

The Black American Spirit, the Birth of a Literature and Identity

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Received : 06 / 01 / 2024 ; Accepted : 12 / 01 / 2024, Published : 31 / 12 / 2024

ABSTRACT: *For blacks, Slavery was a regime of sorrow, degradation, and perpetual frustration. Nevertheless, the enslaved Africans retained their self-respect, fragments of their ancestral culture, and memories of their origins, and achieved some measure of fulfillment even in their bonds. Their essential victory is demonstrated by their written works that portrayed their personality, their suffering, and their fight for dignity. This paper is concerned with the Afro-American literature regarded as the most vital tool for the Afro-Americans to react, through centuries, against Slavery and later against racial segregation.*

KEYWORDS: African-Americans; African Literature; Segregation; Slavery

RÉSUMÉ : *Pour les Noirs, l'esclavage était un régime de tristesse, de dégradation et de frustration perpétuelle. Néanmoins, les esclaves africains conservaient leur estime de soi, des fragments de leur culture ancestrale et la mémoire de leurs origines, et parvenaient à un certain épanouissement même au sein de leurs liens. Leur victoire essentielle est démontrée par leurs écrits qui décrivent leur personnalité, leurs souffrances et leur combat pour la dignité. Cet article se concentre sur la littérature afro-américaine considérée comme l'outil le plus vital permettant aux Afro-Américains de réagir, à travers les siècles, contre l'esclavage puis contre la ségrégation raciale.*

MOTS-CLÉS : Afro-américains ; Esclavage ; Littérature africaine ; Ségrégation

Introduction

Afro-American literature is a vast subject since it originates from the original African literature. This latter had never been written but existed only in the memories of men who had inherited it from generation to generation. This literature coexisted through legends, folk tales, and songs and continued to exist, transported by the enslaved people to the new world. It acquired, through time, a unique American aspect. However, what will be focused on in this paper is how this African American literature was created and from what it was inspired, the aim for which this literature was created, and how it finally became a literary Negro renaissance.

Granted that it is impossible to make a complete separation between literary and historical concerns in a study of this nature, it is then necessary to have first a glance at the history of that enslaved people, and so, this work will give an account of the arrival of the first enslaved people on the American soil, and describe how blacks were treated, their conditions of life and their deep suffering from the loss of their dignity and the right to be treated as "men," which was, the reason that made the blacks react in a literary way. Then, it will deal with the War of Secession since Slavery was one major cause of it, and the abolition of Slavery finally gave freedom to enslaved people but exposed them, once again, to a hard reality: this freedom was not so incredible since their souls were still in prison.

They were considered as an inferior creation and were always put aside in close ghettos characterized by poverty, frustrations, unemployment, and drugs. Once more, Negroes undertook a war for self-assertion. Some events of this struggle will be stated in this work, such as the anti-Negro policy, the period of riots and lynching, and the Supreme Court Decision of 1954.

Concerning the literary aspect of this work, it was necessary to go far enough to the first lights of the literary revolt of the Negroes, which paved the way to the real struggle for identity that blacks lived in the twentieth century and which led to the New Negro Renaissance. The nineteenth century was the time when Negroes, and especially the newly formerly enslaved people, started to produce literary works. These writers, such as Frederick Douglass, were the eye-witnesses through whom the sufferings of Negroes under the institution of Slavery were reflected. The works produced by nineteenth-century writers were generally autobiographies where the first-person point of view was used because all importance was given to their feelings and testimony to reflect the feelings of the other enslaved people.

Then came the first planters of an Afro-American literary revolt at the beginning of the twentieth century. A group of black writers like Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles Wedell Chestnutt permitted a fresh start to move to other matters. Biographies were no longer the basis of Negro writings, but the principal subject became the worries and problems of the Negroes. This was the beginning of the New Negro Renaissance. The first real literary revolt started in 1925 and lasted until the 1940s. This literature, led by such writers as Richard Wright, was a literature of self-assertion. The works were generally autobiographies or inspired by reality, such as the masterpiece of Richard Wright, *Native Son*. and his autobiography *Black Boy*, where the first person's point of view was used. This is a literature of protest and a search for an identity, transmitted through the writer's life, deep feelings, and disappointment in Harlem. In this Northern ghetto, blacks are living in a deep loneliness and a closed circle.

The third period of the New Negro Renaissance is that when the Negro witting came of age. Hens, the protest was no longer the basis of Negro writing, but integration became the policy that black writers followed to reach an identity. Transitional writers such as James Baldwin were no longer centered in their writings but used the third person point of view. That is, they finally left the autobiographies and started to speak about the feelings and lives of other black brothers, to go beyond the description of racism and its hardship to speak about its effects upon blacks as American citizens. They tried to expose solutions to impose themselves in the community and to follow the mainstream of American literature by treating other subjects such as drugs, poverty, sexuality, and so on. This period lasted until the 1960s. The variety of the policies that black intellectuals followed in different periods to acquire an identity may have created differences between black intellectuals. However, this slow progression and diversity of opinions is strong proof of the desire of the blacks to liberate their spirit from the white man's dominance and of their unity in having only one aim, which is to gain an identity.

The Background to Afro-American Literature

Both the man of letters and the historian are entangled in history. However, the writer's undertaking commences where that of the historian comes to a close. History significantly affects the creation of literature; however, literature goes beyond history and becomes a medium for writers to proclaim their ideology. Accordingly, all the historical events that the Negro went through, from Slavery to modern times, forged his personality and created, during the first twenty years of the twentieth century, a literary movement to impose his existence which is the Negro Renaissance.

Slavery

The roots of Slavery go as far back as the sixteenth century. Slavery as a regime of incessant labor was nothing abnormal. There had been incessant labor in Africa. Moreover, the new land needed robust, obedient, and productive servants to build and develop a new civilization. The slave trade was begun in the sixteenth century by English traders. John Hawkins was the founder of this inhuman commerce. He had captured Negroes from West Africa, chiefly from Senegambia and Angola, then took them to the Spanish colonies in the West Indies. The trade was triangular. A ship would leave Britain with cloth and spirits for

Africa. Then, the goods were exchanged for hundreds of Negroes, captured by slave traders or by enemy tribes, and taken to the West Indies or the American colonies. The ships were loaded with sugar, Tobacco, and other goods there and brought back to England. The slave trade began during the early seventeenth-century vital commerce.

During the seventeenth century. The American planter community engaged indentured servants, but they were temporary and too expensive. As enslaved people became available, they seemed the ideal answer to the economic problem. Both Indians and blacks were enslaved; however, Indians seized the opportunity of knowing their lands and fled into the wilderness at the first opportunity. Blacks then gradually became synonymous with enslaved Americans, especially in the Southern states.

The Negroes brought to the American plantations lost all their dignity and human liberty as soon as they reached this land and started to live a tough life. Their cabins were severely built, leaky, unglazed, and unhealthy. The slave food was generally maize and bacon or pork, eked out by what could be hunted or stolen; it was deficient in vitamins and variety. Negro clothes and shoes were the cheapest and were seldom provided in enough quantity, so most enslaved people went dirty, barefoot, and in rags. No laws existed to protect enslaved people, and even if a master whipped an enslaved person to death, he might escape punishment. Blacks were regarded as an inferior order of creation. This idea of inferiority was not shocking at all.

Slaveholders had a robust religious pretext to subject the blacks to such treatment without remorse. This pretext is represented in a story existing in the Bible, saying that Noah, the biblical patriarch, had drunk too much wine. Lying on the soil, naked and completely drunk, he had been respectfully covered by his sons Sam and Japhet, but his third son Cham dared to ignore his father's nakedness. When Noah woke up, Noah knew what had happened and blessed his sons Sam and Japhet and all their descendants, whereas Cham was cursed by changing the skin color of his son Cham and his lineage into black.

Frustration of the personality is sometimes more challenging to measure than the more material forms of oppression. Enslaved people could not own property, could not protest, or ask for lost rights, and might not be taught to read or write, so enslaved people wasted generations of talent and energy. The only richness that Negroes possessed was their original folklore. During that period, we cannot yet speak about accurate literature because these primitive Africans did not have any knowledge of reading or writing and were not allowed to. Their African motherlands were considered a society without literature because it was not written in books. However, their traditional folklore had survived and represented the only kind of resistance against Slavery and oppression.

This folklore was carried out through African myths, legends, tales, riddles, proverbs, and spirituals, with their message of divine consolation and ultimate joy. Then arose directly from the slave experience, above all, the feeling that life is a burden, and death to indenture is to sign a contract with someone to work as an apprentice—an opportunity to lay it down. This feeling was represented in one of George Moses Horton's poems (Huges, 1996: 20):

Alas! and am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain?
Deprived of all created bliss,
Through hardship, toil, and pain!
How long have I in bondage lain,
And languished to be free!
Alas! and must still complain-
Deprived of liberty.

Oh, heaven! and is there no relief.
This side the silent grave-
To soothe the pair -To quell the grief.
And the anguish of a slave?

None of the unbearable conditions of life shocked the American planters since only money and profit interested them. Through centuries, Slavery became a fact of American life, and the planters gradually became dependent upon Slavery for their standard of living, especially in the Southern States. However, in parallel, new literary vogues appeared, among them sentimentalism, the Quakers movement, and the Transcendentalist philosophy, which all contributed to the fight for human rights and the liberation of enslaved people.

In 1823, the English reformer William Wilberforce established an anti-slavery society. Thus, by the early nineteenth century, humanitarians such as Wilberforce had begun to attack Slavery on moral grounds, and it was abolished in all British territories by 1834. In the United States, the Abolition Movement complained against Slavery in the South, and the issue became one of the causes of the Civil War.

The Civil War and the Abolition of Slavery in America: North and South

The most commonly mentioned reason for the Civil War was the repressible conflict that the North and the South were two divergent societies based on conflicting economies. In the North, the Yankees were agriculturists, traders, and craftsmen, considerably marked by the puritanical tradition. They were also hard-working and economical, fighting against unproductive soil. Wisdom, modernity, and democracy were the principles of the North.

On the other hand, many Southern planters were of middle class and aristocrats and had no intention to change. The Southern States were rather agrarian, with rich and productive soil. However, their way of life in the extensive plantations, the climate, and the introduction of Slavery gave them very early particular characters. Besides this, the morals and customs contributed to opposing the two regions.

In the South, people enjoyed theater and dance and used to drink a lot. In New England, theater had been around for a long time. Nevertheless, culture, books, instruction, and education were more attentively considered. The Puritans wanted their children to learn rapidly to read and study the Scriptures. Harvard College, for instance, was founded as soon as 1636, and Yale in 1701. However, we must stress that the distinction between North and South was founded on Slavery. This aspect went more profound to the very element of the civilization of each, and that the Union, instead of being the bound of diverse states, is instead to be described, at a certain period of history, as the forced alliance and a rough companionship of two very different peoples. Nathaniel Hawthorne expressed in a letter to a British friend the cause of the war:

We ... have gone to war, and we need more, or at least a very misty idea of what we are fighting for. It depends upon the speaker, and that again depends upon the section of the country in which his sympathies are enlisted. The Southern man will say: We fight for state rights, liberty, and independence. The Middle Western man will avow that he fights for the Union. Our Northern and Eastern man will swear that from the beginning, his only idea was liberty for the blacks and the annihilation of Slavery. All are thoroughly in earnest, and all pray for the blessing of Heaven to rest upon the enterprise. The appeals are so numerous, fervent, and yet so contradictory that the Great Arbiter to whom they so piously and solemnly appeal must be sorely puzzled how to decide. (Inge 1988, 277)

The North naturally found, or imagined, in Slavery the leading cause of the distinctive civilization of the South, its higher sentimentalism, and its superior refinements of scholarship and manners. It revenged itself on the cause, diverted its envy in an attack upon Slavery, and defamed the institution as the relic of barbarism, the sum of all villainies. And even reasonable Northerners, as Abraham Lincoln¹ feared radical Southerners would try to spread Slavery all over the nation and that they could attempt to reopen the slave trade to expand the system.

However, whatever may have been the defamation of the institution of slavery history cannot be written without recognizing contributions and naming prominent results beyond the domain of controversy. It bestowed on the world's commerce in a half-century a single product, whose annual value was two hundred million dollars. It exhibited the picture of a land crowned with abundance, when starvation was unknown and where many fertile regions accessible only to the labor of the Africans were brought into usefulness and blessed the world with their production, as mentioned by George Fitzhugh (Fitzhugh 1854)

"In the last place, the Negro race is inferior to the White race, and living in their midst, they would be far outstripped or out in the case of free competition. Gradual but certain extermination would be their fate. We presume the maddest abolitionist does not think the Negro's providence of habits and money-making capacity at all compare to those of the Whites. This defect of character will alone justify enslaving him if he is to remain here. In Africa or the West Indies, he would become idolatrous, savage, and cannibal or be devoured by savages and cannibals. At the North, he would freeze or starve".²

So, Southerners defended Slavery more and more because they were afraid that the North would attack Slavery where it already existed to disturb the historic labor system of the South and display race against race to the destruction of both. For that reason, one of the bloodiest wars fought by man before the twentieth century started.

Drifting into the War:1851

The American Civil War remains in minds as the most horrible war before the twentieth century, where three hundred fifty thousand men of the Union army and two hundred fifty thousand men from the Confederate army were Killed.

The nomination of A. Lincoln, as President of the U.S. in 1860, was only a justification for the clash of the war. The Republicans elected this little-known man for the Presidency on a strictly sectional vote. His election symbolized the South alienation from the national government and appeared as menacing to the South. Shortly after Lincoln's election, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas pitted themselves against the remaining states in the Union. She gathered a special session to consider secession. The Southern states wanted to create a new confederation based on what they considered the original principles of the founding fathers. The seven states

¹ Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865). born in Harden, Kentucky, studied laws, won several political posts in Illinois, and made two unsuccessful bids for the U.S. Senate in 1854 and 1858. When nominated as the Republican candidate for the Presidency in 1860, and became the sixteenth President of the U.S.A. and was elected again in 1864.

² George Fitzhugh (1806-1881) was a lawyer and sociologist who specialized in criminal cases and devoted his thoughts to the political economy of the defended South in *Sociology for the South* or *The Failure of Free Society*. He was an ardent believer that Slavery was a just and human system.

met at Montgomery, Alabama, in February 1861 to form the Confederate States of America and chose Jefferson Davis³ of Mississippi as an executive officer.

Lincoln could not halt the coming conflict when he came to the Presidency. However, he tried desperately to heal the breach with a conciliatory policy, announced in his inaugural address in March 1861:

"...Before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of our national fabric, with all its benefits, memories, and hopes, would it not be wise to ascertain precisely why we do it? Will you hazard so desperate a step, while there is any possibility that any portion of the ills you fly from, have no greater real existence? will you, while the certain ills you fly to are greater than all the real ones you fly from-will you risk the commission of so fearful a mistake?". (Inge 1988, 341)

The President reaffirmed his willingness to protect the institution of Slavery in the South and proposed moreover to enforce the fugitive slave road with the same dedication that he would suppress the foreign slave trade. However, Lincoln remained inflexible in opposing the extension of Slavery and that single issue, symbolic as it was, the Union collapsed, and on April 12, 1861, the shot batteries opened fire on Fort Sumter, sounding the first shot of the war.

At the beginning of the war, Lincoln proclaimed a blockade of the southern coasts, and although this was at first extremely weak, by 1863, it became highly influential. It prevented shipments of cotton to Europe and the importation of munitions. The Confederacy, its factories running short of machinery and materials, its railroads falling into decay, was nearing the end of its resources. On the other hand, the Northern states seemed more prosperous than ever, their mills and factories running full blast and their workforce being restored by immigration. However, The Confederacy thought on until further resistance became almost impossible. The Union government had significant advantages on the diplomatic front. So, early in 1864, Ulysses S. Grant⁴ was made Commander of all the Union armies. Finally, Robert E. Lee⁵ had to abandon Richmond, and on April 9, 1865, he surrendered his army at Appomattox. During the years of war, the North aimed both at the preservation of the Union and the elimination of the institution of Slavery. 1863, President Lincoln proclaimed all slaves to be free in his Emancipation Proclamation. Two years later, eight months after the end of the war, on December 18, 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was adopted. It reads: *"Neither Slavery nor involuntary servitude except as a punishment for a crime where of the party shall have been only convicted shall exist within the United States or any place subject to their jurisdiction."* However, some Americans did not consider the freedman a free man and citizen. The road to freedom was long, and it was continuing. The black abolitionist of the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass, said:

³ J. Davis (1808-1889). born in Todd County, Kentucky, he studied at Transylvania, served his military service in Wisconsin, and then studied history and politics. He was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1847 served as secretary of war under Buchanan from 1853 to 1857, and then designed in 1861 to become President of the Confederacy

⁴ Ulysses S. Grant (1822-85) was a general of the U.S. Army during the Civil War and President of the U.S. He attended school until he was appointed to West Point. In 1843, he served in various posts until he resigned as a natural estate agent and clerk. He entered the service in 1861 from Illinois as a colonel and then rose to Commander of U.S. armies. His two terms as President started in 1868. He wrote America's most successful book, *Personal Memories of U. S. Grant* (1885-86).

⁵ R. E. Lee (1807-70) He served as a junior officer in the Engineering Corps but only distinguished himself in the Mexican War. He rose to colonel as he served as superintendent of West Point. In 1861, he resigned his commission with the U.S. Army and commanded the Virginia forces in the Confederate army. He surrendered to General Grant on April 9, 1865.

"No one can tell the day or the month, the month or the year upon which Slavery was not even told when it began to be a vice or the sin; no man can tell where one wave and another end. The claims of Slavery with us were loosened by degrees." (Puckre 1993, 02)

Racial Segregation

Now that the South had been defeated, it had to be reconstructed and restored to its proper relationship with the Union. In broad terms, the purpose of Reconstruction was to wind up the affairs of the Confederacy, get the Southern states into the Union, repair and reanimate the shattered mechanisms of national politics and administration, and also assure the newly emancipated Negro not only his freedom but his political and civil rights. However, Abraham Lincoln did not live to see the final emancipation of blacks from Slavery. Eight months before the adoption of The Thirteenth Amendment", an assassin's bullet ended his life.

While the radical Republicans debated how best to reconstruct the South, the defeated states themselves began to take effective action within their legislatures to maintain white supremacy over the formerly enslaved people. Within months after the conclusion of the war, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Louisiana had implemented so-called "Black Codes" or "Jim Crow Laws" to govern the conduct of the Negro, and generally to define the Negro's status as that of a second-class citizen.

These laws were extended to all forms of public activity, frequently under the force of law but as a matter of custom and tradition. Public accommodation was strictly segregated; blacks were barred from white hotels, restaurants, and theaters. Trains, depots, and wharves were also segregated. In 1896, the Supreme Court upheld the validity of separate but equal transportation. After that, the Jim Crow principle was applied with inexorable logic. Free access to the marketplace was denied to blacks. Most important of all, in many Southern states, the greatest liberty was denied to blacks: the right to vote.

Little by little, Southern whites won back-home rule. In part, they did this by violence and intimidation. They created secret societies like the Ku Klux Klan, which was an association founded by an old Confederate from Tennessee in 1865. It aimed to prevent blacks from exercising their rights as citizens. Moreover, the 1900 to World War II period represented a subtle but essential turning point in the black American experience. When the century opened, conditions seemed almost hopeless, and blacks were indeed a downtrodden people. The years between 1900 and 1925 were harsh years for the American Negro and segregation had become the law of all Southern states.

Threats and violence alienated Blacks in addition to insults and injury. The Negro was caricatured even in the best periodicals of the American press. This press was used to convince most of the nation that the Negro was either a child or a brute, and whatever else he was, he was undoubtedly the White man's inferior. Indeed, by the 1920s, a wave of violence swept the nation and frightened the Negroes. Lynchings and riots took place in Southern cities like Atlanta, and Houston, some Northern states such as Omaha, Chicago, and the nation's capital. In 1915, 69 Negroes were lynched, and the Ku Klux Klan was revived to keep to White supremacy. After World War, fought supposedly upon the principles of democracy, the situation worsened. Between June and December 31, 1919, there were 25 riots. That of Chicago left 38 deaths, 537 injured, and over a thousand homeless black families. In that same year, eighty-three Negroes were lynched, ten of them in the uniform of their country.

As a consequence of this segregation, many personalities appeared to fight for the black cause. Among these men were Booker T. Washington⁶, Philip Randolph⁷, and William Edward Burghart Du Bois⁸, who became this group's most prominent black spokesman. In 1905, he led a meeting to inaugurate an organized program of public agitation for black rights. In 1909, Du Bois and other conference participants joined with White liberals to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This organization was for equal education opportunities and

Complete enfranchisement of Black Americans adopted tactics, agitation, and court action to realize these goals. During its first half-century of existence, the organization's primary objective was to secure legislation in voting, civil rights, housing, and education. It campaigned against all forms of private and public discrimination, especially in federal employment and military service. Although young black militants presently consider NAACP as a conservative organization, up until 1960, it was the most effective weapon against racial injustice that the nation had and helped to make possible the freedom of expression that blacks enjoy today. Regardless of its intention, the NAACP was primarily a middle-class effort. It did bring new hope to the American Negro, and especially the middle-class Negro, and prepared the ground for that general literary upsurge called The New Negro Movement.

Interracial reform, even with the help of activist White liberals, moved very slowly, and it took the extensive disruptions of World War II to shatter established patterns of segregation. Many Whites became aware of the contradiction in fighting the racist philosophy of Nazism in Europe while permitting racial discrimination at home. In this context, the campaign for black rights broadened. The NAACP piled up victory after victory in the courts concerning segregation in housing and interstate transportation. Blacks participated in World War II and became more aggressive and vigorous in the demand for their rights. They had proved themselves in battle and wanted Americans to live up to the ideals they had fought and died for.

By the summer of 1960, the question of the status of blacks had become a major political issue. The two major political parties participating in the presidential campaign 1960 considered the significance of the black vote in a close election. There were one million black voters registered in twelve Southern states. Both parties made strong stands for racial justice and equality. The election of 1960 was close, and blacks had reasons to believe that they shared in the victory of John F. Kennedy.

On April 13, 1963, the most critical direct demonstration was in Degan Birmingham, Alabama, under the leadership of Dr. King and the Southern Christian Conference. The demonstrators demanded fair employment Opportunities, desegregation of public facilities, and the creation of a committee to plan desegregation. The number of participants was significant, and a large number of them were arrested. Police officers and their dogs attacked the marchers. The police action triggered sympathetic demonstrations all over the nation. The Birmingham Demonstration was very important because it compelled the American

⁶ Booker T. Washington (1856-1915). Born enslaved person in Virginia and freed with the Emancipation Proclamation. 1881, he became Head of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama. After delivering his famous "Atlanta Compromise Speech" in 1895, Washington was recognized as the chief spokesman for black Americans. In 1900, he organized the National Negro Business League, which emphasized black thrift and black capitalism.

⁷ A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979). In 1925, he founded and was elected President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, which fought for recognition from the railroad companies, as an elder statesman of the civil organizer of the March of Washington 1963.

⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois (1868- 1963) was an editor and an educator who obtained a doctorate from Harvard in 1895. He was the editor of *The Crisis*, the NAACP magazine. Throughout his life, he criticized the society which tolerated discrimination. In 1961, at 93, Du Bois moved to Ghana.

people to face the problem of discrimination in a way they had never done before. For the first time in American history, the President appeared before the nation and declared that race discrimination was a real issue. However, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.

Lyndon B. Johnson, the thirteenth president of the United States, was quick to make known his strong support of Kennedy's desegregation policy, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, the most far-reaching and comprehensive law in support of racial equality ever enacted by Congress, giving protection to citizens against discrimination and segregation in voting, education, and the use of public facilities. It forbade discrimination in public places, established a federal community Relations Service to help solve civil rights problems, and a federal Equal Employment Opportunity.

Blacks started to believe that a semblance of equality might be attained and that their dream was nearly reached. This dream was perfectly represented in one of the greatest speeches in American history, given by Martin Luther King Jr, entitled: "I Have a Dream": "Four little children will one day live in a nation where the color of their skin will not judge them but by the content of their character." He also declared in the same speech:

"When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants, and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spirituals: Free at last. Free at last. Thank God. Almighty, we are free at last." (Puckrein 1993, 08)

The New Negro Renaissance:

During the early years of the twentieth century, a significant number of Negroes were living in New York, especially in Harlem. One of the sayings of the period was: "The Jews own New York, the Irish control it, and the Negroes enjoy it." This saying was true to a certain extent since Harlem gathered and unified the Negro community, and the Negroes admired their city, romanticized it and, above all, had a good time in it. Therefore, Harlem itself played an important role in preparing the ground for the Negro Renaissance, since many black writers emerged from there, and the best-known writers of the period, even born elsewhere, were drawn to Harlem, the New Negro Mecca, which represented their property in a limited sense. Ralph Ellison⁹said:

"To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city overcrowded and exploited politically and economically; Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth," For the New Negro Renaissance is also called the "Harlem Renaissance." (Ellison 1966)

Afro-American literature was not very old prior to the Civil War. Some novels and poems were published by Afro-American writers such as Phillis Wheatley, and the writings of Frederick Douglass were well known, and his slave narrative remains, until today, a work of distinction. Nevertheless, it was only with the advent of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles W. Chestnutt, towards the end of the nineteenth century, that works that qualified as literature were published.

⁹ Ralph Ellison: Born in Oklahoma City in 1914, he left the South in 1936; Moreover, he met R. Wright after 1937, and he wrote and published some regular articles and short stories for *New Masses*, *The Negro Quarterly*, and other periodicals. He published two major books: *Invisible Man* (1952) and *Shadow and Act* (1964).

During the early twenties, several Afro-American novelists and poets succeeded in publishing their works; even the great scholar W. E. B. Du Bois tried his hand at creative writing in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, written in 1903. In the 1920s, at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, Afro-American writers had to overcome many obstacles to make themselves considered. This is due to the American historical events, such as the Civil War, Reconstruction, the post-reconstruction period, during which the Afro-Americans were virtually deprived of their meager constitutional rights, the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, and the two world wars.

The Afro-American intellectuals were probably more responsive to those events than the whites because of their dark complexion. These writers were Claude Mc Kay, Ana Bontemps, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, and Ralph Ellison. They fulfilled their artistic talents and revealed their community's predicament through novels such as Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Wright was the first Afro-American novelist to clear with slum life in Northern Cities and approach it through the naturalist tradition, in addition to the novels of some white writers such as Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1891), Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906).

White Americans never expected this Negro Renaissance because they never gave the "Negro" writers any severe criticism, simply because the fact that a Negro could write was surprising. The Afro-American author was not expected to play a significant role in American culture, and also because the authentic black voice was not wanted, by fear of its rage and indignation.

Richard Wright, like the other Negro Renaissance authors, believed in hard work, self-control, and personal initiative to show the pervasiveness of racism in America. Before his masterpiece *Native Son* (1940), most of the novels of black Americans either avoided racial issues or were in the apologetic tradition, which portrayed heroic "Negro" characters whom white racists physically victimized. By the advent of the Harlem Renaissance, a new trend in protest literature appeared by presenting a character psychologically threatened by racism. The examples of *Native Son* and the autobiography of R. Wright *Black Boy* (1945) evoked the production of similar novels during the 1940s.

According to the wave of change and fight of the Blacks for their rights by the beginning of the twentieth century, a mood of change was also visible in terms of literature, revealing that the Afro-Americans would no longer tolerate second-class status and provoked a recognition of the Negro cultural richness. This mood for change was caught in Langston Hughes¹⁰, who formed a group in the Harlem section of New York City to exchange ideas.

As spokesman for the group, Hughes published an article, "The Negro Artist and the Racist Mountain," which amounted to a public declaration of the intent of Hughes and his contemporaries to break from their literary heritage and to initiate a new trend in Negro literature. For new black writers, Harlem and its people were to inspire much of their artistic works. Many other Afro-American authors, such as R. Ellison and James Baldwin, who advocated total integration as an answer to racial segregation, found themselves in the limelight. For, R. Ellison wrote:

"No matter how strictly Negroes are segregated socially and politically, on the level of the imagination, their ability to achieve freedom is limited only by their individual aspiration, insight, energy, and will to do so. He was as much a product of his reading as of his painful experiences,

¹⁰ Langston Hughes: Born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, he studied at Columbia College in New York and Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He traveled all over the world and wrote many novels: *The Weary Blues* (1926), *Not Without Laughter* (1930), *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1921) and *Ask your Mama* (1961) and *Selected Poems* (1959).

and he made himself a writer by Subjecting himself to the writer's discipline as he understood it. Same is true of J. Baldwin, who is not the prophet of Negro storefront church but of the library, and the same is true of me". (Ellison 1966, 123)

This new wave of Afro-American writers is deliberately delving into black folk culture and traditions, exploring its history and creating its myths. This new type of Negro literature, which is chiefly directed at the Afro-American conscience, is considered a literature of protest. However, it is instead a literature of affirmation. The Negro Renaissance showed the Negro writer that his dual experience as Negro and as American had much to give to American letters. It gave the Negro writer a new irony, a new kind of satiric approach in the fight for equality.

However, the Negro Renaissance can be broken down into three phases. The first one was from 1900 to 1925 and was significantly influenced by writers called 'The Planters' such as Alain Le Roy Locke, Claude Mc Kay, and others who formed the roots of this renaissance. Moreover, 1900 was a starting point because it goes back enough to include Du Bois's earliest literary efforts.

Then, the second period went from 1925 to the 1940s, called 'the First Fruits Period' when literary groups were formed, attracted to the Harlem Mecca, and all of them felt that a new day had come and that there was a new Negro to seize it. The racial segregation of that period showed that justice for a black man was not possible in Southern courts and was not found too often in Northern ones. During these years, not a giant but an appreciable number of black intellectuals turned to communism, and the effect of this shift is found in the works of writers like Frank Marshall Davis, L. Hughes, and R. Wright. In the 1930s, events marked the end of the 'Nigger Heaven'; Harlem, that joyous city of Jazz and nightlife, experienced devastating riots, making the Negro realize that Harlem was just another ghetto with all of the frustration that poverty and the lack of employment opportunities fostered.

The period between the 1940s and the 1960s was the period of the integration movement, which gathered forces after World War II to fight racial segregation. Thus, the movement brought to the Negro a new sense of power in a country dominated by a resistant white majority. Beyond this achievement, however, civil rights leaders tended to see total integration of the black and white races as the final step in destroying the Negro's negative self-image. This movement and its success have affected Negro writings. That was the "Mainstream of Black American Literature," whose foremost writers were Chester Himes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and James Baldwin and many others stopped to deal with the traditional white-black problems as a protest against racism and set out towards the American mainstream, looking for new themes.

Conclusion

From the beginning, the primary stimulus of the blacks that made them create and then develop black literature was the Negro's self-image, self-concept, and "who am I?" problems. Written words were an alternate approach to the black man's problems of identity and self-esteem. In the nineteenth century, when Slavery was abolished, the Negro had been stripped of his culture and left with his heritage: an oppressed black man in a hostile white man's world.

The hard years of Slavery planted both in the white as well as the black psyche that the black man was an animal with no brain to think, with no heart to feel with, and no need to live, that he was only a thing that did not belong to the human race. Even if free, the black community was still profoundly affected by this treatment that they underwent for generations.

The first literary manifestation of the black man was a literature of necessity because it was necessary for the Negro to find a way to search himself for himself and for the white man to prove his existence to

him. At this stage, the Negro was fighting to prove first that he was a man and not an animal, and so it was not human to be treated as an enslaved person by another man.

The autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and his contemporaries represented the testimony of the treatment to which they were submitted. These writings were self-centered; they contained only the first-person point of view, and no other person participated in the story. This was first because the writers at this stage of Negro literature had not a great literary material. After all, nearly all the writers were self-educated men.

It was also because there was no need to make another hero participate in the story since they represented the main hero who thinks, speaks, and feels the suffering and hardness of Slavery and through whom all the sensations of Slavery were mirrored. The main aim of this newly-born literature was to react against the inferiority that blacks had to live with, and this was through the confessions of the writers.

In the late 1800's and the early 1900's, the systematized racist propaganda of the white man increased in intensity. The Negro was disenfranchised, mutilated, and lynched. The Negro became very unacceptable, and the white man projected the idea that the black man was a brute with a propensity to murder and ravaging sexual impulses, and so on. Such ideas were to inspire the whole system to organize discrimination, segregation, and the exclusion of Negroes from society.

Afro-Americans expanded a great deal of internal energy, trying to seek "individual freedom" in a white man's world. The Northern ghettos, and especially Harlem in New York, gathered these seekers for black identity who revolutionized the mind and soul of the Negroes, and made their first preoccupation the acquiring of identity and no longer being foreigners on land that became theirs, as well as that of the Whites.

These identity searchers were Negro artists and writers for whom the basis of writing was protest. They wanted to protest against their alienation and their separateness. This step was the second on the long path of the black literary movement for black existence and was a notable progression.

The protest writers sought a place in their nation and for self-assertion. Using their own experiences, they wrote all that they were enduring under racism and segregation. However, this protest was not the right way to achieve an identity; it served only to make the blacks aware of their situation and of their right to have better lives and a place equal to that of the whites. It also warned the Whites of that boiling rage in the hearts of the blacks.

The literary movement of the Negro did not stop there. The New Negro Renaissance was always in progression, fed by the strong desire for blacks to obtain an identity. The group of integrationist writers that appeared between the 1940s and the 1960s brought a new philosophy, a new sight to the Negro fight. The transition to new themes, that is, the integration with the literary mainstream, was considered to be a better solution for the Negroes' inquiries. The writings of this group were no longer self-centered but considered different matters through different characters in the story.

Their feelings and testimony were no longer the basis of the story, but the third-person point of view started to be used. The problems of the ghetto, such as homosexuality, drugs, and poverty, were analyzed deeply. These matters were more attractive and more enjoyable to read, even to the Whites, and that was the aim of the black writers, to make everybody know about the blacks' problems, not in the eyes of a white towards a black man, but with those of a man towards another man.

However, the years of the 1960s, which witnessed this integrational movement, were crucial for American literature. The decade of the sixties brought radical changes in the thinking of many black

Americans, and these changes were naturally reflected in the literature of the period. Prior to this period, Negro writers took it for granted that although they used Negro subjects, they were American writers. Their objective was to become a part of the mainstream of literary tradition and acquire an American identity. But a new Negro movement appeared, called the Black Art Movement, which insisted that black writing should repudiate the Western tradition, which is intrinsically anti-Negro, and has to be replaced through the thinking and creative productions of non-whites.

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