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The Crisis Of Representation In Postwar American War Fiction

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Abstract: The first half of the twentieth century marked a significant shift in American literature toward confronting the unsettling realities of modern life. Naturalist and socially engaged writers addressed social inequality, economic injustice, and moral crisis, while the Lost Generation introduced profound stylistic and philosophical innovations. However, despite the unprecedented historical trauma of World War II, postwar American fiction was frequently criticized for artistic superficiality and emotional evasiveness. This article examines the paradox of postwar American war literature through critical responses and postmodern narrative strategies. The study argues that postwar war fiction reflects not a lack of meaningful cultural material but an avoidance and repression of traumatic reality.

Keywords: American war fiction, postwar literature, postmodernism, World War II, trauma.

Introduction: American literature at the turn of the twentieth century increasingly reflected social unrest, economic inequality, and moral uncertainty. Naturalist writers such as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, followed by socially engaged authors like Sinclair Lewis, John Steinbeck, and John Dos Passos, exposed the structural injustices of American society. Works such as Main Street, The Grapes of Wrath, and Waiting for Lefty exemplify literature's commitment to social critique and reform. The cultural turbulence following World War I intensified these tendencies. Influenced by Freudian psychology, Marxism, and the collapse of traditional values, the so-called Lost Generation produced a remarkable literary revival. Writers such as Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Eliot, and the Harlem Renaissance authors reshaped American prose and poetry through stylistic innovation and existential depth.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis based on:

1. Historical-contextual approach, situating war fiction within its socio-historical moment;

2. Critical discourse analysis, examining contemporary literary criticism (R. W. B. Lewis, Edmund Wilson, John Aldridge, Marcus Klein);

3. Narrative and structural analysis, focusing on postmodern techniques such as fragmentation, temporal disorder, irony, and linguistic experimentation;

4. Comparative method, contrasting World War I and World War II literary responses.

Primary texts from American war fiction and secondary critical sources are analyzed to identify recurring patterns of thematic avoidance, repression of trauma, and formal innovation.

RESULTS

The first four decades of the twentieth century saw American culture far more willing to acknowledge the more disquieting aspects of modern life. Literature from the 1890s was marked by social protest, particularly in the works of naturalist writers such as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, and later writers such as Sinclair Lewis, John Steinbeck, and John Dos Passos. Lewis's novel "Main Street" (1920), Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" (1939) and Clifford Odets's play "Waiting for Lefty" (1935) are all examples of early twentieth-century American literature engaged with social inequality, economic disparity, and the need for reform.

Difficult economic conditions following the First World War and intellectual currents such as Freudian

psychology and Marxism contributed to the breakdown of traditional values, and young Americans of the 1920s were deemed "the lost generation." One result of the turbulence of these years was a rich literary movement spearheaded by writers such as William Faulkner, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and the writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

The very richness of American literature produced before World War II only served to highlight the failings of novels written in its aftermath. According to R. W. B. Lewis, American fiction since World War II "has been rich enough in quantity, but its quality has been somewhat puzzling and contradictory." There have been many novels of "clear artistic competence", but despite using the war as a marker of a new era and referring to a writer known for his writing on the first global conflict, Lewis was unable to explain the absence of "the decisive power of a Faulkner, or a Hemingway, or even a Scott Fitzgerald." (Cunnell, 2007, p. 4)

Post-war literature was defined as "superior entertainment best embodied in the New Yorker school of writers; writers who are always leading up to something that never happens". (Kerouac, 1951) Edmund Wilson was especially dismissive, saving his most biting comments for bestsellers such as Anya Seton's The Turquoise (1946), the crudity of which "has not even the rankness of the juicier trash." Jack Kerouac summed up the situation in an unpublished 1951 letter to Alfred Kazin by stating that "fiction is become fetid." (Lawrence, 1933, p. 9)

Although the vitality of writing by the Lost Generation was frequently linked to World War I, and although critics seemed dimly aware of the "something that never happens" in American writing following World War II, no one appears to have pointed to an avoidance of the horrific new realities ushered in by war as the reason for the era's literary banality. John Aldridge came close when he pointed out that "the novels of this war simply do not have the impact that those of the first war had nor, for that matter, do the novels that have been written so far about the aftermath." (Aldridge, 1969, p. 42) He suggested it is "as if they had been written too easily and their authors had too painless an apprenticeship." Utilizing common concerns about mass production, Aldridge described the era's literature as "machine-made," more a "prefabricated product" than a finely wrought piece of craftsmanship, "the sort that can be obtained if more problems are avoided than are met and overcome."

Like the majority of the era's critics, Aldridge turned away from this brief identification of the absence of painful problems to focus on what came to be a continually reiterated theme in literary discourse. For most intellectuals, the increasing move toward mass culture and the perceived failure of liberalism meant that the post-war writer had inherited what Aldridge described as "a world without values," the engagement with which "can never form the basis of successful literature." Critics even justified literary banality by pointing out that it was hardly the writer's fault if the materials they were obliged to work with lacked meaning. Marcus Klein suggested that the era had "no Puritanism, no Babbitry, no Booboisie, no Comstockery. No tyranny of ideology, no ideology at all in the proper sense, no hollow patriotism, no evangelical Christianity. No Prohibition, and scarcely any prohibitions, no prudery, no social complacency, no somnolent insularity." To suggest a lack of cultural material as responsible for post-war reticence is startlingly disingenuous given that Klein made this claim only a few years after the Holocaust, a devastating world war, the first combat use of nuclear weapons, and the start of a cold war that threatened complete annihilation. This popular line of reasoning saw critics ignoring what Philip Roth refers to as "demonic reality" (Roth, 1985, p. 90) in favor of a version of American life much more manageable: one that positioned bland suburban complacency as the cause of mediocre literature rather than as another symptom of the repression of recent trauma.

DISCUSSION

The growth of American writing in the postwar period has been affected not only by sharply depicted polarizations, but also by the ability to sustain variety and dialogue in the constructions of art. The culture, literature, film, and drama of the United States in the postwar period are subjects each of the contributors to this volume has approached from his or her own perspective. Yet all constitute a revelation of art forms that defy simple characterization as either purely traditional or experimental and reflect a feisty engagement with American life. The ensuing new fusions have produced cross-disciplinary critical approaches to art, recast even the conception of archiving books and manuscripts, and enriched discussions across the borders of forms and genres.

The growth and prominence of ethnic literatures are one of the remarkable features of postwar American writing. The many literatures that comprise ethnic studies incorporate, but redefine, traditions of American realism, aligning over time diverse narratives of diaspora, collisions with mainstream expectations, and even postmodern renderings of the current urban scene. These literatures unite the historical and the mythic. They explore the disruption and reconstitution of ethnic and American identity, and approach the

problem of modernity through the experience of cultural collision and change. Ethnic writing sometimes defies formal categories, as writers employing ethnic heritage contribute to a variety of literary genres and forms.

Postmodernism, from the literary point of view, is believed to reflect such people's attitudes toward the war as skepticism, black humor, or irony as well as it takes the development of literature itself back to realism. New features of postmodern writing emerge. Barry Lewis in The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism distinguishes among the following:

• temporal disorder, disrupting the chronology of the novel, retelling the past and providing deep details from different perspectives;

• pastiche, which arises from the feeling that everything has been done before, so writers can do nothing but paraphrase;

fragmentation, suggesting that the wholeness and completion associated with traditional stories is not preferred any more;

• looseness of association, carrying the meaning of 'no logic'. The text is usually put together in a loose order;

• paranoia, stressing the climate of anxiety, fear of losing our identity or being manipulated;

• schizophrenia, due to which a character's mind is split into several pieces or segments;

• vicious circles, appearing in fiction when both the text and the outer world blend, so that we can not separate one from the other;

• language disorder, which involves experiments with language.

"Postmodernism is, of course, only part of the total landscape, but like a mountain-range it looms over everything else, and plodding over its peaks and valleys is no easy task" (Lewis, 2001, p. 122)

Books in general and war novels in particular actually contain much more features than just those mentioned above. According to Barry Lewis' division, the reader might get a feeling that postmodern literature, reflecting the postmodern world as such, is based on nothing but disruptions and disorders, which results in illogical or even insane behavior of the characters. Entire society is falling apart, fast pace of technological development together with great discoveries in science and its frequent instances of misuse cause serious problems and these make the future uncertain for mankind.

"Because the years immediately following World War I had produced a literary revival, many critics in 1945 confidently assumed that history would repeat its pattern and immediately offer a new generation of Fitzgeralds, Hemingways, and Eliots. What these critics did not seem to realize was that the temper of the young men who went into the second war was almost exactly the reverse of that of the young men of 1917. The crusade of 1914 – 1918 to make the world safe for Democracy had not been repeated in 1939 – 1945, and an era of disillusionment and reevaluation was not to be expected". (Spiller, Thorp, Johnson, & Canby, 1953)

Although postmodernism as a literary movement does portray the world this way, it seems to be only one side of the coin. Books, or rather authors are able to 'offer' also the other and not so negative side, containing such motifs and symbols as friendship and trustworthiness, faith in skills and determination of an individual, importance of family representing the basic social unit, love and fellow-feelings, humanity, etc. These topics are believed to be characteristic for popular literature which – as the opposition to high literature – is simpler and more direct, as far as the story, the language, and the book's structure are concerned. However, it is the exception that proves the rule.

Most books tend to mix the vision of brighter and unspoiled future with worries concerning the opposite and from time to time these two ideas get in confrontation, depending on the author's wish to change the plot of the book and develop it even further. By strengthening one, weakening the other and vice versa, the author usually leads the reader into a state of doubt and expectation. In addition, by introducing some new characters as well as placing extra information, the plot becomes even more complicated. This makes the reader search for hints and details hidden somewhere in the text so that he could clearly understand the author's intentions.

What unites all war novels is portraying the war as such with all actions that went along this global conflict. However, the way of depicting particular events taking place between the years 1939 and 1945, can make the novels similar on one hand, but different on the other. There are certain aspects which help the reader recognize the parallels and contrasts. These may be considered the major focus of my thesis.

The language of war novels often follows the way real soldiers usually speak for the purpose of giving a true picture of a harsh military setting. This is described by Joseph J.Waldmeir as the writers' ability to report "the speech of servicemen, from its monotonous obscenity through its cluttered inarticulateness". Waldmeir also assumes that in this sense it is conceivable to notice the influence of Hemingway, whose style is based on short sentences and quick-flowing dialogues, providing a lot of details. At the same time, however, certain passages

may look unclear and clues hidden so that the reader is forced to guess now and then.

"One may just wonder whether the novels might not have been equally detailed without the example of "A Farewell to Arms", whether the novelists might not have decided independently that the most efficient way of communicating the emotions attendant upon combat to the reader is to present him with as objective and complete a portrait as possible of the ground upon which the action takes place. Even without Hemingway, it is likely that verisimilitude would be the war novelist's intent and detailed completeness his means of achieving it" (Waldmeir, 1969, pp. 1–20)

On the other hand, "the real war will never get in the books" as Walt Whitman stated at the end of the Civil War. He was particularly thinking of the "unspeakable side of the war, no longer so considered by the modern mind." "It is true that war's horrors, and their obvious counterparts in 'normal' civilian life, can still dismay us profoundly for a moment of clarifying awareness. But then they are quickly taken for granted, as though each separate instance were not a cry to us to set all other concerns aside and put things right". (Rosenthal, 1976, pp. vii–x)

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that post–World War II American war fiction should not be interpreted as artistically deficient or culturally impoverished. On the contrary, its apparent evasiveness signals a profound struggle with historical trauma and the limits of representation. Postmodern narrative strategies—fragmentation, irony, and temporal disruption—function as literary responses to experiences that resist conventional realism. The war novel thus evolves from direct representation of combat to an exploration of memory, repression, and ethical uncertainty. By examining what is omitted, displaced, or indirectly represented, postwar American war fiction reveals not the absence of meaning, but the enduring difficulty of articulating the full psychological and moral consequences of modern warfare.

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