

MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE FROM 1920S TO 1950S: FROM SOCIAL CHAOS TO SPIRITUAL PURSUIT

Bahar İnal

School of Foreign Languages, Ondokuz Mayıs University, Atakum, Samsun, Turkey

Abstract

The period of Depression in America creates a strong disbelief in the utility of social and moral institutions which provide no good for man. People, therefore, attempt to create radical means of survival associated with bohemianism, nihilism, materialism, and liberalism. In America, writers and playwrights like F.S. Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee project a negative view of man and world. Likewise in Europe, writers like D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, Andre Gide, and Franz Kafka all draw a shattered vision of a world and humanity with no belief in either of them. All these writers have a common point in the fact that man has lost his innate capacity to survive in a world terrorized by the consequences of the wars and left aside in a state of utter despair. Therefore, they exhibit victim-characters who are entrapped in the complexities of the modern age and ultimately defeated. Being spiritually impotent and morally degenerate, characters like Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, the Italian ambulance driver Tenente in *A Farewell to Arms*, Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* are all unable to fight against the chaotic situations of the world and hence unable to exert their influence upon life.

However, a new atmosphere in American novel appears towards the end of the 1950s. Departing from the defeated image of man with no positive values, the novelists start to present willful characters decidedly refusing to be victimized in the hands of a ruthless system. Strongly aware of the moral degeneration in the whole world those willful and morally strong characters make their lives meaningful by personal determination and self-respect. Novelists like Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and Ken Kesey take a positive side and render in their novels dignified characters resisting against disintegration and dishonor. The essential point is that the bleak view of life developed by the first generation of modern American writers is replaced by the affirmative view of life developed by the second generation of writers as keen observers of the whole world. The new image of "survivor" in American novel is the embodiment of human courage and nobility. Rejecting to be a tragic victim anymore, the survivor stands upright with a strong belief in his potentials. He approaches the complexities and uncertainties of life with a staunch resolution which the victim-hero refrains from. His main rebellion is against an illogical order disguised under the guise of logic and order.

Biographical Information

After studying English Language and Literature at Çankaya University in Turkey, I had a M.A. degree in the department of British Literary and Cultural Studies at the same university and wrote a dissertation entitled *Gothic Discourse and Its Reflection of Discontent in Matthew Lewis' The Monk*. In 2006, I started working as a lecturer of English in the department of Foreign Languages at Ondokuz Mayıs University and still continue to work there. In 2010, I started a PhD program in the department of American Culture and Literature at Kadir Has University. For the time being, I am writing a dissertation entitled *The Aesthetic Reflections of August Strindberg on the Drama of Eugene O'Neill*. In June 2014, I attended the 19th International August Strindberg Conference held in Rome. In September 2014, I attended a seminar for a research project on August Strindberg at Stockholm University. In May 2015, I attended F. Scott Fitzgerald Conference at Başkent University and British and Turkish Literary and Cultural Interactions Conference at Hacettepe University. In June 2015, I attended the 6th International Conference on Consciousness in Theater, Literature, and the Arts at St. Francis College in New York. My main academic studies and interests are Expressionism in Drama, Avant-garde Theater, Literature and Philosophy, Literature and Art, Art History, Existentialism in Modern American Novel and Drama, Victorian Literature.