



# LITERARY QUEST

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## **African American Literature and its Quest for Freedom**

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### **Abstract**

African Americans are the residents of the United States who have origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. In the United States, the term is generally used for Americans with at least partial Sub-Saharan African ancestry. Most African Americans are the descendants of captive Africans who survived the slavery era within the boundaries of the present United States. Slavery, reconstruction, development of the African American community, participation in the great military conflicts of the United States, racial segregation and the Civil Right Movement were some of the events and issues that were faced by African Americans. Black Americans make the single largest racial minority in the United States and form the second largest racial group after the Whites in the United States.

During 20th century, non-fiction works by authors such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated whether to confront or appease racist attitudes in the United States. This paper attempts to explore the issues of

African American literature like their quest for freedom and equality which is long denied to Blacks in the United States, along with further themes such as African American culture, racism, religion and slavery. It has been done with the award winning novels and works of some great African American writers.

This paper also discusses the change that had cropped up in the position of African Americans and African American literature in American society over the centuries before and after the Civil Rights Movement Era.

### **Keywords**

African American Literature; Slavery; Civil Right Movement.

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African American literature began with the works of African descended 18th-century writers, Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano and reached early high points with slave narratives of the nineteenth century in America. African American literature and art rose to its zenith with the Harlem Renaissance from 1920 to 1940. Numerous Black artists, musicians and others produced classic works in fields from jazz to theater; the renaissance is perhaps best known for the literature that came out of it. The themes and issues explored in the literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American

society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, and equality. African American writing had tended to incorporate oral forms such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues and rap.

In the words of Albert J. Raboteau, Princeton University Professor, all African American studies including African American literature “speaks to the deeper meaning of the African-American presence in this nation. This presence has always been a test case of the nation's claims to freedom, democracy, equality, the inclusiveness of all.” African American literature explores the issues of freedom and equality long denied to Blacks in the United States, along with further themes such as African American culture, racism, religion, slavery, and a sense of home among others.

The positions of African Americans and African American literature in American society have changed over the centuries. The literature primarily consisted of memoirs by people who had escaped from slavery before the American Civil War. Slave narratives included the accounts of life under slavery and the path of justice and redemption to freedom. During 20th century, non-fiction works by authors such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated whether to confront or appease racist attitudes in the United States. Du Bois published a highly influential collection of essays titled *The Souls of Black Folk*. The essays of the book on race were revolutionary, representing Du Bois' personal experiences to describe African Americans' way of living in American society. The book contains Du Bois' famous quote: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (238). Du Bois believed that African Americans should, because of their common interests, work together to battle prejudice and inequity. In contrast to Du Bois, who adopted a more confrontational attitude toward ending racial strife in America, Washington believed that Blacks should first lift themselves up and prove themselves the equals of Whites before asking for an end to racism. While this

viewpoint was popular among some Blacks (and many Whites) at the time, Washington's political views would later fall out of fashion.

A large migration of African Americans began during World War I and reached its high point during World War II. Black authors attempted to address these issues with their writings. One of the first writers to do so was James Baldwin, whose work addressed issues of race and sexuality. Baldwin, who is best known for his novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, wrote deeply about personal stories and essays while examining what it were like to be both Black and homosexual at a time when neither of these identities was accepted by American culture.

Richard Wright is best known for his novel, *Native Son* (1940), which tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a Black man struggling for acceptance in Chicago. Baldwin was so impressed by the novel that he titled a collection of his own essays *Notes of a Native Son*.

The other great novelist of the period was Ralph Waldo Ellison, best known for his novel *Invisible Man* (1952), which won the National Book Award in 1953. The Civil Rights time period also saw the rise of female Black poets, most notably Gwendolyn Brooks, who became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize, for her book of poetry, *Annie Allen* published in 1949.

Richard Wright's work has been thought to be of special importance to Ellison's literary development because of their close friendship during the first stages of Ellison's writing career. In 1941 review Ellison praised *Native Son* highly. Four years later he was eloquent in his description of Wright's most important achievement.

He has converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and 'going-underground' into a well to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America. (qtd. in Fischer 355)

Number of critics have claimed that the prototype of the narrator's subterranean room in *Invisible Man* is found in Wright's overheated novella, *The Man Who Lived Underground*.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison constructed, from the fabric of his own background as a Negro, a nightmarish story of the brutal experiences endured by a young American Black man and their effect on his once naively idealistic psyche. Despite its theme, the book goes beyond the bounds of a traditional Negro novel. Ellison told

I am a novelist, not an activist. But I think that no one who reads what I write or who listens to my lectures can doubt that I am enlisted in the freedom movement. As an individual, I am primarily responsible for the health of American literature and culture. When I write, I am trying to make sense out of chaos. To think that a writer must think about his Negro-ness is to fall into a trap. (qtd. in Fischer 338)

Toni Morrison, meanwhile, helped promote Black literature and authors when she worked as an editor for Random House in the 1960s and '70s, where she edited books by such authors as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones. Morrison herself would later emerge as one of the most important African American writers of the twentieth century. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. Among her most famous novels is *Beloved*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988. This story describes a slave who found freedom but killed her infant daughter to save her from a life of slavery. Toni Morrison's historical trilogy includes *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992) and *In Paradise* (1998). Morrison continues to unearth key moments in African American history to explore the complex origins of Black identity and community. Her trilogy invokes and examines traumatic histories. Another important novel is *Song of Solomon*, a tale about materialism and brotherhood.

Morrison is the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

In 1982, Walker won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for her novel *The Color Purple*. An epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* tells the story of Celie, a young woman who is sexually abused by her stepfather and then is forced to marry a man who physically abuses her. The novel was later made into a film by Steven Spielberg. African American literature has become accepted as an integral part of American literature, with books such as *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley. It tells the story of Kunta Kinte, an 18th century African, captured as an adolescent and sold into slavery in the United States, and follows his life and the lives of his alleged descendants in the U.S. down to Haley.

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