hoped their situation would improve. However, the South remained segregated and the discrimination of the blacks was visible in the North too. The struggle to desegregate all public facilities began.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-68) was a major civil rights leader. He believed that nonviolent action protest was effective means of securing constitutional rights for blacks. He applied the doctrines of civil disobedience and passive resistance. (In 1963 he delivered his famous speech „I Have a Dream“)

Malcolm X (1925-65) was a representative of a radical black movement, known as the Black Muslims. He accepted the doctrine that white people were devil. His calls for armed self-defense reflected widespread anger among urban blacks. (*Autobiography of Malcolm X*)

African American writers supported civil rights movement not only by active protests but also by producing literature. Their output is referred to as the Black Arts Movement (1960-1970). They produced literature of social protest or literature inspired by oral tradition.

Amiri Baraka (1934), poet and playwright, he set the tone for the late 1960s with his emotional condemnations of white values

African American cultural revival continued in the 1970s and 1980s. Writers were describing and analyzing the black experience (Alice Walker and Toni Morrison – novelists, August Wilson – playwright, Gwendolyn Brooks, June Jordan, Ntoya Shange – poets, Spike Lee – filmmaker)

Alice Walker (1944) portrays in most of her writing the lives of poor, oppressed black women in the early 1900s. She is occasionally criticized for her unsympathetic portrayal of men. (*The Color Purple*, a novel)

Toni Morrison (1931) is one of the most prolific African American women novelists. In 1993 she won a Nobel Prize in literature. She grew up in a storytelling environment, including tales of the supernatural, that would later inform her works. She appreciated Afro-American folk culture, especially music. Her work deals with the black experience and celebrates the black community. (novels: *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*)

June Jordan (1936) is a poet, playwright, novelist, composer, political activist and teacher. She was born in Harlem and began writing poetry at the age of 7. In her poetry she combines political activism and her personal experiences as a black bisexual woman.

Sources:

Lauter, Paul (ed.). *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Volume 2. Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1994