

**THE IMPACT OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR ON AMERICAN
LITERATURE**

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Annotation. *This article provides a comprehensive analysis of how the Second World War is depicted and explored in American literature. It traces the evolution of wartime narratives from patriotic and heroic portrayals to more nuanced reflections on trauma, absurdity, and disillusionment. Through a study of prominent authors like Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, and Joseph Heller, the article examines how literature has grappled with the psychological and moral dimensions of war.*

By situating key works within their socio-historical contexts, the article underscores the role of literature in confronting and shaping collective memory. It argues that the examination of the Second World War in American literature offers critical insights into war, memory, and identity, enriching our understanding of the past and its resonance in contemporary discourse.

Key words: *Second World War, American literature, novels, poems, postmodernism, period.*

INTRODUCTION

The Second World War stands as a defining moment in modern history, reshaping global dynamics and leaving an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of nations. In the realm of literature, particularly in American letters, the war's impact reverberated profoundly, influencing writers to grapple with themes of conflict, sacrifice, and resilience. This article delves into the rich tapestry of American literature shaped by the crucible of World War II, exploring how writers navigated its complexities and transformed their experiences into enduring narratives. This exploration of World War II literature in America will examine notable works that encapsulate the war's impact on society and culture. From the disillusionment expressed in the post-war works of J.D. Salinger to the haunting realities depicted by Norman Mailer in "The Naked and the Dead," these narratives offer a window into the myriad ways in which the war shaped literary expression. Moreover, the literature of this period serves as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling in making sense of human conflict and resilience.

FINDINGS

Advances in science and technology in Western countries rapidly intensified at the start of the 20th century and brought about a sense of unprecedented progress. The devastation of World War I and the Great Depression also caused widespread suffering in Europe and the United States. These contradictory impulses can be found swirling within modernism, a movement in the arts defined first and foremost as a radical break from the past. But this break was often an act of destruction, and it caused a loss of faith in traditional structures and beliefs. Despite, or perhaps because of, these contradictory impulses, the modernist period proved to be one of the richest and most productive in American literature. A sense of disillusionment and loss pervades much American modernist fiction. That sense may be centered on specific individuals, or it may be directed toward American society or toward civilization generally. It may generate a nihilistic, destructive impulse, or it may express hope at the prospect of change.

Modern education and development

Richard Wright exposed and attacked American racism in *Native Son* (1940). Zora Neale Hurston told the story of a Black woman's three marriages in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). John Steinbeck depicted the difficult lives of migrant workers in *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The Harlem Renaissance produced a rich coterie of poets, among them Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Alice Dunbar Nelson.

Drama came to prominence for the first time in the United States in the early 20th century. Playwrights drew inspiration from European theater but created plays that were uniquely and enduringly American. Eugene O'Neill was the foremost American playwright of the period. His *Long Day's Journey into Night* (written 1939–41, performed 1956) was the high point of more than 20 years of creativity that began in 1920 with *Beyond the Horizon* and concluded with *The Iceman Cometh* (written 1939, performed 1946). Thornton Wilder presented a realistic (and enormously influential) vision of small-town America in *Our Town*, first produced in 1938[1].

The Contemporary Period (1945–present) in the United States began with post-World War II confidence and economic strength, leading into the Cold War in the late 1940s. This global conflict with the Soviet Union shaped politics for over four decades, influencing American literature notably during the latter half of the 20th century. The era of the 1950s and '60s witnessed significant cultural changes driven by the civil rights and women's rights movements within the U.S. By the start of the 21st century, American literature evolved into a diverse narrative, drawing from a broad spectrum of past writings from various backgrounds and embracing the experiences of a more diverse American populace.

African American literature during this period was notably influenced by Richard Wright, whose autobiography "*Black Boy*" (1945) reflected his experiences and led him to leave the U.S. for France after World War II due to the discrimination he faced. Other African American writers from the 1950s to

the '70s grappled with the desire to escape an unjust society and effect change. Ralph Ellison's novel "Invisible Man" (1952) depicted the story of an unnamed Black man navigating an America that ignored him. Lorraine Hansberry's play "A Raisin in the Sun" (1959) explored the impact of racism in Chicago. Gwendolyn Brooks made history by becoming the first African American poet to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1950.

The Black Arts movement, rooted in Black nationalism, aimed to cultivate a unique Black consciousness. Notable works include "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" (1965) by Malcolm X and Alex Haley. The American novel in this era saw a proliferation of styles and forms, including realism, metafiction, postmodernism, and more, reflecting diverse societal engagements. Key novels from this period include Norman Mailer's "The Naked and the Dead" (1948) and "The Executioner's Song" (1979), Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita" (1955), Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" (1957), and Thomas Pynchon's "The Crying of Lot 49", among others, each offering unique perspectives on contemporary American life[2].

In late 20th century and early 21st century there has been increased popular and academic acceptance of literature written by immigrant, ethnic, and LGBT writers, and of writings in languages other than English[3].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the impact of the Second World War on American literature is profound and enduring. Through a diverse range of narratives, from firsthand accounts to fictional portrayals, authors have explored themes of heroism, trauma, loss, and resilience. This period in history provided a fertile ground for writers to delve into the complexities of human experience during wartime, reflecting both the horrors and the hope that emerged from this pivotal moment in global history. American literature of the post-war era continues to bear witness to the enduring legacy of World War II, reminding us of the profound ways in which historical

events shape our cultural consciousness and understanding of the human condition.

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