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The influence of civil war on American literature

[1] Nitin Kumar, [2] Dr. Ravindra Kumar

[1] Assistant Professor, PGDAV College, Department of English, University of Delhi, Delhi, India
[2] Associate Professor, Department of English, C.C.S. University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract
This paper traces the history of American poetry, drama, fiction, and social and literary criticism from the early 17th century through the turn of the 21st century. Even after more than 140 years the American Civil War continues to serve as a major source of inspiration for a plethora of literature in various genres. While only amounting to a brief period in American history in terms of years, this war has proved to be one of the central moments for defining the American nation since the second half of the nineteenth century. The facets of the Civil War, its protagonists, places, events, and political, social and cultural underpinnings seem to hold an ongoing fascination for both academic studies and fictional representations. Thus, it has been considered by many the most written-about war in the United States.

Keywords: civil war, American literature, political

Introduction

After the American Civil War, a new era of literature began: Realism. This was due to the radical changes in American society. The U.S. developed from an agricultural to an industrial society and money started to make the world go round. But along with industrialization and urbanization there came alienation the loss of the community for the individual, especially in big cities and this development was of course to be seen in literature, too.

"Now one scholar has come up with a new angle on this very old problem. In "From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature," Randall Fuller reminds us that the 1860s featured as talented a cohort of American writers as any decade could ask for — authors now known and loved by only their last names: Whitman, Emerson, Hawthorne, Dickinson, and Melville. Fuller carefully details how these writers experienced the war in their daily routines, their family lives, and their interlocking friendships.

What this group portrait reveals is that, while the Civil War may not have led to any lasting works of literature, it had a profound impact on the most important writers of its era. The war changed what they believed and how they wrote. After the shots at Fort Sumter, the North came quickly and patriotically together — "*flush'd in the face*," in Whitman's words, "and all its veins fiercely pulsing and pounding." But Fuller suggests that Whitman and his literary cohort soon became uncomfortable with this kind of certainty, even though they had played a large part in putting that certainty into place. America's first generation of great writers began experimenting with new literary forms, and began questioning their most dogmatic assumptions about the morality and effects of war."

As the scholar Richard Slotkin has noted, survey classes were organized chronologically, and the Civil War functioned as a dividing line between the first and second part. Fall classes generally focused on the great literature written during the so-called "American Renaissance" of the 1850s by Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville, while spring classes examined literary movements, like realism and modernism, which grew out of the Civil War. Even as the curriculum changed in the 1980s to include more women and minority writers, the war years remained absent.

This gap is not easy to fill: what counts as Civil War literature remains an open question. Must an author have had combat experience for his work to count as Civil War literature? None of the major canonical American authors were centrally engaged in the Civil War's military action, leading the critic Daniel Aaron to refer to it in 1973 as "The Unwritten War."

Yet the war loomed large in American authors' imagination. Whitman recorded his encounters with wounded soldiers in "Specimen Days." Drawing on newspaper and magazine accounts of the war action, Melville composed "Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War." This list grows significantly if we include Southern writers like William Gilmore Simms or James R. Randall, and grapple with the task of reading poetry meant to boost the Southern cause.

The picture becomes even more complicated when we consider women writers. Mary Chesnutt elevated diary writing to an art form when she recorded and eventually published her memories of the war. Louisa May Alcott fictionalized her nursing experiences in "Hospital Sketches." Emily Dickinson's most productive years fall into the early 1860s, and her seeming isolation in Amherst, Mass., belies, so the literary scholar Shira Wolosky argues, her poetry's deep engagement with the war. And while African-American writers often did not have the same access to writing that their white contemporaries enjoyed, newspapers like The New York Anglo-African provided important commentary on the political landscape alongside poetry and fiction.

That discovery will require us to set aside our expectations that Civil War literature should tell us in realistic terms about the devastations of the war. The unrealistic nature of this literature is a failure by our standards; for 19th-century readers, it was a mark of its success. As the historian Drew Gilpin Faust shows in "This Republic of Suffering," literature

provided solace; fiction offered meaning to otherwise incomprehensible facts. As the manner of death changed during the Civil War, and soldiers died far from their homes and loved ones, stories that tied the horrors of the war to the comforts of the hearth helped people cope with their losses

Literary comedians

Although they continued to employ some devices of the older American humorists, a group of comic writers that rose to prominence was different in important ways from the older group. Charles Farrar Browne, David Ross Locke, Charles Henry Smith, Henry Wheeler Shaw, and Edgar Wilson Nye wrote, respectively, as Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. (for Vesuvius) Nasby, Bill Arp, Josh Billings, and Bill Nye. Appealing to a national audience, these authors forsook the sectional characterizations of earlier humorists and assumed the roles of less individualized literary comedians. The nature of the humour thus shifted from character portrayal to verbal devices such as poor grammar, bad spelling, and slang, incongruously combined with Latinate words and learned allusions. Most that they wrote wore badly, but thousands of Americans in their time and some in later times found these authors vastly amusing.

The first group of fiction writers to become popular—the local colourists—took over to some extent the task of portraying sectional groups that had been abandoned by writers of the new humour. Bret Harte, first of these writers to achieve wide success, admitted an indebtedness to prewar sectional humorists, as did some others; and all showed resemblances to the earlier group. Within a brief period, books by pioneers in the movement appeared: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Old town Folks* (1869) and *Sam Lawson's Oldtown Fireside Stories* (1871), delightful vignettes of New England; Harte's *Luck of Roaring Camp, and Other Sketches* (1870), humorous and sentimental tales of California mining camp life; and Edward Eggleston's *Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871), a novel of the early days of the settlement of Indiana. Down into the 20th century, short stories (and a relatively small number of novels) in patterns set by these three continued to appear. In time, practically every corner of the country had been portrayed in local-colour fiction. Additional writings were the depictions of Louisiana Creoles by George W. Cable, of Virginia blacks by Thomas Nelson Page, of Georgia blacks by Joel Chandler Harris, of Tennessee mountaineers by Mary Noailles Murfree (Charles Egbert Craddock), of tight-lipped folk of New England by Sarah Oren Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, of people of New York City by Henry Cuyler Bunner and William Sydney Porter ("O. Henry"). The avowed aim of some of these writers was to portray realistically the lives of various sections and thus to promote understanding in a united nation. The stories as a rule were only partially realistic, however, since the authors tended nostalgically to revisit the past instead of portraying their own time, to winnow out less glamorous aspects of life, or to develop their stories with sentiment or humour. Touched by romance though they were, these fictional works were transitional to realism, for they did portray common folk sympathetically; they did concern themselves with dialect and mores; and some at least avoided older sentimental or romantic formulas.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain) was allied with literary comedians and local colourists. As a printer's apprentice, he knew and emulated the pre-war sectional humourists. He rose to prominence in days when Art emus Ward, Bret Harte, and their followers were idols of the public. His first books, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) and *Roughing It* (1872), like several of later periods, were travel books in which affiliations with postwar professional humorists were clearest. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), his best works, which re-created the life of the Mississippi valley in the past, were closest to the work of older humorists and local colourists. Despite his flaws, he was one of America's greatest writers. He was a very funny man. He had more skill than his teachers in selecting evocative details, and he had a genius for characterization.

The naturalists

Other American writers toward the close of the 19th century moved toward naturalism, a more advanced stage of realism. Hamlin Garland's writings exemplified some aspects of this development when he made short stories and novels vehicles for philosophical and social preachments and was franker than Howells in stressing the harsher details of the farmer's struggles and in treating the subject of sex. *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) and *Rose of Dutcher's coolly* (1895) displayed Garland's particular talents. These and a critical manifesto for the new fiction, *Crumbling Idols* (1894), were influential contributions to a developing movement.

Other American authors of the same period or slightly later were avowed followers of French naturalists led by Émile Zola. Theodore Dreiser, for instance, treated subjects that had seemed too daring to earlier realists and, like other Naturalists, illustrated his own beliefs by his depictions of characters and unfolding of plots. Holding that men's deeds were "chemical compulsions," he showed characters unable to direct their actions. Holding also that "the race was to the swift and the battle to the strong," he showed characters defeated by stronger and more ruthless opponents. His major books included *Sister Carrie* (1900), *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and—much later—*An American Tragedy* (1925).

Literature did not just offer consolation. As we see in a poem like James R. Randall's "Maryland, My Maryland," literature also actively shaped the way in which people experienced the war, and affected political events as they unfolded. Randall was a college tutor with limited previous writing experience. He wrote the poem – which today is the state song of Maryland – in one night in response to a specific event, when the 6th Massachusetts Regiment fired on civilians while marching through Baltimore. The poem did not just record what happened: it gave voice to the state's secessionists when it called on them to "Avenge the patriotic gore that flecked the streets of Baltimore." The poem fuelled anti-Union sentiment, and forced Gov. Thomas Hicks to call the assembly for a vote on secession. Published in The New Orleans Delta newspaper on April 26, 1861, and reprinted in newspapers throughout the region, the poem became a powerful anthem of the Southern cause: Mary Chesnutt copied the poem into her diary in January 1862, and a cadet named William Galt of the Virginia Military Institute wrote the poem into a wartime notebook. The emotional appeal of the literature was not just in the words, but also in the melodies that spoke to people's feelings about college friends and family holidays. Yet the poem could

quickly reclaim its political meaning, and serve as a comment on military events.

Afro American Literature

Apart from realism there was another important post - Civil War development: the rise of Afro American Literature. Former slaves, now freed had suddenly the time and the right to explore their creative talents. Thus a number of great Afro-American writers emerged. One of them was Booker T. Washington, who was not only a writer, but also the most prominent black leader of that time. In his autobiography „Up From Slavery" (1901) he described his own way towards freedom, a gift that he wanted to use to improve the lives of other Afro -Americans and to integrate them into the American society. He expressed this wish in his famous Atlanta Exposition Address in 1895.

Conclusion

The Civil War indeed takes a prominent thematic place in twentieth-century American literature, particularly since the 1980s. This claim might be surprising at first glance, since the Civil War as an historic event then already dated back more than 110 years. The prevailing significance of the war in American literary discourse can be explained by the far-reaching changes in the political, social, and cultural premises that have informed the reception of the Civil War both in scholarly and public discussions in the U.S. since the 1960s.We usually don't think of literature as changing the course of history, and if we do, we look for a specific cause and effect. But often, literature runs like a conversation through the Civil War – rousing to action one moment, giving rise to parody the next, tying news events to established images and appealing to feelings as much as to reason. We won't be able to understand how people experienced the war if we look for it only in realistic descriptions and through later lenses of literary taste.

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