

(1) African American Literature from 1940s to 1960s

Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes

Abolitionism

Europe

- started with the Enlightenment and became an influential moment seeking to abolish slavery and slave trade
- slavery was first abolished in France (1794) during the Revolution, though Napoleon re-established it (1802)
- Great Britain banned slave importation in the Slave Trade Act (1807), the United States followed a year later
- Great Britain became the first country to completely abolish slavery by the **Slavery Abolition Act (1833)**

America

- the United States banned slavery in the Northwest Territories¹ by passing the Northwest Ordinance (1787)
- the United States passed the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) enforcing individuals to report on a runaway slave
- the Civil War (1861–1865) confronted the Confederation of the South and the victorious Union of the North
- Lincoln's **Emancipation Proclamation (1865)** became the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution

Harlem Renaissance (1920s)

Features

- an African American cultural movement which sought to develop artistic but also political and social activities
- introduced the new themes of the pride of racial origin, celebration of ethnic groups and absence of legal rights
- enabled by the Great Migration from the rural South to the urban North, in particular the Northwest and East
- dissolved with the shrinking audience and publishing opportunities with onset of the Great Depression (1929)

Supporters

- supported by the **NAACP** (since 1909), the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People
- produced a seminal anthology of fiction, poetry and essays, *The New Negro* (1925), edited by **Alain Locke**
- launched the careers of Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston
- profited from the activities of the moderate Booker T. Washington as well as the militant W. E. B. Du Bois

Segregation

Public Transport

- Jim Crow Laws (1876–1965): introduced the segregation of whites and blacks who were 'separate but equal'
- **Plessy v. Ferguson (1892–1896)**: Homer Plessy, a black octolune, was arrested for sitting in a white coach on a railway in Louisiana, four years later the ruling put racial segregation under the protection of the federal law
- Rosa Parks (1913–2005): the first black woman who refused to give up her seat in a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, to a white man (1955), was arrested, which started a wave of non-violent protests, as the Bus Boycott

Educational Institutions

- **Brown v. Board of Education** of Topeka, Kansas (1954): Oliver Brown, a black man, fought for his daughter to be able to attend a nearer white school, Ferguson's decision was overruled and segregated schools abolished²
- Little Rock Nine (1957): Little Rock, Arkansas, was the first high school to enrol nine black students, the city governor disapproved and sent troops to prevent the Nine from entry, then US army was sent to guard the Nine
- Thurgood Marshall (1908–1993): a lawyer who legally challenged the segregation laws in the area of schools

Civil Rights Movement

Leaders

- an exacerbation of mostly non-violent protests led Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in the 1950s and 1960s
- **Martin Luther King Jr.** (1929–1968, assassinated): advocate of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience
- **Malcolm X**³ (1925–1965, assassinated): advocate of any means necessary to succeed, including violence
- Black Panther Party (1966–1976): a military party following Malcolm X and spreading the Black Power views

Actions

- the Nashville, Tennessee, sit-ins (1960): a series of large-scale protest sit-ins directed against lunch counters that refused to serve black people, the protesters kept on sitting peacefully at the counters till closing time
- March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (1963): a protest march attended by a quarter of million people, during which Martin Luther King delivered his most famous speech 'I Have a Dream' at the Lincoln Memorial
- **Civil Rights Act of 1964**: the result of the 1963 March, extended voting rights and outlawed racial segregation

Black Arts Movement (1965–1975)

Black Power

- an artistic branch of the Black Power Movement, started in Harlem by the writer and activist Amiri Baraka
- supported radical nationalists in their struggle against whites and promoted black pride and black aesthetics
- followed the new ethno-centric concept of an autonomous black culture independent from the white America

¹ Northwest Territories included the area east of the Mississippi River and north-west of the Ohio River.

² The responsibility to address the situation was left on individual schools, many adopted the label of private academies to avoid it.

³ Born Malcolm Little, dropped the white man's name, changing it to X, signifying the unknown name of his African ancestors.

Richard Wright (1908–1960)

- Biography**
- born into a family of an impoverished African American sharecropper on a cotton plantation in Mississippi
 - his father deserted the family (1913), his mother suffered her first stroke (1918) that left her partially paralysed
 - spent his childhood shuttled about among various relatives, also was placed for some time in an orphanage
 - finished his education at high school (1925), moved to Memphis where he took menial jobs and began writing
 - moved to Chicago (1927), moved to New York (1937), moved to Paris (1947) where he died as an expatriate
- Upbringing**
- the characteristic tone of anguish and anger in his work was inspired by the deprivations felt in the Deep South
 - the deprivation was physical, he was poor and often hungry, as well as psychological, intellectual and spiritual
 - his mother and his maternal grandmother raised him with belief in rigid morals and harsh corporal punishment
 - his education was limited but also restrictive, he was deliberately denied access to the books he most needed
 - found inner fulfilment in books by H. L. Mencken⁴, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson
- Chicago**
- the Depression made him go on relief, then joined the Federal Negro Theatre and the Federal Writer's Project⁵
 - became active in radical politics, began writing poetry for the leftist journals *New Masses* and *Partisan Review*
 - joined the Chicago John Reed Club⁶ (1933), then officially became a member of the Communist Party (1936)
- New York**
- became Harlem editor of the Communist newspaper *Daily Worker* after his move to New York City
 - co-edited the short-lived literary magazine *New Challenge* which published African American writers
 - at first struggled to work out the relationship between the techniques of fiction and the tenets of Marxism
 - left the Communists (1944) after an accusation of anti-Stalinist sentiments and resistance to party discipline
- Paris**
- visited France on the invitation of Gertrude Stein (1946), a year later returned to settle in Paris permanently
 - met Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir, immersed himself in existentialist philosophy
 - lectured in Europe on politics, racism and African American literature, published his collected lectures (1957)
- Writing**
- his early works focus on the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North
 - his later works use art as a weapon but insist on a balance between the didactic load and the artistic sense
 - seeks to merge the Marxist analysis of society, the Freudian system of psychology and literary naturalism
 - his feeling for the pain and pathos of African American life gives his work the melancholy residue of the blues
 - his characters struggle against accepting the place of powerlessness and the role of subservience and silence
 - the struggle of characters leads into defiance that society regards as criminal and punishes by social rejection
 - sometimes the struggle leads characters directly into criminality and the consequent threat of legal punishment
 - haunted characters attempt to force people who occupy positions of power to see, hear and acknowledge them
- Early Work**
- 'Blueprint for Negro Writing'** (1937)
- an influential essay published in the *New Challenge* declaring his independence from bourgeois literary forms
 - argues that a Marxist conception of society offers the maximum freedom for an African American writer
- Lawd Today*** (written 1937, published 1963)
- an experimental work about twenty-four hours in the life of a middle-class Chicago African American
 - modelled self-consciously after James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* (1930–1936)
- Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas*** (1938)
- a collection of four stories about racial prejudice, African American resistance and violence in the Deep South
 - the protagonists become increasingly rebellious against white demands as they find a collective means to resist
 - influenced by Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway in handling serious issues in a simple naturalistic style
- Fiction**
- Native Son*** (1940)
- a novel about a young black man Bigger Thomas who accidentally murders the daughter of his white employer
 - based on an actual murder case turned into literature, like Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925)
 - a publishing success, became the first book by an African American to be selected for the Book of Month Club
 - foreshadows his later existentialism with its issues of freedom, alienation, dread and identity through violence
 - explores the relation between where and who we are, our being in the world and our knowledge of ourselves
 - suggests the irreality of the protagonist's life on the edges of white society by using the Gothic and the surreal
 - the murder issues out of the fear conditioning the protagonist's life in a black ghetto of the Chicago South Side
 - the murder is presented as the product not of will but of circumstance and the desperate violence it engenders
 - the protagonist feels free for the first time in the prison for he thinks he has broken out of the prison of himself

⁴ H(enry) L(ouis) Mencken (1880–1956), an American journalist, essayist and satirist; critic of American life and culture, especially the ignorant middle classes; attacked ignorance, intolerance, frauds and fundamentalist Christianity.

⁵ Projects sponsored by Work Progress Administration (WPA), a government employment agency under the New Deal in the 1930s.

⁶ A youth Communist organization named for John Reed (1887–1920), an American communist activist and muckraker journalist; reported first-hand on the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) in *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919).

- he puts together the two worlds seen by him as ‘something the world gave him and something he himself had’
- his Communist lawyer Max tries to move him from identity built on hate and defiance to one founded on hope
- the protagonist fails as he lacks the social consciousness and capacity of articulation that Communism requires

Folklore

Twelve Million Black Voices (1941)

- a book combining words and pictures to express the folk history of the African Americans in the United States

Auto-biography

Black Boy (1945)

- an autobiographical story of the author’s life up until his move to Chicago
- reveals that the South denied him a sense of his own humanity and identity and the chance to learn who he was
- considers identity a social construct, cultural rather than natural, that has to be won by struggling and suffering
- thinks the worst crime of white society to be their excluding his people from a sense of fully being in the world
- suggests that living for blacks in a world they never made is like living in a dream liable to change at any time
- together with the next volume retells the American myth of personal reinvention and the making of an identity

American Hunger (1977)

- further chapters of the autobiography about his Chicago life and his disenchantment with the Communist Party
- describes how he found nothing else but new forms of racial oppression and economic deprivation in the North
- explains that he broke with the Communist Party for it sought to control his intellectual and creative freedom

Existentialism

The Outsider (1953), ***Savage Holiday*** (1954), ***The Long Dream*** (1958)

- shows characters cut off from the world around and from the past, making virtues of isolation and rootlessness
- the first mentioned for instance shows the search of a self-conscious African American intellectual for identity

Non-fiction

Black Power (1954), ***The Color Curtain*** (1956), ***Pagan Spain*** (1957), ***White Man Listen!*** (1957)

- a result of his extensive travels in the 1950s to understand the origins and legacy of African American slavery
- places social oppression in a global context, linking racism in America to colonialism in Africa and Asia
- *Black Power: A Report of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* gives an account of a trip to the Gold Coast in Ghana
- *The Color Curtain* reports on the author’s coverage of a conference in Indonesia
- *The Pagan Spain* attempts to find answers to the history of slavery in the paradoxes of Spanish culture

Ralph Ellison (1914–1994)

Biography

- born in Oklahoma, educated in a segregated school system, went South to Alabama to attend a black college
- read modern poetry and in his reading of Eliot and Pound found a relationship between modern poetry and jazz
- went to New York to seek out Richard Wright and to gather folk material that was to become part of his fiction

Writing

- produced his early work under the influence of Wright and naturalism, but then slowly developed his own style
- mixes realism, surrealism, symbolism, folklore and myth to confront the brutal reality yet offer images of hope

Structure

Invisible Man (1952)

- implements the author’s dream of inventing language as diverse as American culture and African American life
- avoids getting trapped in one idiom by mixing more verbal forms and influences into one multicultural whole
- develops the tradition of anecdote and tall tale, sermon and autobiography, journals and songs of the self
- presents the novel as a myth celebrating a god’s death, travelling in the underworld and leading to a rebirth
- qualifies also as a picaresque novel, as its wanderings explore the pluralities of American culture and identity

Invisibility

- describes the experience of an anonymous black protagonist-narrator wandering through America in the 1930s
- the protagonist struggles to come to terms with society that prevents his people from knowing who they are
- he discovers himself invisible in that his black skin renders him nameless and anonymous in white society
- he chooses from unsatisfactory alternatives suggesting the mythic opposition of the clearing and the wilderness
- he can either give up his self to the role prescribed by society or escape into a formless territory without a self

Identity Phases

- he journeys through various stages during which he tries on new roles, a fresh change of clothes and identity
- begins in the South as a ‘darky’ subjected to ritual humiliations, then as a ‘college boy’ at a segregated school
- continues in New York as a worker at a whitewash factory that is described as a paradigm of American society
- becomes an activist by joining a group called the Brotherhood, a thinly disguised version of the Communists
- following a race riot in Harlem retreats to an underground sewer where he stays while writing this book
- ends up in a border area where he can understand his invisibility and address his readers through his writing

Essays

Shadow and Act (1964), ***Going to the Territory*** (1986)

- his two collection of essays published during his lifetime

Posthumous

Flying Home and Other Stories (1996), ***Juneteenth*** (1999)

- the former is a collection of six short stories, the latter an uncompleted novel, both published posthumously

James Baldwin (1924–1987)

- Biography
- born in Harlem to a single mother, suffered at the hands of his stepfather, who was a zealous itinerant preacher
 - his stepfather abused his religious and parental power by insisting that James bore the ugly mark of the devil
 - the writer was later to use this experience of shame, isolation and alienation as the material for his first novel
 - joined the church of a black woman evangelist he happened to meet (1938) and served as a minister until 1941
 - moved to Greenwich Village (1944) where he began to shuffle off his church associations and work on a novel
 - most of his intimate relationships were homosexual, this at a time when homosexuality was still criminalized
 - moved to France (1948) for some time and spent the rest of his life travelling between Europe and America
- Writing
- known principally as a novelist and essayist, was also a playwright, scriptwriter, poet, director and film-maker
 - his novels, essays and play *The Amen Corner* (1955) revolve around the themes of racial and sexual identity
 - explores the question of colour as a determinant of identity, adds the questions of sexuality, family and religion
 - observes that ‘the question of colour, especially in this country, operates to hide the great question of the self’
 - insists on ‘the necessity of Americans to achieve an identity’ by tackling the systematic racism and injustice
 - suggests in *The Fire Next Time* (1962) that America must solve racism or face apocalypse, ‘the fire next time’
- Semi-Autobiography
- Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953)**
- provisionally titled ‘Crying Holy’ and then ‘In My Father’s House’, immediately established his reputation
 - may be seen as an initiation novel of the protagonist John Grimes who is introduced on his fourteenth birthday
 - records the initiation into knowledge of one’s own sexuality, racial identity, humanity and place in community
 - the protagonist is modelled on the author himself and also other characters resemble his actual family members
- Section I
- ‘The Seventh Day’, the first section, is told from the protagonist’s perspective and sets his marginal position
 - the protagonist is denied by his stepfather and dismissed for his supposed unmanliness, ugliness and intellect
 - the rejected son dispossessed of his birthright embodies the historical experience of the African American
 - one way is to see himself as others see him, lapse into hatred of himself and succumb to shame, fear and guilt
 - another way is to struggle to accept and realize himself, to pursue self-realization on a larger historical scale
- Section II
- ‘The Prayers of the Saints’, the second section, concentrates on the protagonist’s aunt, stepfather and mother
 - offers variations on the theme of self-denial, uses images of dirt, darkness, grime to evoke what is to be denied
 - all the three characters concerned choose to evade their true feelings and hide their true selves behind masks
 - links the story of individuals to history, shows through them the substance of the African American experience
- Section III
- ‘The Treshing-Floor’, the final section, recounts the struggle of the protagonist for his own self, his own soul
 - the protagonist goes through a complex religious experience, from a sense of damnation to one of salvation
 - accepts the core of his being and also his community of other African Americans who have suffered as he has
 - expresses the acceptance through the sound of the blues and sound of all the rhythms of African American life
- Novels
- Giovanni’s Room* (1956)**
- his second novel, openly explores homosexuality in the story of a young white American expatriate in Paris
- Another Country* (1962)**
- his third novel, uses various settings and several characters to explore the issues of racial and sexual identity
- Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), *Just Above My Head* (1979)**
- later novels, similarly pursue problems of race and sexuality
- Essays
- Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961), *The Fire Next Time* (1962), *The Price of the Ticket* (1985)**
- collections of essays
- Plays
- The Amen Corner* (1955)**
- a play dealing with racial and sexual identity and the influence of the church on the lives of African Americans
- Blues for Mr Charlie* (1964)**
- a play based on the killing of the black boy Emmett Till for whistling at a white woman in Mississippi (1955)
- One Day, When I was Lost* (1973), *A Deed from the King of Spain* (1974)**
- later plays

Langston Hughes (1902–1967)

- Biography
- born in Missouri to parents of mixed African American, European American and Native American descent
 - raised mainly by his grandmother who introduced him to the oral tradition and instilled him with racial pride

- went through various jobs, was working as a busboy in Washington when Vachel Lindsay launched his career
 - graduated from college and moved to Harlem, which became his primary home for the remainder of his life
- Genres
- wrote poetry, fiction, plays, essays, biographies, histories, journalism, translations, also two autobiographies
 - edited anthologies of African American writing, also produced librettos, film scripts, songs, children's books
- Aims
- committed to the notion of a separate and distinctive black identity, the shared presence of African Americans
 - insists that it is the duty of young African American artists to uncover the power and glory of their traditions
 - aims 'to change through the force of his art that old whispering "I want to be white"' present among his people
 - declares as his aim 'to interpret and comment upon Negro life, and its relations to the problems of Democracy'
- Subjects
- makes his favourite subject the ordinary black men and women of the fields and streets, especially of Harlem
 - qualifies as a socially committed poet, clearly seeks identification and imaginative empathy with his characters
 - speaks through a multiplicity of voices to capture the multiple layers, the pace, drive and variety, of black life
 - dramatizes the petty oppressions of individual black people, their dreams of liberation or their stony endurance
- Influences
- influenced by the free verse as employed by Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay and above all Walt Whitman
 - even more influenced by black music, tried to grasp and hold the meanings and rhythms of jazz⁷ in his poems
 - includes into jazz also spirituals, work songs, field hollers and shouts, blues, gospel, ragtime and rock and roll
 - uses the classic blues form⁸, mixes classic with other forms or uses fragments of blues themes and vocabulary
 - adopts from jazz its 'conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms'
 - suggests that the open-ended and improvisational nature of jazz subverts the closed structures of white culture
- Poetry
- Montage of a Dream Deferred*** (1951)
- a poetry collection, one of his most impressive works which manages to create a verbal portrait of Harlem
 - employs the free associations and abrupt rhythms of boogie-woogie, street poetry, rapping and jive-talk
- Ask Your Mama*** (1961)
- a poetry collection including perhaps his most experimental and his first truly multicultural poems
- Fiction
- Simple Speaks His Mind*** (1950), ***Simple Takes a Wife*** (1953), ***Simple Stakes a Claim*** (1957), ***Simple's Uncle Sam*** (1965)
- 'Simple Stories' were originally character vignettes for a journal to which he devoted the latter part of his life
 - involve an apparently slow and even dull-witted black character who always manages to outwit his antagonists
 - comment on topical issues through the eyes of the humorous and street-wise Harlem worker Jesse B. Simple
- Laughing to Keep From Crying*** (1952), ***Something in Common*** (1963)
- short story collections
- Tambourines to Glory*** (1958)
- a novel
- Auto-biographies
- The Big Sea*** (1940), ***I Wonder as I Wander*** (1956)
- autobiographies

⁷ By 'jazz' Hughes nearly always meant black musical culture in general.

⁸ In music, the blues form is characteristic for the twelve-bar blues chord progressions. In poetry, the Blues Stanza is a three-line stanza rhymed AAa BBb etc. As to subject matter, blues typically uses ironic laughter mixed with tears.