

Civil Rights Movement in Literature

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During the 1960's, the African-American struggle for Civil Rights delineated a variety of approaches: the nonviolent tactics of Martin Luther King who headed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC, founded 1957), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, founded 1909); and the more drastic and aggressive methods of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam (organized 1930), the Black Panther Party that spearheaded a self-defense agenda (founded 1966), and the Black Power movement popularized by Stokely Carmichael. Groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (founded 1960, later Student National Coordinating Committee) initially subscribed to peaceful methods but gradually espoused more combative techniques. As slogans like "Black Is Beautiful" and "Black Power" became prevalent, African-American literature became more tuned in to the events of the decade, demonstrating theoretical approaches which, like the disparity in political ideology, were either conciliatory and encouraged dialogue, or were bitterly irate and sought vengeance and revolutionary change.

Rosa Parks' refusal in 1955 to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, fueled a series of zealous reactions that signaled the birth of the Civil Rights movement. Under Martin Luther King's leadership, African-Americans began to demand their rights as American

citizens. Black writers began responding to Civil Rights struggles by the late 1950's and early 1960's. Poets like Gwendolyn Brooks who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for *Annie Allen* (1949), Margaret Danner, Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, Melvin B. Tolson, Sterling Brown, and Mary Elizabeth Vroman, expressed their feelings and concerns for the conflict in their poetry. Others expressed themselves in short stories, plays, novels and essays. They include Ralph Ellison and his celebrated novel *Invisible Man* (1952), James Baldwin and his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Paule Marshall and her first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Lorraine Hansberry, Mari Evans, William Melvin Kelley, and Ernest Gaines. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), partly addressing segregated housing policies at the time, was the first play by an African-American woman to reach Broadway. Considered by some as "integrationist drama," much like the drama of Loftin Mitchell and Alice Childress, the play also earned Hansberry the honor of being the youngest American to receive the New York Critics Circle Award in 1959.

For the first time since the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's, events of the 1960's afforded Black writers the opportunity to explore and foreground the beauty and uniqueness of African-American culture. This concept was particularly aroused by the rigid prescriptions of the Black Arts and Aesthetic movements. African-American writers like Hansberry, Haki Madhubuti, Baraka, Askia Muhammad Toure, Langston Hughes, Lethonia Gee, Larry Neal, Odaro, Ahmed Alhamisi, and Reginald Lockett, openly celebrated and incorporated into their lives and their writings the stories, rituals, songs, and customs of their African and African-American ancestry. In addition to reclaiming and tapping from lost or disregarded Black aesthetic and social values, these movements mandated that Black literature be functional, express positive Black images,

cater primarily to the well-being of Blacks, and connect with the goals of the Civil Rights fight and the Black Power ideology.

After the riots in the urban ghettos in the mid-1960s, African-American poetry was used as a political weapon. Poets like Robert Hayden, Lucille Clifton, Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, Baraka, Alice Walker, Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, and Dudley Randall employed their poetry for communal purposes, as a dramatic voice primarily for all African-Americans, but sometimes expressing universal themes. Effects of the Black Power and Arts movement on the novelist and short story-teller was evident in the works of William Melvin Kelley (*Dem*, 1967), Ishmael Reed (*The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, 1967), and Ernest Gaines (*Catherine Carmier* 1964, *Of Love and Dust*, 1967 and *Bloodline*, short stories, 1968). Writers like Paule Marshall, C.H. Fuller, Jr., Ernest Gaines, Charlie Cobb, and Julia Fields also expressed the movement in short stories. Autobiographies and biographies appeared on the scene, proving to be very powerful and insightful. They include works like Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964), Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970). Playwrights like Baraka whose *Dutchman* (1964) propelled him into theatrical prominence; Douglas Turner Ward, well-known for his *Day of Absence* (1965); Charles Gordone and his highly celebrated *No Place to Be Somebody* (1967); and Ed Bullins, acclaimed for his *In the Wine Time* (1966); brought the new socioaesthetic and political awareness to the stage. Other playwrights of this period include Charles Patterson, Lonnie Elder III, Carol Freeman, Joseph White, and Ben Caldwell.

Some of the writers of this era were clearly more radical than others, moving away decisively from the integrationist and apologetic protest themes of the 1950's. Having given up

on deliberation and nonviolent methods that had proven insufficient, they sought more antagonistic styles and themes, dictating immediate and severe steps toward handling the crisis. Writers like Yusef Iman, Madhubuti, Sun-Ra, Larry Neal, Charles Anderson, Caldwell, and Baraka fall within this category. Baraka and Neal published *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* in 1968, a collection of essays, poetry, fiction, and drama by various Black writers. Both editors, describing African-American writers as "warriors" in the Foreword to the text, declared the arrival of a new era for Black art. Their anthology served as the birthplace and voice of the Black Arts movement which, Neal noted, condemned any principle that separated African-American writers from their communities. African-American art was ordained as an instrument for self-determination, justice, self-pride, and the revival of veritable aesthetic and cultural values that derive from the Black heritage. While many African-Americans upheld and advanced the proposals of the movement, other more conservative Black critics faulted it, claiming that it was creatively restrictive and prejudiced. But the Black Arts movement promoted Black literature and attracted a lot of attention to the genre. More and more independent publishers, both Black and White, began to explore and publish literature by African-American writers. With the increased availability of this literature, its readership-- Black, White and beyond--would grow simultaneously.

Suggested readings

Baraka, Amiri (LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal, eds. *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1968.

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- "Contemporary Literature." *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*. Eds. Jones A. Emmanuel and Theodore L. Gross. New York: The Tree Press, 1968. 350-561.
- "The Fifties and Sixties." *Black Literature in America*. Ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971. 304-425.
- "The Forties to 1970." *Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*. Eds. Richard A. Long and Eugenia W. Collier. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985. 440-625.
- "Integration versus Black Nationalism: 1954 to ca. 1970." *The New Cavalcade: African American Writing from 1760 to the Present*. Eds. Arthur P. Davis et al. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992. 3-454.
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- Worley, Demetrice A. and Jesse Perry, Jr., eds. *African American Literature*. Lincolnwood: National Textbook Company, 1993.

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