

African American Literature

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Hello, my name is Shawn Salvant. I'm an Assistant Professor of African American Literature at Vanderbilt University. Today I want to discuss the ways in which race and social inequality have been important terms in the development of African American literature. As you might imagine, these have been important terms since the beginnings of African American literature, in the 18th century, but you also might imagine these terms, and the way that they're used in African American literature, will change depending on the social and historical contexts in which the authors are writing, and depending on the literary genre, the literary conventions and styles that the authors are using.

When we think about the earliest period of African American literature, from the middle of the 18th century, say around 1740 to 1820, we should keep in mind that issues of race are coupled with issues of Christianity and spirituality more general, and also with issues of reason, the principle that is emphasized by many of the enlightenment thinkers, are very influential in the American scene during this period. We should keep in mind as well, that the social, intellectual and political leaders of the period, those whom the authors are trying to influence with their writing, not only saw the world in terms of black and white, and dark and light skin peoples, but also in terms of Christian, non-Christian, and in terms of those who practiced and could reason and could write rationally, articulate their rational thoughts on paper, and those who did not.

So for African Americans writing during this period, demonstrating those principles was very important. We'll remember that Phillis Wheatley published her collection of poems in 1773. There was quite a question as to whether she had actually written them, and she had to undergo a trial in which she had to demonstrate that she actually the author. If we look at the frontispiece of Wheatley's first collection of poems, we see an image of her as the writer at work, with pen in hand, writing her poems as a way of demonstrating her ability to write and authenticating her own authorships.

Many of the autobiographers during this period crafted their narratives of their own life according to the conventions and the forms of a spiritual narrative, a spiritual conversion is often a key part of the form of their narratives, and we see the influence of the spiritual narrative into the next phase or period of African American literature, the period in which slave narratives become very popular. This is the period from 1830 to 1860 or 1865, or so, really the height of the abolition movement in America. Slave narratives were a very popular form of writing.

The public bought many of these narratives by figures such as Frederick Douglas, Harriet Jacobs, Josiah Henson, William Wells Brown. This is a very popular form of writing in America in the middle of the 19th century. These were first person accounts of the slave experience, and the many of the important themes of social protest, moral equality, racial equality that we think of is developed in later African American literature, can be traced to the genre of the slave narrative, and the autobiography is established here as really the backbone of the African American literature tradition, and we see so many prominent African American writers and other figures, political figures, social figures, artistic figures, from other areas also writing autobiographies well into the 20th century.

Many of you are familiar, I'm sure with the slave autobiographer, Frederick Douglass. Douglass not only was famous for his anti-slavery activism, and his anti-slavery lecturing all over the world, but he was also credited with writing the first piece of prose fiction in the African American literary tradition, and as we move into the 1850's in American, we see the birth of prose fiction in the African American literary tradition, and the first novels published by African Americans.

There are four novels written and published by African Americans before the civil war. I'm going to take a moment just to spotlight a couple of them. One is the very first novel published by an African American, and it's the novel called *Clotelle*, published by William Wells Brown in 1853. Brown himself was a former slave, an anti-slavery lecturer, and an abolitionist, and he wrote a novel that was based on what was then the rumor that Thomas Jefferson had fathered children with his slave, Sally Hemmings, and as you can imagine, this was quite a sensational story to publish during this period, and Brown really

wanted to articulate and represent some of the contradictions and hypocrisies that he saw in the American context with regard to the rhetoric of unalienable rights and liberties from the founding fathers and the slave society that had developed, and was entrenched in American society, certainly by the middle of the 19th century.

Another important novel during this period is Martin Delaney's novel *Blake*, published in 1859. This is a unique novel, because it's really one of the first extended literary treatments of the themes and the issues, and the philosophy of black nationalism, which certainly had its nonfiction and political manifestations in the work and writings of figures such as Henry Highland Garnet, Alexander Crummell, David Walker, and others. Delaney's novel takes a black nationalist hero named Henry Blake, who is adamant on sowing a collective consciousness among free blacks, enslaved Africans, enslaved black, enslaved African Americans, as well as creating a transnational, transgeographic collective political force, so Blake travels Canada down to the southern parts of the United States, into Cuba, and also across the Atlantic into Africa, and sows the seeds for a black uprising, a black collective consciousness that is important for the political blossoming of black nationalism.

As we move into the period after the civil war, the post-bellum period, the Reconstruction period, and the post-Reconstruction period, we see that many of the turbulent issues facing African Americans during this period also reflected in the literature, and the themes of social inequality take on a little bit of a different cast. We have writers such as Charles Chestnut, who was trained as a lawyer, but became a novelist and short story writer, very talented literary figure in addition to his legal talents. Chestnut was very interested in representing the strange inequalities and social and psychological problems related to the question of color. He was very interested in investigating the color line, the division between black and white, as a legal and social construct and idea, so he wrote many short stories and novels depicting characters who were light enough to pass, but were legally considered black, and he explored some of the social and political contradictions of that status.

Another important writer during this period is Francis Harper. Her novel *Iola Leroy*, published in 1892, it's a very important text for considering the ways in which women during this period were treated differently according to their race and their social

opportunities. Harper was very interested in the ways in which marriage was related to one's racial identity, and one's social possibilities, and one's moral principles, as well. *Iola Leroy* is a novel that explores those interrelationships in the context of post reconstruction America.

Many of the writers that I've mentioned so far in the 19th century lived lives in which their first and foremost occupation was as an activist, anti-slavery lecturers, abolitionists. When we move into the period known as the Harlem Renaissance, we get a significant distinction here. Many of the writers and artists during this period were trying to make their lives and live their lives as artists, writing and producing art for art's sake, and this is a significant difference in terms of the ways in which social inequality is manifested and comes through in the literature published by African Americans. This not to say that these writers were not concerned with political activism and using their literature to affect some sort social equality, but the ways in which they did that were to draw from the roots and the culture in the African American community and to represent that culture in novels, in plays, and in poems during this period.

They didn't have a unified political agenda all the time, but they were all collectively interested in delving into the roots of African American culture, and using that as a source for their art, and this in itself I think had its political and social impact. Now the economic depression that effectively put an end to the Harlem Renaissance also ushered in a period of realist and social protest literature.

One of the key figures in this period is the author Richard Wright, whose novel *Native Son* published in 1940 really shocked and awakened a lot of consciousnesses in American when it was published as the first African American book to be selected for the Book of the Month club. It was very popular, but also a very searing and uncompromising and bleak representation of urban African American life. Wright's main character, Bigger Thomas, is moved towards violence and much antisocial behavior due to his feelings of despair and feeling completely left out of the American dream, and American society.

This is also the period in which Langston Hughes publishes his poem asking the question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" and much of the literature, and much of

the literature published during this period attempts to answer that question in some way. What's happened to the dream of equal treatment, and social equality here in the middle of the 20th century, that's moving forward? Authors such as Lorraine Hansberry, whose play *A Raisin in the Sun* was performed on Broadway for the first time at the end of the 1950's. These authors tried to answer this question. Hansberry's play depicts an African American family living on the south side of Chicago, dealing with the racial discrimination, the economic discrimination that they're feeling related to their racial status, and asking themselves, "How can we move forward in American society? What can we do to achieve some level of social equality?" It's a very vibrant period of social critique in the African American literary tradition.

One of the most explosive and dynamic and controversial periods of African American literature comes out of period in which Wright and Hansberry wrote, and this is the *Black Arts Movement* of the 1960's and '70's. This movement is framed by the civil rights movements taking place in the nation at large, and many of the uncompromising positions taken by the most adamant and activists and radical African American leaders such as Malcolm X, are the source for the artistic expression of those figures in the black arts movement.

One of the central figures in this movement is a poet and playwright named Amiri Baraka once wrote that he wanted to produce poems that kill, and this was a period in which many of the writers had a unified political agenda to write poems and plays, and produce art that had direct social impact, and were not just representing the riots and the protests that were taking place around in America, but were participating in these movements, as well. So they wanted to produce art that really had a social and political impact, and was not simply to write art for art's sake, but to directly impact the ways in which African Americans lived and interacted during this period.

Now the *Black Arts Movement* is perhaps the last distinct period in African American literature, as much as these periods can be considered distinct and cohesive. After the '60's and '70's, there really is a flourishing of African American literature in all different styles and methods, and political programs, and approaches, genres. One of the trends that does shine through and develop in the 1970's, from 1974, are the contributions from African American female writers who are influenced by the feminist movement, feminist

critical theory, feminist theories, and feminist political theory that develop out of the 1970's. Writers such as Tony Morrison and Alice Walker write novels and poems, and plays, that really demonstrate the layered and nuanced effects of the ways in which race and social inequality play out in the American context, and they are adamant at getting across in their fiction that race and social inequality are not felt in the same ways by everyone. Issues of gender are key in understanding how these terms affect writers and African American peoples in America during this period.

So with the time I have left, I just want to encourage you to pursue some of the books and authors that I've mentioned here, and one good way to get started in learning about the development of African American literature is to look at the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, which gives a good survey of all the classic works in this area, and also gives you good introductory notes to the periods that I've mentioned, and to the authors and their works. It really is a very vibrant and dynamic and rich tradition that continues to be enriched by the discovery of new texts in the early part of the periods of the field, and by the contributions of new authors as we move forward into the 21st century.

With that, I'd like to conclude and say thank you for joining me in this discussion, and I wish you well in your examination of this interesting topic. Thank you.