

# A literary mapping of the period-specific cultural zeitgeist in American literature of the twentieth century

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## Abstract

The body of American literature is rooted into the demographics of its geographical location and thus serves as a documentation of its cultural, societal and political evolution throughout the course of its history. The notion that everyday work of literature is influenced by or does influence the spirit of the era it has been produced is the point of research in the current research paper. For the purpose of literary mapping of the period-specific cultural zeitgeist in American literature of the twentieth century, the analytical tool of Zeitgeist developed by Krause (2019) alongside the literary research paradigm of “New Historicism” is employed. The research proceeds in the domain of the scholastic mapping of war, illness, drug intoxication and religion and sexuality in American literature. The research is carried out through the content analysis of fictional narratives published in every decade of the twentieth century that hail from a diverse range of authors. The current research endeavors to provide a comprehensive account of the evolution of cultural zeitgeist in the American society from the Jazz Age to the Zeitgeist of Change to the postmodernist extravaganza and the disillusionment until the end of twentieth century.

**Keywords:** American literature, Zeitgeist, New Historicism, twentieth century

## Introduction:

The body of literature that is produced in a society is a great reflection of trends, spirits and evolution of that society. Therefore, the body of American literature that has emerged from the United States of America in the past century or more says a lot about the cultural trends of the country. The influence of literature upon the culture of a society is two ways, implying that not only does culture influence the literature of an era but the literature also plays a significant role in shaping the culture of a society or the spirit of the time. This factor urges certain publications in a decade to be called zeitgeist books, and “A zeitgeist book reflects the spirit of the age in ways that its author and his/her readers don't quite understand” (McCrum, 2007). When zeitgeist novels are classified and categorized, it reveals that “Zeitgeist novels tend to fall in one of three categories, none of which have anything to do with the quality of the work itself, [...] In the first category are books nostalgic for a simpler, romanticized past, [...] The second category is

made up of books that unwittingly capture the spirit of their time” and the third category is, “Forward-looking novels that provide glimpses into the future” (Rich, 2014).

It is a general observation that literature comments upon historically significant scenarios such as war and societal values as in the case of the novel *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It also functions to predict future trends and possible outcomes of humanity's strategies at a certain point such as in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell. Similarly, literature sums up the common spirit of life of a society at certain time periods in such an estranged way that the readership fails to interpret the narrative in the terms of its multi-dimensional prospects. The very fact that the “Zeitgeist of an era is best recognized when it has passed, rather than during its time” (Whitmore, 2018) makes the current research feasible as it tries to perform a literary mapping of the period-specific cultural zeitgeist in American literature in the twentieth century. The body of American literature is humongous at its

best therefore only the body of literature produced in the twentieth century is to be subjected to analysis. The twentieth century is the literary period of modernism in American literature and American lifestyle prompting the cultural zeitgeist to assume a new form every decade.

### **Literature Review:**

The previous section has established that literature and especially American literature mirrors historically significant scenarios in its fictional and nonfictional narratives. American Civil War, fought for the cause of the abolition of slavery that went on from 1861 to 1865 has been the bloodiest conflict in American history. As a result, many authors “found their creative impulses stoked or altered by the Civil War” (Fialka, 2015) and went on to contribute to the American literary canon and thus shape the American literary culture. Randall Fuller in *From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature* pays attention to the canonical authors Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Louisa May Alcott, Frederick Douglass, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville. These authors had a direct or indirect encounter with the war and their literary tradition owed its form and existence to the Civil War. Those literary works that were produced in the immediate aftermath of war provide the margin of literary mapping of instant human reaction to war and the desperation to make meaning out of chaos. As in the case of the bard Walt Whitman, Fuller states that his “immediate impression was that the world had gone mad, had lost its bearings, that the American ship of state, once so buoyant and promising, was foundering in a storm unleashed by its own contradictions” (Fuller, 2011). Susan Zieger tracks the trope of drug addiction in the Anglo-American literary canon in *Inventing the Addict: Drugs, Race, and Sexuality in Nineteenth Century British and American Literature* in works such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Without a Home*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Hasheesh Eater*, etc. In her endeavor to map the mentions of drug addiction and intoxication-induced adventures in American literature she declares, *The Hasheesh Eater* (1857) by Fitz Hugh Ludlow “the first U.S. auto--biography of drugged experience” (Zieger, 2008). This leads

her toward the hypothesis that Ludlow’s autobiography [...] illuminate how the hallucinatory “inner space” of white male subjectivity engaged the imperial tropes of travel, exploration, and conquest” (Zieger, 2008) and thus contribute to the literary canon of the New World.

Alongside man and being his own enemy, nature also has adversarial tendencies that prompt man to battle and thus become the subject of fictionalization in literature. The dissertation *Writing the spirit/reading the mind: Representations of illness and health in nineteenth century American literature* “tracks the ways in which nineteenth century American representations of illness and health constitute a particularly American religious, political, and aesthetic experience” (CAPPELLO, 1989). The research maps the trope of madness, idleness and illness as used in C. B Brown’s novels *Wieland* and *Arthur Mervyn*. The literary tracking reveals a variety in the kinds of illness narratives as Chandler Robbins *Remarks on the Disorders of Literary Men* (1825) registers itself as a survival text into the literary body of disease in American literature. As the culture of the United States of America is to be explored, the subjects of religion and individual’s sexuality are key concepts that provide a great peek into the American society and literary and religious history. Ann-Janine Morey juxtaposes both themes, creating an “aberrant theme” and maps its evolution in texts of authors from Nathaniel Hawthorne to John Updike. The research has employed the mapping of the theme as “the medium wherein so many of the tensions of religion and sexuality are dramatized and then moves to contemporary novels that deal with moral and religious issues through metaphor” (Morey, 1992). This comprehensive review of the scholastic literature that has provided with the literary tracking of American cultural, social and religious history makes way for the content analysis to perform literary mapping of period-specific cultural zeitgeist in American literature in the twentieth century.

### **Research methodology:**

This research paper extends the analytical tool of the zeitgeist, which literally means “spirit of the times” developed in Krause (2019) as a tool for sociological analysis. Krause

proposes zeitgeist “as a hypothesis for a pattern in meaningful practices that is specific to a particular historical time-period, links different realms of social life, and extends across geographical contexts” (2019). The current research adapts the proposed analytical tool by appropriating it with the content analysis of the literature produced during historical periods of American literature. Therefore, the proposed research paradigm for the current research article is that of “New Historicism” which has been best defined as “the textuality of history and the historicity of texts.” The qualitative research is to be carried out through the content analysis of the literary works of authors produced in specific time periods that manifest the zeitgeist of the certain decade in American cultural history.

#### **Analysis:**

In the twentieth century, the historical period of the 1920s was the time known as the Jazz Age, the Age of Intolerance most famously, the Roaring Twenties. Even though these terms encapsulate the social, economic and cultural spirit of the age, it was also reflected in the literature produced. With regard to the generation of the time period, it became known as the Lost Generation, a name popularized by American modernist writer Gertrude Stein (Whitmore, 2018). The collective sensibility of being lost was a souvenir of the disillusionment caused by World War I (1914 – 1918) known as the Great War. The restlessness of the times was paired with materialism and frivolousness as Americans indulged themselves in luxuries that led to the economic plummet known as the Great Depression that trailed behind. The best representative piece of literature of the Jazz Age is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The author looked “through the haze of the zeitgeist surrounding him, [and] criticized the corruption and shallowness of America and its people” (Whitmore, 2018). The following words from the novel encapsulated the listlessness of the Lost generation that came from struggling for their dreams only to realize the hollowness of the achievement,

“Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no

matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther [...] So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (Fitzgerald, 1925).

These lines not only reflect Fitzgerald’s apt diagnosis of the American society in the 1920s but also help to establish *The Great Gatsby* as the representative text. In the decade of the Roaring Twenties, the zeitgeist of the era was of acquisitiveness and frivolousness, all while leading its generation to a future uncertain and unstable. Due to the societal instability and economic plummet known as the Great Depression that followed the Jazz Age, a spirit of reflection, reformation and humility got woven into the fabric of the American society. The impression of the Jazz Age followed into the 1930s, an era greatly marked by the advent of the Harlem renaissance. This witnessed not only a surge in the production of literature from African American authors, but it was a “literary cultural movement [that was meant] to reject the traditional American standards of writing and discover and utilize their own style of writing to signify their cultural identity” (Henken). This cultural shift where African American voices were being recognized was manifested in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Hurston exercised the agency bestowed upon Black authors due to the zeitgeist of the Harlem renaissance and used a Southern black dialect in her writing, “If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk. It's so many people never seen de light at all” (Hurston, 1937). Due to this, the author received much controversy and critics labeled her novel to be “too black” (Henken). The cultural shift of awareness about diversity in the American society continued well into the upcoming decades and tinged the zeitgeist of each literary period of the future. Therefore, the 1960s were marked by the Zeitgeist of Change owed to the Civil Rights movement (1954 - 1968). The Zeitgeist of Change was marked by an effort on the part of the American society to bring “full rights to African Americans [and] set the precedent for all minority groups to be treated as equals, and allowed the nation to move in a more racially open direction” (Whitmore, 2018).

This spirit of appreciation of ethnic diversity in the American society has been recognized in the world of literature with the rise of the genre of historical fiction. The revival of historical fiction allowed modern authors to retell the canon of history with subjective perspectives. As a result, “ethnic American writers [were] particularly influential in this genre, telling histories that give voice to previously marginalized voices” (Sheffer, 2020). The Zeitgeist of Change prompted colored voices to emerge on the political, cultural as well as literary front. The two significant biographical accounts that were published in the 60s made space for colored perspectives in the literary canon of America and functioned as a mouthpiece of the Black experience in the American culture. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) by Malcolm X and Alex Haley documented not only the life of historical and politically influential Black activist but also shed light on the political upheaval of “the civil rights act [and] the way that African-Americans were being treated during this time period” (Shafiee). Haley’s narrative does not only narrate to its readers the political struggle of Malcolm X but rather aware us of the subject’s experiences of racism since childhood, “They called us Nigger and darky, ratus so much we thought those were our actual names” (Haley, 1965). The statement rightly follows the zeitgeist of change as it makes the reader empathize with the collective experience of the colored community. A similar approach is taken in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou in which the author has uncovered the racist reality of White American culture. Angelou’s biographical account registers itself as the ultimate zeitgeist-shaping text as it sensitizes the white supremacist society to everyday racism, which is at times subtle and often goes unnoticed by those who are not a target of it. Angelou shed light on the discrimination that persisted in the American society, recounting that the only professional prospects reserved for the colored community were “maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen” and anyone who aspired to be more than this was deemed “farcical and presumptuous” (Angelou, 1969). Moreover, paired with the voice of ethnic minorities in the American society, the marginalized female voice

also started to take its place in the literary canon aiding the spirit of cultural and societal reform. *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan voiced female concerns in the 60s and since has become the seminal text of the feminist literary movement. Its influence can be estimated by the review of the social theorist Alvin Toffler, who described it as “the book that pulled the trigger on history” (Temple, 2018).

The postmodern era promised its generations the liberty to practice their choices in speech, writing, fashion and institutional affiliations. It also allotted the freedom to juxtapose one’s own choices with others, giving way to a variety of trends and cultures coexisting with each other in the later decade of the 20th century. A new historical approach to the literary body of the era reveals the aspects of disillusionment and protest against the institutional dogmas. The era’s pulse takers recount that the cultural zeitgeist of the 70s was “skepticism for realism and the ideological systems that kept current systems of authority in power, [while] exploring contradiction, juxtaposition and dystopia”. In this regard, many of the works of literature produced in the era could be deemed as the zeitgeist texts as each of them seems to cater to a predominant spirit. Robert Pirsig’s novelistic autobiography, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) is “a nostalgic, old-fashioned novel that nevertheless reflects the malaise of its era and prefigures our own technophiliac age” (Rich, 2014). Pirsig’s account serves to not only provide reconciliation with the realization of the culmination of previous decades but also harkens to the promising future and prepares the American society for it. The fact that *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* can be regarded as a zeitgeist novel is because it addressed the anxieties of modernity that persisted in the society and the unsettledness with the technology culture. With statements such as, “We’re living in topsy-turvy times” and “There is just no escape from [...] The whole thing or The whole organized bit or The system” (Pirsig, 1974), the novel acknowledges the change in times. The increasing uneasiness and violence looming over the American culture reappeared in the commercial success of the psychological horror novel *The Shining* (1977)

by Stephen King. King's portrayal of the protagonist, Jack Torrance who is a psychopathic killer acknowledged the American society's craving for the representation of the uncanny in the human race. The genius of the horror novel lies in its genre-bending techniques as King describes it as his "crossroads novel," and suggests that its success is based on his decision "to go deeper—to admit Jack's love of his father in spite of (perhaps even because of) his father's unpredictable and often brutal nature" (Temple, 2018). Another book of the era that can be categorized so is *Helter Skelter* (1974) by Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry because it captures the zeitgeist of terror that spread across the United States of America. The novel cashes upon the thrill of Charles Manson's murders in the late 1960s and the subsequent conviction trial in 1971 and succeeds to register itself as the best-selling true crime book ever.

The decade of the 1980s kick-started with the start of the term of President Ronald Reagan, who entered office in 1981 and an era of economic stability was promised to the Americans. Because of the president's endeavors to provide economic stability to Americans, "the spirit of the 1980s was associated with extravagance and transformation; money, consumer goods, programming and music exemplified the ever-changing period" (New Trends in American Life in the 1980s, 2013). The zeitgeist of consumerism and the American society's increased likeness of luxury goods was picked on by the authors of the era and materialized itself in the form of literature that was produced not just for readability but for marketability as well. The novel *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney published in 1984 not only explored the issues of class, taste and ideology but also addressed "the categories of high-, low- and middlebrow culture" (O'Brien, 1996). O'Brien regards such literature to be able "to mediate between art and commerce, individualism and packaging, the classic and the "beach read" (1996). McInerney's novel showcases the bright side of the American society in the 80s where the Americans were working to maintain an extravagant lifestyle and "compete with one another to showcase their wealth" (New Trends in American Life in the 1980s, 2013). The fast

paced-ness of life in America in the 80s has been captured brilliantly in another novel *White Noise* (1985) by Don DeLillo. DeLillo's work has been declared an essential novel of the decade as it "captures the quality of daily existence in media-saturated, hyper-capitalistic postmodern America so precisely, you don't know whether to laugh or whimper" (Grossman, 2010). *White Noise* hits upon consumerism and the isolation, self-absorption and social anxiety it causes in the American society. Apart from the glittery lifestyle of the last decades, another aspect of the American society that took the culture by storm was rampant drug usage among its citizens. The surge in the use of recreational drugs in the Americans and subsequently an epidemic of AIDS was an apt prompt that led the American authors into writing. The AIDS epidemic followed well into the last decade of the 20th century and inspired Tony Kushner's social play *Angels in America* (1991). *Angels in America* was declared "the first major play to put homosexual life at the center of its moral debate, [covering] territory that ranged from Heaven to earth, from the AIDS epidemic to conservative politics, encapsulating, in its visionary sweep, the sense of confusion and longing that defined late-twentieth-century American life" (Lahr, 2004). It was "hailed as a turning point for theatre, for gay life, and for American culture" (Temple, 2018) as it was an imminent success by winning major accolades and touched social, political and private aspects of American culture in the 90s.

### **Conclusion:**

The texts selected for the purpose of content analysis fall into either of the three categories of zeitgeist novels as each of the texts is unique in its prospects and standing according to the American cultural values. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the body of literature, especially American literature, is an image of thought patterns of not only the author as an individual but the zeitgeist of the era in which the text is produced. The research paradigm of New Historicism has provided the license for the literary mapping of cultural trends and social evolution of the United States of America as reflected in its literature. The current research has been carried out with regard to the decade-specific cultural, political and social zeitgeist

and thus carries prospects for further research on American literature in multiple contexts.

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