THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT: *The Second World War literature was neither pessimistic nor antiwar. Instead, it presents war in its complexity as a tragic but perhaps inevitable part of the human condition. Reflecting the views of their own generation, authors writing about World War II generally accepted the justness of that war and the necessity of ridding the world of Nazi totalitarianism and Japanese militarism. World War II literature helped to make that war, later called the "good war," a defining moment in affirming America's democratic values and the nation's identity as a moral people.*

Key words: *American literature, World War II, literature, writers, novels, authors.*

American writers on the subject of World War II created a body of work unsurpassed in quality by the literature of any other American war. Novels, autobiographies, and poetry explored the effects of war on individuals. Unlike the disillusionment that characterized the literature of World War I.

Writers have long drawn on the experiences of war to examine themes such as race, power, democracy, and human behavior under conditions of stress. Partly through addressing these and similar issues with unprecedented candor and realism, U.S. war literature matured during and after World War II. Hundreds of war novels eventually appeared, some of outstanding craftsmanship. Many

American poets did impressive work, and wartime journalism and postwar memoirs often exhibited a new subtlety and clarity.

The Most Popular And Original Works And Writers

The best fiction about wartime—Evelyn Waugh's *Put Out More Flags* (1942), Henry Green's *Caught* (1943), James Hanley's *No Directions* (1943), Patrick Hamilton's *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947), and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949)—was produced by established writers. Only three new poets (all of whom died on active service) showed promise: Alun Lewis, Sidney Keyes, and Keith Douglas, the latter the most gifted and distinctive, whose eerily detached accounts of the battlefield revealed a poet of potential greatness. Lewis's haunting short stories about the lives of officers and enlisted men are also works of very great accomplishment.

Eliot T.S, who produced in his Four Quarters (1935–42; published as a whole, 1943) the masterpiece of the war. Reflecting upon language, time, and history, he searched, in the three quartets written during the war, for moral and religious significance in the midst of destruction and strove to counter the spirit of nationalism inevitably present in a nation at war. The creativity that had seemed to end with the tortured religious poetry and verse drama of the 1920s and '30s had a rich and extraordinary late flowering as Eliot concerned himself, on the scale of *The Waste Land* but in a very different manner and mood, with the well-being of the society in which he lived.

American Literature

Novels

World War II novels comprise the most varied category in U.S. war literature. Harry Brown tells of small-unit combat in *A Walk in the Sun* (1944). John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano* (1944) suggests that the integrity of most Americans abroad will ultimately outweigh the arrogance and cruelty of a few.

Hersey also wrote *Into the Valley* (1943) and *Hiroshima* (1946), both reportorial classics, as well as the novels *The Wall* (1950), about the Warsaw Ghetto, and *The War Lover* (1959), a Freudian tale of bomber pilots in England.

Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* (1944) ends disturbingly before its draftee protagonist goes overseas. Life in North Africa and Italy beguiles the GIs in John Horne Burns's *The Gallery* (1947). Like many novels, *The Gallery* features self-seeking officers, decent enlisted men, and kind-hearted foreign women, but a chapter about gay Allied soldiers was controversial. John Hawkes's surrealistic *The Cannibal* (1949) portrays occupied Germany as a landscape of gothic horrors, and Jerzy Kozinski takes a macabre view of Nazi-occupied Poland in *The Painted Bird* (1965). William Gardner Smith's *Last of the Conquerors* (1948) shows black soldiers in occupied Germany as better treated by German civilians than by fellow Americans. John Oliver Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1962) dramatically portrays a comparable social contradiction in wartime Australia.

The vivid and moving *Mask of Glory* (1949), by Dan Levin, offers a leftist perspective on Marine heroism in the Pacific. Though disdained by critics as cliched and superficial, Leon Uris's *Battle Cry!* (1953) was enormously popular. Richard Matheson's *The Beardless Warriors* (1960) shows teenagers coming to grips with battle. *Face of a Hero* (1950), by Louis Falstein, dramatizes the bombing of southern Europe, and Edward L. Beach's *Run Silent, Run Deep* (1959) does the same for the sub-marine war.

Three ambitious, more or less pessimistic, novels appeared in 1948. Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* unites the fates of three infantrymen, two American and one German. Shaw emphasizes that the United States has its racists and tyrants as well as Germany; here, however, they have not yet gained the upper hand. German expatriate Stefan Heym's *The Crusaders* spotlights a psychological warfare unit; while endorsing the Allied cause as just, Heym criticizes American hypocrisy and naivete in Europe. In his deeply pessimistic *The Naked and the*

Dead, Norman Mailer mixes realistic details of the Pacific war with profound fears about the future of democracy. In this novel, war has given frightening power to autocrats like General Cummings and sadists like Sergeant Croft. Only chance and heroic endurance, embodied in Private Ridges and Private Goldstein, offer a glimmer of hope in a dark human and natural landscape.

The best-selling *From Here to Eternity* by James Jones in 1951, describing the life of the rebellious Private Prewitt in Hawaii before Pearl Harbor. Considered shocking in language and detail at the time it was published, its brutal depiction of army life angered some skeptical critics. But Jones's ability to write powerfully and insightfully about soldiers was confirmed in *The Thin Red Line* (1962), an outstanding combat-oriented novel. In the sex-charged *Whistle* (1978) Jones writes bleakly of returned veterans of Guadalcanal.

World War II is the subject of many distinguished memoirs and other nonfiction accounts. *The Longest Day* (1959), by Cornelius Ryan, is an early example of oral history. *The Warriors* (1958), by former intelligence officer J. Glenn Gray, ponders the psychology of men at war. Senior officers' memoirs, such as General Dwight Eisenhower's *Crusade in Europe* (1948), are complemented by the works of junior officers and enlisted men; some no-table examples are James Fahey's *Pacific War Diary* (1956), Eugene Sledge's *With the Old Breed on Peleliu and Iwo Jima* (1981), Samuel Hynes's *Flights of Passage* (1988), Raymond Gantter's *Roll Me Over* (1997), and William A. Foley, Jr., 's *Visions from a Foxhole* (2002).

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