

Conflict: A Cultural Theme in the Early 20th Century American Novel

Majed Al-Lehaibi
Jazan University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

This paper addresses a major theme in the modern American novel: Conflict as a catalyst for constant change. Between the 1920s and 1930s can be traced a major paradigm shift from a post-World War I search for individualism and independence to one of a Depression-era emphasis on collectivism and solidarity. Analysis of several prominent literary works from this era leads to the conclusion that American fiction encodes American history and that conflict and contradiction explain the development of the modern American fiction.

Keywords: American novel, realism, communism, proletariat, class, African Americans, conflict, pragmatism

Introduction

Conflict emerges as the central theme of many American novels in the early twentieth century. Lionel Trilling asserts, in *Reality in America*, “The very essence of a culture resides in its central conflicts, or contradictions.” Trilling further points out that “a culture is not a flow, or even a confluence; the form of its existence is struggle, or at least debate, [and] is nothing if not a dialectic” (Marx, 1964, p. 342). In this dialectical process, then, conflict serves as the catalyst for constant change. American writers in the early 1900s produced works that captured the changes taking place in the wake of industrialization, immigration, and other cultural upheavals. In documenting such changes, these writers typically criticized the status quo and advocated reform. Their texts described actual “living conditions, the workings of institutions, and [...] the underlying process of [...] historical-evolutionary development” (Bradbury, 1983, p. 7). Through the “political exposé” of muckraking journalism, they also suggested the need for change, as seen in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), which dramatized the dangers faced by immigrant workers in the meatpacking industry and led to much-needed reforms. As such, American literature is not indifferent to historical and social experiences.

World War I

The pervasive impact of World War I extended not only to the political, economic, social, and psychological spheres but also to the cultural sphere of literature. Woodrow Wilson led America into World War I with the declared ideal dream of championing the rights of mankind and making the world safe for democracy. Thus, the war was transformed into a crusade of high principles. In April of 1917, for example, Wilson declared to the U.S. Congress: “Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion” (Cooper, 1983, p. 322)¹. Furthermore, American clerics supported the war as a moral and religious imperative, even suggesting that Jesus himself would be fighting the Germans were he with them. Reverend Randolph McKim preached:

It is God who has summoned us to this war. It is his war we are fighting. [. . .] This conflict is indeed a crusade. The greatest in history—the holiest. It is in the profoundest and truest sense a Holy War. [. . .] Yes, it is Christ, the King of Righteousness, who calls us to grapple in deadly strife with this unholy and blasphemous power [Germany] (Abrams, 1969, p. 55).

However, the war ended in widespread disillusionment and disappointment. Wilson's idealistic dream of “the establishment of just democracy throughout the world” was never realized, and his proposal of a League of Nations was never ratified by the U.S. Senate² (Ambrosius, 1991, p. 131).

Further, writers and intellectuals saw that the war lacked any clear purpose; and, their hopes of ambivalent progress seemed to lose credibility. Like Robert Graves, they said “good-bye” to the pre-war beliefs, values, the confidence in an ordered and civilized society, and certitudes.

¹ In the interest of organization, coordination and unity, congress passed laws to restrict the opponents of the war (i.e. the case of Eugene V. Debs).

² To such end, John Maynard Keynes, one of the British signatory delegations at Versailles peace conference, criticized Wilson in his *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919) and described his peace treaty as “Carthaginian”.

This outlook came to typify an entire generation. Philip Gibbs, a British writer, observed in his *Now It Can Be Told* (1920) that

the old order of the world had died there [on the battlefields], because many men who came alive out of that conflict were changed, and vowed not to tolerate a system of thought which had led up to such a monstrous massacre of human beings (Hynes, 1991, p. 286).

Like Gibbs, Edmund Gosse, a British poet, noted that the war had destroyed the noble traditions and ideas of the past. In a 1920 letter to André Gide he wrote:

We are passing through dreadful days, in which the pillars of the world seem to be shaken [. A]ll in front of us seems to be darkness and hopelessness. It is much harder to bear than the war was, because there is no longer the unity that sustained us, nor the nobility which inspired hope and determination (Hynes, 1991, p. 288).

American writers such as T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1922) and Ernest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) registered the same measure of post-war disenchantment. In his 1920 poem *Ode Pour L'Election De Son Sepulchre*, Ezra Pound wrote: “There died a myriad, / And of the best, among them, / For an old bitch gone in the teeth, / For a botched civilization” (Rainey, 2005, p. 51). In a 1937 essay titled “The Missing All,” John Peale Bishop recalled that “The war made the traditional morality unacceptable. [...] It revealed its immediate inadequacy. [It produced] a world without values” (Wilson, 1948, p. 75).

Along with a growing interest in modernity’s technological advances, notes Henry Idema in his *Freud, Religion, and the Roaring Twenties* (1990), World War I acted as a catalyst in accelerating the break from “outworn traditions” of the past (p. 5). Walter Rideout observed that the war was a historical-temporal landmark separating “the two nations,” the pre-war nation and the post-war nation. In an almost sad notation, Rideout wrote, in his *The Radical Novel in the United States* (1956):

One of the effects of modern war is to alienate us from the recent past. The events of the prewar years are accomplished, of course, and do not themselves change, but our attitude toward them changes vastly. In our consciousness war drops like a trauma between “before” and “after,” until it is sometimes hard to believe that “before” was a part of us at all. Thus Americans in the nineteen-twenties felt sharply cut away from the Years of Confidence on the other side of World War I (p. 1).

In the wake of the WWI, American writers and intellectuals questioned inherited beliefs and expressed skepticism about traditional morality, idealism and nationalistic politics, considering them as nothing but disguised forms of hypocrisy.

In this context, Freudian themes flourished in literature, wherein the truths were described and often linked to the deeper and hidden rather than the higher meanings or points of reference; and that the unconscious was privileged over the conscious. Sigmund Freud’s tripartite paradigm of super ego, ego, and id was interpreted as implying that the suppression of our instinctual drives by the super ego resembled hypocritical oppression of the dissatisfied masses and their inner thoughts by the high mindedness of the “Old Guard;” and, the id is but oppressed natural part of us that silently yearns for expression. Hence, the main characters of Lewis’s *Babbitt* (1922) and Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) demonstrate not only external but

internal conflicts on the individual level. Anthony Hilfer refers to it in his *The Revolt from the Village* (1969) as the theme of “the buried life” and isolated self (p. 29).

Buried Lives

The eponymous protagonist of Lewis’s *Babbitt* (1922) is a stout, middle-aged, and successful real-estate broker in Zenith. In George F. Babbitt’s home town, the citizens assiduously devote themselves to impressing one another with their material possessions and group memberships in organizations such as the Brotherly and Protective Order of Elks. When Babbitt, conditioned by conformity, finally rebels against small-town life, his rebellion is pathetic: “He fears the power of his administered society, which offers rewards (i.e., security, power, gadgets, property, slogans, and clubs) for conformity and threatens punishment (being ostracized from ‘the Clan of Good Fellows’ who enjoy and control society’s spoils) for resistance” (Minter, 1996, p. 88). When he tries unsuccessfully to sunder these connections, Lewis writes: “The independence seeped out of him[,] and [he] walked the streets alone, afraid of men’s cynical eyes and the incessant hiss of whispering” (p. 380). Babbitt realizes that he is trapped. “They’ve licked me; licked me to a finish!” he says to himself (p. 397). Finally, he confesses to his son tragically, “I’ve never done a single thing I have wanted to in my whole life!” (p. 401).

Thus, conflict in this text culminates in Babbitt’s vague sense of dissatisfaction. The tragedy of his life is that the world from which he is trying to escape has become so much an ingrained and inescapable part of his identity. Babbitt is then a victim of the mechanical life of the modern world that shaped his own internal mind. He “could never run away from Zenith and family and office, because in his own brain he bore the office and the family and every street and disquiet and illusion of Zenith” (p. 301). Even after the protagonist tries to leave the village, he is “condemned to circle back to [his] starting point, with nothing gained and much energy lost” (Hilfer, 1969, p. 175).

The “revolt against small-town life,” in the words of critic Alfred Kazin (p. 205), continues in Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), which attacks American small-town life by painting it as a world of illusion, distortion, and contradiction. Anderson uses fragmentation and “a version of literary collage to give form to his discontinuous narrative [... that] demonstrates the conflict between the individual and society by reinforcing the sense of ‘isolation, repressed needs, thwarted desires, failed communications, and misshapen lives’ that American [small-town] life fosters” (Minter, 1996, p. 102). In order to make sense of the fragments, Anderson intertwined his stories of George Willard, who becomes the confidant of silent and lonely individuals and their obliquely expressed desires; Wing Biddlebaum, who nervously moves his hands as a sign of suppressed homosexuality and a dire need for expression; Doc Reefy, whose “paper pills” are nothing but messages expressing a hunger for expression; and Ray Pearson, who is married to a nagging wife but falls silent when he wants to warn a friend not to marry. This story in particular shows the gap existing between what is being thought and what is being actually expressed. That is to say, Ray Pearson is unable to explicitly contradict the traditional response that his friend should be a man of honor and marry the young woman whom he got pregnant. Burdened by this contradiction, he says softly, “It’s just as well. Whatever I told him would have been a lie” (p. 171).

All the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* are cut off from one another as a result of “the social, cultural, and spiritual desiccation” of the modern world (Minter, 1996, p.103). Their smothered lives and stymied desires resulting from, Hilfer writes, “the conflict between [their] inner imaginative subjective reality and outer socially defined reality [...] Most of the central

characters,” concludes Anthony Hilfer, “feel excluded from the community” (p. 149). By default George Willard thus becomes the medium of expression of their inner voices and yearnings breaking through the walls of social repression³.

Idealism versus Realism

Conflict between idealism and realism continues as a major theme in war-related novels of the 1920s. Initially the war enticed artists with the promise of adventure: “It provided splendid experience for an aspiring writer, experience that could be had nowhere else” (Cohen, 2001, p. 9). Hemingway went to the war with other American writers because, Malcolm Cowley writes, the war “creates in young men a thirst for abstract danger, not suffered for a cause but courted for itself” (*Exile's Return*, p. 41). Lieutenant Henry, a version of Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), is not sure about his real motives as to why he joined the war and approaches it with a sense of detachment, when he is asked why he, an American, is “in the Italian front,” he says, “I don't know...there isn't always an explanation for everything,” and he feels that this war “did not have anything to do with [him]. It seems no more dangerous to [him] than war in the movies” (p. 39). Most of the writers who participated in the war, initially expected a brief war marked by heroism, chivalry, and adventure. But, the reality of the war turned to be entirely different from their expectations.

Hemingway was seriously wounded in the Italian front in 1918. This was the permanent wound that stamped much of his art. Malcolm Cowley, in his 1932 review of *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), observes that “the war, to judge from his books, has been the central experience in his career; he shows the effects of it more completely than any other American novelist” (Spanier, 1990, p. 82). Hemingway, thus, replays his war wound in a number of his characters: In *In Another Country* (1927), the protagonist, a wounded American lieutenant in a hospital in Milan, thinks, “I was very much afraid to die, and often lay in bed at night by myself, afraid to die and wondering how I would be when I went back to the front again” (Poore, 1953, p. 270). In *Now I Lay Me* (1927), Nick reveals, “I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body. I had been that way for a long time, ever since I had been blown up at night and felt it go out of me and go off and then come back” (Poore, 1953, p. 363). And, in *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver, is injured on the Italian front by a mortar shell. Describing his experience, Henry says, “I went out swiftly, all of myself, and I knew I was dead and that it had all been a mistake to think you just died. Then, I floated, and instead of going on I felt myself slide back” (p. 55). Surely, these stories are based on Hemingway's traumatic wounding. In a letter to his parents in Oak Park, Illinois, he writes, “Wounds don't matter. I wouldn't mind being wounded again so much, because I know just what it is like” (Griffin, 1985, p. 90). Hemingway was convinced that his wounds were necessary for his art; in fact, he told F. Scott Fitzgerald in a 1934 letter that we are all wounded “from the start [...] but when you get the damned hurt, use it—don't cheat with it. Be as faithful to it as a scientist” (Baker, 1981, p. 408). Hemingway learned to transform his firsthand experience during the Great War into art.

³ The novel as a whole can be seen as a contradiction to the past in its form. By his emphasis on giving utterance to the emotive, inner life of his characters, Anderson created a decentered form of narrative. Kazin postulates, in *On Native Grounds* (1942), that Anderson was fascinated by freedom. He declared his “liberation [from the 19th century straight forward narrative]” in the novel *Winesburg, Ohio* (Kazin, 1942, p. 210). Kazin concludes that *Winesburg, Ohio* “broke with rules of structure literally to embody moments, to suggest the endless halts and starts, the dreamlike passiveness and groping of life” (pp. 210, 214).

A Farewell to Arms reflects not only the author's traumatic wounding in the war but also the cultural wound that in a sense allowed many writers and intellectuals at the wake of the Great War to see through the illusion of the idealism of the previous generations. The novel captures the experience of the Great War in the eyes of Frederic Henry who undergoes a gradual awakening to the reality of the war. In the dugout at the front, Henry and the other members of the ambulance crew discuss the value of war. Henry naively says, "I believe we should get the war over... It would not finish it if one side stopped fighting. It would only be worse if we stopped fighting" (p. 51). His comrade, Passini, tries to persuade him that "there is nothing as bad as war" (p. 51). A moment later, their trench is hit with an Austrian mortar shell. Passini is brutally killed and Henry is injured. Soon thereafter, in the hospital, Henry tells the priest, "when I was wounded we were talking about it. Passini was talking" (p. 69). Henry adopts Passini's attitude about the war. After a convalescing summer in Milan, Henry tells the priest, "it is in defeat that we become Christian," suggesting that victory is worse than defeat because "no one ever stopped when they were winning" (p. 164). Soon after, thinking of Passini, he says, "the peasant has wisdom, because he is defeated from the start" (p. 165). Witnessing the brutality and the indignity of the war, eventually Henry realizes that "the whole bloody thing is crazy" (p. 192), and thus he has made his "separate peace." Hence, saying "farewell" seems to him as the only rational thing one can do in an irrational war.

Furthermore, Frederic Henry's making his "separate peace" with the war expresses Hemingway's suspicion of the empty rhetoric by which the fashionable privileged society, from a safe distance, dignify the ugly carnage of war and the ugly meaning of war time deaths: "I was always embarrassed," says Henry, "by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice." Compared to the sacrifice of the fallen, "abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene" (p. 53). This notation spells out Hemingway's distrust of the abstract values that allowed the previous generation to blunder into the war.

The war created a conflict between past and present, a transforming context or "new force field" that led many writers to reject established patterns of social order (Bradbury, 1983, p. 32). During the 1920s this repudiation of the past contributed to a "profound alienation" (Kazin, 1942, p. 31). Aesthetic experimentation abounded during the decade. Writers tended to portray themselves as "lonely explorers" whose art was socially disengaged and focused on what Granville Hicks called the "margins of life" (Meyers, 2004, p. 213). In *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (1973), Richard Pells describes the modernists as authors who "shut themselves up in airless rooms to create great works" (p. 158). Accordingly, Margot Norris suggests in "Modernist Eruption" that Ernest Hemingway's works "seem escapist..." (Elliot, 1991, p. 322). Norris continues that, Hemingway used "a disciplined, muscular, classical style to redeem the fragmentation, loss of value, and chaos both symptomized and produced by the war" (Elliott, 1991, p. 318). *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) in particular reflects the post-war sense of despair and sterility about the end of civilization. David Minter notes that Hemingway conveys in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) "a sense of how indelibly the Great War had marked the young who survived it" (Minter, 1996, p. 82). Jake Barnes' wound reflects the sterility and post-war confusion. He is forced to seek an entirely new way of life: that suits his condition. "I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it, you learned from that what it was all about" (p. 152). Clearly learning to "live in it" describes efforts by the "lost generation"⁴ to find new values in a world that essentially was emptied by the Great War.

⁴ Used by Hemingway in an epigraph to *The Sun Also Rises*, the phrase has become a cultural tag for all those who served in World War I. As Hemingway explains in *A Moveable Feast* (1964), his friend Gertrude Stein heard the phrase used by a mechanic who was complaining about a young man working for him. The mechanic said to

The Moneyed Class

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) depicts conflict in the form of a fear of poverty and the manic search for success and wealth. The specific tension is between those born into ashen poverty and those accustomed to careless wealth. Jay Gatsby, a veteran of World War I, lives in a "materialistic, careless society of coarse wealth spread on top of a sterile world" (Bradbury, 1983, p. 87). On the other hand, George and Myrtle Wilson are described as ghosts; Laura Hensley (2007) notes, they embody "the rootless working class. Wilson lives in the valley of ashes, an undeveloped, depressing area where nothing grows or prospers. This represents a dumping ground for people who do not fit into an era made for the enjoyment of the elite" (p. 35).

What is special about Gatsby is that he has a "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life," a "romantic readiness," and a "gift of hope" (*Gatsby*, pp. 3-4). By following a regimented schedule of self-improvement, Gatsby has succeeded in reinventing himself. Born as Jimmy Gatz to "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all," he has become Jay Gatsby (*Gatsby*, p. 63). His self-reinvention reflects the American promise of success and liberation from the past. However, the secret behind his ultimate failure, writes Minter (1996), "lies in the fact that his world, which pretends to be receptive to dreams, in fact protects those who have been born to riches and power" (p. 146). Gatsby's story is thus one of little people who dream of entering the "privileged world of wealth, power, and status," but those who were born rich, like Daisy and Tom Buchanan, "have no intention of relinquishing their hold on it" (Minter, 1996, p. 114).

In "The Rich Boy" (1926) Fitzgerald wrote, "[T]he very rich [...] are different from you and me" (Fitzgerald, *Diamond*, p. 131). It has been often noted that Hemingway responded sardonically, "Yes, they have more money," but that was not what Fitzgerald had in mind. The rich have something more than money that sets them apart: "They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are because we had to discover the compensations and refuges of life for ourselves" (Fitzgerald, *Diamond*, p. 131). "Having made themselves models to be emulated," Minter (1996) contends, "they became expert in protecting themselves from the competition of those [who aspire to their lifestyle]" (p. 114). Tom, Daisy, and Jordan in *The Great Gatsby* feel that wealth is simply another of their entitlements. They "assume the right to spend vast sums of money without even pretending to make any. [...] Tom epitomizes an aristocracy of such wealth and power that he can afford to be careless, as well as narrowly self-interested" (Minter, 1996, pp. 114, 115). The poor, like George Wilson, live and work in the valley of ashes. But, his wife Myrtle is similar to Gatsby. She dreams of escaping her dreary life and entering the ranks of the rich through her affair with Tom Buchanan. Unfortunately, the glamorous world for which she longs not only exploits but also is indifferent to her. When she tries to assert herself, "Tom Buchanan [breaks] her nose with his open hand" (*Gatsby*, p. 37). Both Gatsby, who thinks of wealth as a means of attaining a dream life with Daisy, and Myrtle pay a high price for wanting, as Daisy says of Gatsby, "too much" (p. 132).

Malcolm Cowley notes in "The Class Consumerism of Fitzgerald's Life" that one of the novel's early titles was "Among Ash Heaps and Millionaires," which more or less sums up its dimension of class conflict (Johnson, 2008, p. 31). Such conflict coalesces in the assumption that "people like Jay Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson have been put on earth to entertain [people like Tom and Daisy], and people like George Wilson to run [the errands of people like Tom]"

the young man, Hemingway writes, "You are all a *génération perdue*" (p. 61). The phrase, however, has become an epithet for American expatriate writers. It has become a reference to the theme of the loss of innocence, disenchantment, and spiritual malaise in the wake of the Great War.

(Minter, 1996, p. 115). Regarding Gatsby, Tom says to Nick Carraway: “[T]hat fellow had it coming to him. [...] He threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy’s” (p. 114). Gatsby’s death is engineered because he posed a threat to Tom’s status and power. In “Class and Spiritual Corruption,” John Brickell argues that Tom Buchanan is an

example of the upper-class Fascist, who, obsessed with fear that the black races may overthrow “Nordic Supremacy,” sees himself “on the last barrier of civilization.” His fear, however, sharpens his cunning, and his position in society gives him the opportunity to use it. Not only does he lie to Myrtle Wilson, but with ruthless contempt, he exploits her husband, George, as an instrument of revenge on Gatsby. Morally speaking, he is Gatsby’s murderer (Johnson, 2008, p. 99).

In the end, Daisy remains married to her rich husband, abandons Gatsby, and does not even attend his funeral, although Gatsby was murdered for something she did – namely, kill Myrtle in a car accident. According to Hensley (2007), this plot outcome exemplifies the oppressiveness of the moneyed class in toying with the lives of those below them in the economic scale and then “retreat[ing] back into their money or their vast carelessness [...] and living] safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (p. 35)⁵.

Class Conflict

Conflict in the 1930s novel focused on class struggle and political tension as a necessary ingredient in creating a fundamental social change. During this period the theme that freedom can only be realized through collective action dominated the American social novel, which was then conceived of as a catalyst for changing the status quo by advocating a collectivist view of humanity. Toward this end, Granville Hicks indicates it is essential that a writer’s “identification with the proletariat should be as complete as possible. He should not merely believe in the cause of the proletariat; he should be, or should try to make himself, a member of the proletariat. [...] The exploited masses were] the true nation, and the only theme of our time” (Robbins, 1942, p. 12). Cowley asserts that leftist writers found a purpose and “a sense of comradeship and participation in a historical process vastly larger than the individual” (“Art Tomorrow”, 1934, pp. 61–62). They defined themselves culturally as being opposed to the modernists, who saw importance in introspective projects and neglected social problems⁶. In contrast, leftist writers brought the marginalized classes – the dispossessed – directly into their

⁵ Minter (1996) suggests another central conflict in *The Great Gatsby*: that between “an era in which the American [D]ream remained an enabling myth and one in which it often functions as a cultural lie” (p. 148). In the past America was purported to be a place where poor people were inspired to dream and offered the opportunity, ultimately, to realize those dreams. However, *The Great Gatsby* sees through that illusion and exposes a society governed by the capitalist arrangements that “manipulate the hope-driven energies of the poor while offering them little or no chance of sharing its rewards” (Minter, 1996, p.148). This deflationary view of the American Dream is not new. For example, Langston Hughes wrote in his 1935 poem “Let America Be America Again”: “I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek— / And finding only the same old stupid plan / Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak” (p. 4).

⁶ Michael Gold describes modernist writers in “The Writer in America” (1953) as “escapists, abstractionists, Freudians, and mystics of art, foggy symbolists, clowns and trained seals and sex-mad pygmies of the pen” (*Mike Gold Reader*, p. 183). In “Notes on Art, Life, Crap-Shooting, Etc.” (1929), he argues that modernism’s concept of autonomy was incapable of either adequately critiquing society or advancing human potential; instead, he classifies modernism as fundamentally anti-social. However, Joseph Freeman regarded proletarian literature, as Marcus Klein paraphrases in his “The Roots of Radicals,” as “what happened when modernism met depression” (Madden, 1968, p. 139). Thus, Klein considers proletarian literature a “literary rebellion within [the] literary revolution [called modernism]” (Madden, 1968, p. 137).

works. They argued that art was a revolutionary tool and adhered to the communist slogan of the John Reed clubs, the idea that art is a weapon. In his 1929 column “Go Left Young Writers,” Mike Gold indicates that art was “one of the products of a civilization like steel or textiles. Not a child of eternity, but of time” (*Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, p. 186). Accordingly, writers tried to produce work that was true to everyday experiences to make it, as Paul Lauter writes in “American Proletarianism,” “an instrument for inspiring and shaping change” toward “a new, just, and therefore socialist future” (Elliot, 1991, pp. 335–36)⁷.

“Apocalyptic renewal,” notes Malcolm Bradbury (1983), “was indeed the decade’s great preoccupation. [...] Writers offered in their works] hopes for a violent upheaval that [would] apocalyptically renew the city and American Dream” (p. 102). Toward this end, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) has, at its center, the pursuit of “a kind of ‘agrarian utopia.’” (Bradbury, 1983, p. 109). The story seems to break away from selfish individualism by showing the virtue of human solidarity and generosity, especially at the end of the novel when Rose of Sharon nourishes the starving outsider with the breast milk meant for her stillborn baby. Clearly, this act signifies, Paul Lauter observes, “incorporating outsiders into the more or less traditional family” (Elliot, 1991, p. 343). The novel thus reflects the proletariat’s spirit of collectivism. In a 1933 letter to a friend, Steinbeck wrote, “The group has a soul, a drive, an intent, an end, a method, a reaction, and a set of tropisms, which in no way resembles the same things possessed by the men who make up the group” (George, 2005, p. 25). His subject is “the phalanx of human emotions” (Bradbury, 1983, p. 109)⁸. Steinbeck’s demonstration of this collective soul culminates in the example of Rose of Sharon’s suckling the starving man, which can be read as an attack on “the lore of liberal individualism” promulgated by capitalism (Bradbury, 1983, p. 2).

The transition from selfish individualism to collective consciousness is also reflected in Hemingway’s works of the 1930s. Hemingway went through a kind of conversion in terms of his cultural outlook. He had been maintaining his professional aloofness in the first half of the 1930s, and firmly believed that politics and art do not mix. In a 1932 letter to Paul Romaine, Hemingway wrote, “I do not follow the fashions in politics, letters, religion etc. If the boys

⁷ Serving as an instrument of change was the practical value of art in the 1930s. Genevieve Taggard writes in “Life of the Mind, 1935” that “the words in the books are not true / if they do not act in you” (Hicks, 1935, p. 195). Thus, the political left viewed the artist as a public figure who should contribute meaningfully to his or her society.

⁸ When things become too dire, cooperative action becomes the only means for survival from a Darwinian point of view. Here we come to the collective mentality that Steinbeck referred to as the phalanx or “the group man,” in which people come together to achieve a shared goal. In *Dubious Battle* (1936) explains how the group morality and goal supersedes the individual morality and goal: “A man in a group isn’t himself at all; he’s a cell in an organism that isn’t like him any more than the cells in your body are like you” (p. 113). In a letter, Steinbeck wrote to a friend that “[t]he individuals in a group have thus surrendered their identities and wills to the collective will of the mass” (Owens, 1996, p. 65). The group goal is ambiguous. It can be understood as not only a collective action to advance a communist goal (the collective “we”) but also a mob action. In either case, it is a Darwinian survival mechanism, comparable to some extent to the late-nineteenth-century formation of corporate collectivities such as trusts to drive smaller companies out of business. The phalanx as a mob action is clear in Whittaker Chambers’ “Can You Make Out Their Voices?” (1931). The poor farmers in Chambers’ short story have not yet learned anything about Marxism and communism except the negative attitudes toward communism propagated by the bourgeoisie media: “‘I guess you Reds want everything free’ said Frank. ‘I guess you will, too, before the baby’s dead.’ [replies Jim Wardell, a man who “spends too much time nights reading those (red) books he has in the house” and who now is organizing the impoverished farmers] Hard and bitter to hammer it home” (pp. 6, 8). They learned from their miserable conditions how to rebel in order to save their starving children. These farmers work collectively as a mob to seize food from store windows. The group man thus becomes capable of responding to the Darwinian struggle for survival.

swing to the left in literature you may make a small bet the next swing will be to the right and some of the same yellow bastards will swing both ways. There is no left and right in writing. There is only good and bad writing”(Baker, 1981, p. 363). His apparent move to the left, perhaps driven by his awareness that his works had been out of touch with people’s suffering during the Great Depression, started with the publication of “Who Murdered the Vets?” (1935) in *The New Masses*, the magazine that epitomized the 1930s literary revolution. In this article, he writes with indignation about U.S. Army veterans in the Florida Keys carelessly abandoned by the government to perish in a hurricane. Indicting the rich and those in power, Hemingway observed: “[Y]acht owners know there would be great danger, unescapable danger, to their property if a storm should come [hence you do not see them and their yachts in the Keys during this season].” He continues, “[V]eterans are not property. They are only human beings. [... A]ll they have to lose is their lives” (p. 9). Although this was not a leftist article but only a scathing complaint against the government, the leftist camp regarded it as indicating Hemingway’s move toward the left. Granville Hicks wrote in 1935:

The passion of “Who Murdered the Vets?” not only strengthened my conviction; it made me want to emphasize the good things that can be said about Hemingway, not the bad. This is not because I had any notion that Hemingway would become a revolutionary novelist if the “The New Masses” patted him on the back; it was because “Who Murdered the Vets?” had a quality that had been disastrously absent from his previous work. [...] “Who Murdered the Vets?” suggested that Hemingway was going somewhere (Meyers, 2004, p. 213).

In 1938, Herbert Solow, a critic for *the Partisan Review*, noted Hemingway's ascent within the leftist circles; he recognizes in his article “Substitution at Left Tackle: Hemingway for Dospassos” that Hemingway started to “rise to ‘beatified’ heights for critics like Gold, Hicks, and Cowley” (Cohen, 2009, p. 82).

Hemingway, however, portrays those veterans again in his 1937 novel, *To Have and Have Not* (1937), as battered individuals who drank away their meaningless lives under the auspices of a callous government. In this novel, he moves even closer toward social consciousness by writing about proletarian group solidarity, the “brotherhood” of the “conchs,” and proletarian writers such as Richard Gordon. Most importantly, Hemingway made this character, the dying Harry Morgan, utter the message of solidarity conveyed by the book as a whole: “No matter how, a man alone ain’t got no bloody f--ing chance.” The narrator adds, “It had taken [Harry] all his life to learn” (p. 225)⁹. This message suggests what Philip Young (1966) refers to as “a deathbed conversion” (p. 99); it resonates with Tom Joad’s “I know now a fella ain’t no good alone,” the most overt collectivist declaration in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (p. 418).

Hemingway’s shift in the 1930s toward the theme of collectivism and solidarity suggests that the struggle for individualism and independence in the 1920s had been lost. Hemingway became attracted to the CPUSA after its official announcement in August 1935, via “The Popular Front,” by Georgi Dimitroff, that it would abandon its explicit revolutionary activities of the Third Period and join the progressive resistance against fascism. Hemingway viewed the communists as playing an important role in fighting fascism in Spain. He made it clear, however, that the communist anti-fascist agenda was what attracted him rather than its revolutionary ideology. For example, Harry Morgan, in *To Have and Have Not* (1937),

⁹ Essentially, one can see also in *To Have and Have Not* (1937) an acknowledgement of the have nots in the characters of Harry Morgan and Albert as well as Morgan’s divorce from individualism, a gesture that can be recognized as a turning towards group solidarity.

regarded the revolutionary Cubans as a bunch of murderers: “What the hell do I care about his revolution? F-- his revolution. To help the working man, he robs a bank and kills a fellow works with him and then kills that poor damned Albert that never did any harm. That’s a working man he kills” (p. 168). In addition, Robert Jordan, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), admits that he is only an “anti-fascist” (p. 66). Michael Reynolds (1997) posits that Hemingway was “neither right nor left, but opposed to government of any sort. He trusted working-class people, but not those who would lead them to the barricades and not the masses en masse” (p. 211).

Hemingway’s *The Fifth Column* (1938) stresses the urgency of fighting fascism in Spain. His protagonist Phillip demonstrates a strict dedication to the cause; therefore, Philip must get rid of his mistress, whom he intended to marry, because she takes him away from his duty: “We’re in for fifty years of undeclared wars,” he asserts, “and I’ve signed up for the duration” (p. 87). Philip’s statement echoes Hemingway’s at the second American Writers Congress in June of 1937 that “no true writer could live with fascism” (Reynolds, 1997, p. 270). In his preface to *The Fifth Column*, Hemingway comments, “[I]t will take many plays and novels to present the nobility and dignity of the cause of the Spanish people” (Kazin, 1942, p. 337). A parallel can be drawn here to *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), in which Robert Jordan devotes himself to the cause of fighting the injustice epitomized by fascism. Jordan, Hemingway writes, is “not a real Marxist” (p. 305). He hates the imposition of arbitrary authority and believes in “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity [...] and the Pursuit of Happiness.” He tells himself, “If this war is lost [...] all of those things are lost” (p. 305). Therefore, Jordan accepts “Communist discipline... [of following order and trying] not to think beyond them... for the duration of war” (p. 163). He thus follows the Stalinist premise that the “end justifies the means.”

Hemingway saw a moral obligation to fighting Fascism, which adheres to a policy of terror. He believed that to defeat Fascism, it was imperative to adopt the Fascist war tactics, without infringing on the impunity of the civilians. In his 1937 speech, “Fascism is a Lie,” Hemingway announced: “we must realize that... there is only one way to quell a bully and that is to thrash him” (Hemingway & Matthew, 1986, p. 194). Hence, for the sake of serving a higher cause and preventing greater evil, violence is justified. Accordingly, fighting alongside those who are fighting for their freedom, Robert Jordan finds a need to kill in the battlefield.

For that, sacrifice is not “in vain.” The fancy words that “embarrassed” Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* are now “quite satisfactory as mental sanctions for quietly heroic behavior” (Hoffman, 1951, p. 101). Hemingway recognized in justice and human dignity a noble cause for which Jordan ultimately becomes a martyr. “War,” Hemingway writes in *To Have and Have Not*, can thus be “a purifying and ennobling force” (p. 205). Jordan dies at the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* to save the Pilar group. His death becomes – not absurd but – meaningful as a symbolic rebirth, a process of inclusion. In his death, Jordan is “completely integrated” with some grander force that infiltrates the universe (p. 471). Hemingway writes in the spirit of the Catholic devotion of John Donne, “All mankind is of one Author, and is one volume... No man is an island, entire of itself.”¹⁰ Jordan “felt an absolute brotherhood with the others who were engaged in it” (p. 235). He enters into a complex mystical union with Maria, and with nature. The novel’s conclusion stresses the theme that, in sacrifice and martyrdom, one enters into a spiritual oneness with the group and the universe: “One and one is one” (p. 379). Ray West, an American literary critic, calls this remark “the end of despair and futility — the end of the lost

¹⁰ The opening lines of John Donne, “All mankind is of one Author...,” summarizes the era’s rejection of individualism and “the development of a new, collective self that acquires identity through relations with others” (Foley, 1993, p. 237).

generation” (Hoffman, 195, p. 101)¹¹. This is the ultimate lesson that the dying Jordan learns, and he “wish[es] there was some way to pass [this lesson] on” (p. 467)¹². It is the same lesson Tom Joad learns from Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

One time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good, cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole. Funny how I remember. Didn' think I was even listenin'. But I know now a fella ain't no good alone (p. 418).

Both Hemingway and Steinbeck thus draw on Ralph Waldo Emerson's doctrine of the Oversoul, the belief that we become whole and “holy” when we are finally connected to and participating in the collective soul. This is a vision of society that resonates with an ethos of solidarity in which salvation concerns the interest and support of the entire society.

Notably, in 1941, Mike Gold described Hemingway's writing as “illuminat[ing] the poverty of his mind.” Hemingway, he went on to say, led the life of “a rich sportsman and tourist [...] a spectator without responsibilities, who holds a box seat at the crucifixion of humanity.” For Gold, “Hemingway country” was nothing but

a world of cafés; bullfighters; big game hunting; scotch, more scotch, absinthe; long-limbed, gallant, “aristocratic” women who succumbed easily; and expensive pleasure fishing; and expensive travelling hither and yon [...] a colorful world and one completely divorced from the experience of the great majority of mankind (*The Hollow Men*, p. 88).

Hemingway's *The Fifth Column* (1938) offers a hint of what Gold refers to in Philip's breaking up with Dorothy – a self-indulgent figure who fails to identify with class struggle or denounce injustice. Dorothy is, as Gold alleges about Hemingway, a sheer observer, a tourist who is detached from the plight of humanity around her. For example, after the bombardment, Petra talks about the attack's brutality and asks Dorothy, “Was the bombardment very bad here last night?”

Dorothy: “Oh, it was lovely.”

Petra: “Senorita, you say such dreadful things.”

Dorothy: “No, but Petra it was lovely.”

Petra: “In Progresso, in my quarter, there were six killed in one floor. This morning they were taking them out and all the glass gone in the street [...]”

Dorothy: “Here there wasn't any one killed” (p. 20)

¹¹ Hemingway's politics in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* were applauded by the left. Daniel Aaron writes, in *Writers on the Left*, that Hemingway had “become the party's favorite literary name” (p. 351).

¹² Jordan perceives the Spanish Civil War as part of his enlightenment: “It's part of one's education. It will be quite an education when it's finished” (p. 135). He intends to write a book about the war and its human cost, but when the fascists kill him, they also cause the demise of his art and the suppression of the truth that would have been told in its pages. The fascists are depicted as the enemy of humanity, and Jordan perceives Fascism as equivalent to “the death of art...the death of everything that the artist values and needs” (Shams, 2002, p. 69). Hemingway emphasized this view of the death of truth in art via Fascism in his 1937 speech, “Fascism is a Lie”: Fascism is a lie told by bullies... It is condemned to literary sterility. When it is past, it will have no history except the bloody history of murder that is well known... It is very dangerous to write the truth in war, and the truth is also very dangerous to come by” (Hemingway & Matthew, 1986, p. 193). Thus, rather than simply indulging in acts of self-preservation, the Hemingway hero of the late 1930s became a sympathetic figure who is involved with the plight of mankind.

Dorothy's reaction obviously indicates her indifference to the wreckage and carnage, the human cost, of the bombardment. Because she was not personally affected by the bombardment, her experience of it was "lovely." In addition, echoing Frederic Henry's desire for a "separate peace," she talks often about leaving this place of "war and revolution" for a happier place, like "Saint-Tropez," where she and Philip can lead a life of leisure (p. 23). In contrast, Philip explains to her that he forsook everything he once had for the good of the cause.

Refuting Gold's view that Hemingway was entirely out of touch with the proletariat because he did not offer "a single portrait of a man at work", Philip exhibits strong sympathy for the workingman when he compares the amount of money Dorothy spent on foxes to the wages paid to workers (*The Hollow Men*, p. 88)¹³. Consequently, when Max asks whether Dorothy is a "Comrade," Philip firmly answers "No" to confirm that she still subscribes to the capitalist worldview (p. 70). Finally, Philip rejects what Gold refers to as the "life of comfort" and offers to help the injured, working under the leadership of communists and emphasizing that "my time is the party's time" (p. 70). Later Max tells him, "You do it so [that all people] can live and work in dignity and not as slaves" (p. 79). Gold's criticisms of Hemingway, therefore, seem applicable only to works that predate "Who Murdered the Vets?"

The Struggle against Racial Inequality

Integrating racial conflict into the 1930s class struggle, communism brought for the oppressed Black Americans the hope of equality and inclusion in the society from which they were barred. In his 1972 autobiography titled *Black Worker in the Deep South*, Hosea Hudson, a communist activist, describes a Black communist sharecropper named Al Murphy who believed that Blacks were the most exploited group in America:

[They] built not only the railroads and the factories, [but] they [also] had helped to build the material wealth of the entire [S]outh with their toil and sweat and blood. Yet we Negroes enjoyed practically none of the rights guaranteed American citizens by the U.S Constitution. [. . . R]ight here and now we blacks are the last to be hired and the first to be fired. It was we, already existing on the crumbling edge of starvation. (p. 38)

Al Murphy sees in communism an answer to the so-called "Negro question." Adopting the communist explanation of racism, Murphy asserts that the capitalist system "robbed the masses of people of a livelihood, that the only way the bosses could prevent the white and black masses of people from struggling together was to keep them divided. If they could spread the lie that every white woman was in danger of being raped by some black man, it helped to spread fear and disunity" (Hudson, 1972, p. 38)¹⁴.

¹³ Of note, Hemingway also shows that same sympathy for the economic suffering of the workingman in *To Have and Have Not* when Harry Morgan realizes that his hard work makes no difference and that his family remains hungry.

¹⁴ Murphy is alluding to the Scottsboro case in which nine Black men were falsely convicted by an all-White male jury of raping two White women. The Communist Party did not consider the travesty as evidence of racial prejudice. Instead, James S Allen, the Communist Party's chief expert and strategist on Southern Blacks, in his 1933 "Scottsboro" describes it as "a struggle between two opposing class forces" (Fried, 1997, p. 151). Eight of the nine young Black men were sentenced to death. The Communist Party saw this as a miscarriage of justice, "an expression of the horrible national oppression of the Negro masses" (Maxwell, 1999, p. 132). Therefore, the Party involved itself by appointing Samuel Leibowitz, who has been compared to Clarence Darrow in the 1925 Scopes trial, as a defense attorney. The efforts of the Communist Party eventually saved the lives of those young men. As a result, it gained popularity among Blacks. William Maxwell contends that "Scottsboro made Communism a household word in African American clubs, beauty shops, and churches and added color to the party's rank and

The idea that capitalism exploits racism to keep the working class divided, incapable of acting and too busy quarreling with one another, was also stressed in the 1931 Yokinen trial known as “Race Hatred on Trial.” In this party trial, August Yokinen, Party Unit Leader of the Finnish Workers Club, was found guilty of practicing “white chauvinism” that “aid[ed] the bourgeoisie in bringing about disunity among the Negro and white workers” (Fried, 1997, pp. 146-47). In this trial, racism was characterized as “crimes against the working class.” In his final statement Yokinen declared, “I see now that this white chauvinism is not only an outrage against the Negro workers, but is also a crime against the working class as a whole” (Fried, 1997, p. 149). Echoing Al Murphy, he said as well that racism is a social phenomenon created by the capitalists

to divert the working class from struggling against the vicious attack upon their class organizations and their living standard; it is becoming ever more important for the workers to solidify the class solidarity of the Negro and white workers. [...] American imperialism uses this artificial separation of workers into groups to further split them from each other by spreading its vicious doctrines of race and national prejudice by playing the Negro and foreign-born and American white workers all against each other (Fried, 1997, pp. 149–50).

Of significance here is the fact that among the founding principles of the John Reed Club, published in April of 1932 in the *The New Masses* under the title “Draft Manifesto,” was a mandate for “fighting against white chauvinism” in cases of racial discrimination or persecution (Fried, 1997, p. 177). In such Communist structure, the Blacks found a chance for self-expression and a hope for liberation from Jim Crow laws. In “To Negro Writers,” presented at the American Writers Congress in 1935, Langston Hughes declared: “We want a new and better America, where there won’t be any poor, where there won’t be any more Jim Crow, where there won’t be any munition makers, where we won’t need philanthropy, nor charity, nor the New Deal, nor Home Relief” (Hart, 1935, p. 141). Hughes saw the role of the Negro writer as one of merging racial and class interests to create a sense of class brotherhood.

Much like Al Murphy, Richard Wright found in communism a rational solution for the irrational nightmare facing the African American he writes about in *Native Son* (1940). His unabashed political convictions made him condemn Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) as a work “about nothing” because, as Rafia Zafar writes in her “Southern Daughter, Native Son: Hurston and Wright,” it does not concern itself with “the Depression-era black man” or his “never-ending oppression” (Bercovitch, 2002, pp. 343, 346). For Wright, fiction has to deal directly with the writer’s contemporary social and racial scene. Bigger Thomas, *Native Son*’s protagonist, is a dispossessed victim of the social arrangement by which African Americans were second-class citizens constrained by Jim Crow laws. The whole world for him thus is a prison. Enraged and frustrated, Davis comments in “Race and Region,” Bigger rebels and “attempts to alter power relationships” in a society that denies his humanity (Elliot, 1991, p. 433). He consequently lives out the rest of his life in further fear and

file throughout the United States” (p. 133). Because of such support in the Scottsboro trial, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., announced in a sermon that “the day will come when being called a Communist will be the highest honor that can be paid an individual and that day is coming soon” (Maxwel, 1999, p. 133). Along the same lines, John Dos Passos wrote in “Scottsboro’s Testimony,” published in *Labor Defender* in July of 1931, that “As far as I can see, since the days of the old Abolitionists, no one has had the courage to publically face the problem until the International Labor Defense and the Communist Party came along with their slogans of equality and cooperation between white and Negro workers. For that reason alone, I think those organizations deserve support, even by outsiders who do not subscribe to their entire creed” (p. 131).

deprivation. Sentimentally, Mr. Max, Bigger's attorney, tries to put Bigger into a larger social context to show that Bigger is but a representative figure for the condition of a whole race. Max explains how the impact of oppression, racial segregation, economic deprivation, and injustice the black people have suffered could produce "the Bad Nigger" (Bell, 1987, p. 158). Therefore, society, not Bigger, should be judged.

Conclusion

Conflict and change have profoundly molded and informed the American novel. Thus, Bradbury (1983) surmised that the American novel is "a living genre." It is regarded "as predominantly a product of the culture out of which it is created, as deriving from a distinct history, ideology, landscape, and cast of mind" (p. vii). The dialectical process of conflict and change, Louis Menand (2001) contends, constitutes the open-endedness of modern society where the culture is not confined to reproducing the values, customs, and practices of the past, but chooses its new paths depending on emerging possibilities and circumstances¹⁵. This process will always be reflected in the literature the culture produces, which itself underlies the constant growth of the American fiction.

¹⁵ Reflecting on the pragmatism of the American Culture, Louis Menand writes in *The Metaphysical Club* (2001): "Modernity is the condition a society reaches when life is no longer conceived as cyclical. In a premodern society, where the purpose of life is understood to be the reproduction of the customs and practices of the group, and where people are expected to follow the life path their parents followed, the ends of life are given at the beginning of life. People know what their life's task is, and they know when it has been completed. In modern societies, the reproduction of custom is no longer understood to be one of the chief purposes of existence, and the ends of life are not thought to be given; they are thought to be discovered or created. Individuals are not expected to follow the life path of their parents, and the future of the society is not thought to be dictated entirely by its past. Modern societies do not simply repeat and extend themselves; they change in unforeseeable directions..." (p. 399).

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Corresponding author: Majed Al-Lehaibi
Contact email: mallehaibi@jazanu.edu.sa