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ENGL 203-03

4 May 2018

Final Essay

Throughout the course of this semester, we have explored an abundance of authors that have shaped the culture of American literature. Early on we looked at how writer’s beliefs and values were integrated into their works. This was evidently shown in the writings of Anne Bradstreet. From these values, writing started to stem off into the hopes and ideals for people in our country, which Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson displayed in their works. The factor of race came to play a key role in literature throughout the Harlem Renaissance. Lastly, we analyzed the representation of social classes through the writings of John Cheever and Raymond Carver. These authors and many more have pathed the way of American literature by writing from the influences of their own time and of those before them.

Anne Bradstreet laid the foundation early on by writing about principles that were important to her, such as her faith, family, and nature. She demonstrated a steadfast devotion to her Puritan faith, which was showcased throughout her poetry. For example, in “Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House, July 10th, 1666” Bradstreet turns to God in face of hardship when her house caught on fire. She says, “And to my God my heart did cry to strengthen me in my distress ad not leave me succorless.” (Bradstreet 122). Additionally, she was not remorseful towards God, yet she was thankful because “sufficient for us is left” (Bradstreet 122). We also saw the significant role her family played in not only her life but also her writing. “To My Dear Children” embodies the essence of Bradstreet, who wrote this for her kids when she was sick, in hopes that they would have a better understanding of who she was and what she stood for.

Bradstreet’s beliefs played a fundamental role in her life and writing, which led writers like Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson to communicate the hopes and dreams of our country. Through the transcendentalist movement, Emerson unified man, God, and nature in his works, specifically in “The American Scholar”. Here he features the responsibilities of a “*Man Thinking*”, who takes on many roles in society (Emerson 537). He also stresses the initiative that an American scholar takes by saying, “Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential.” (Emerson 541). Similarly, Whitman aimed to inspire a nation and give the American people a voice. In “Song of Myself”, Whitman uses elements of nature to describe the American people (Whitman 1028). He also ties in spiritual aspects like Bradstreet by saying, “I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then” (Whitman 1065). Emerson and Whitman were both able to incorporate their religious beliefs like Bradstreet, while providing readers at the time with sense of innovation.

Emerson and Whitman ignited the flame of the American people, while writers during the Harlem Renaissance focused on the portrayal of African American culture at the time. Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen are two of the most notable writers of this time, who wanted to represent the racial injustices during that time. In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, Hughes reflects on his ancestors and the journey of African Americans throughout history. However, in “Song for a Dark Girl” he highlights the cultural corruption when a girl’s “black young lover” is hung to tree, which leads her to question God and the use of prayer (Hughes 2226). Similarly, Cullen questions God’s decisions in “Yet Do I Marvel”, where he struggles to be a poet during a time when it was not acceptable for African Americans (Cullen 2241). Additionally, Cullen’s “Incident” reveals the racial prejudice he experienced at only eight years old (Cullen 2241). This event left a lasting impression on him about how the world views not only him but also African Americans. Both Hughes and Cullen personified the African American voice at the time in order to help people understand their perspectives, while looking to inspire readers during their generation just like Emerson and Whitman.

More recently, the works of John Cheever and Raymond Carver give us insight on the depiction of social classes. In “The Swimmer”, Cheever introduces us to Neddy Merrill, who decides to swim across the county, going from the “Grahams, the Hammers, the Lears, the Howlands, and the Crosscups (Cheever 2364). Merill seems to be in a middle-class community, but there is more to his story than meets the eye. Little by little more is uncovered about his life, and when he gets to the Halloran’s house Mrs. Halloran expressed her regret for his misfortunes with losing his house and children (Cheever 2367). However, in “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”, different types of love are mentioned that go beyond age and social class. Terri and Ed represent a toxic relationship of violence, yet Terri says, “In his own way maybe, but he loved me.” (Carver 171). Carver went on to reflect an old couple’s relationship, who were badly injured in a car accident. The husband loved his wife so much that he became depressed when we could not see her through his cast (Carver 183). The devotion of the old couple relates to the same original themes of Bradstreet, who had an unwavering love for her faith and family.

Through this course, I have seen the progression between each literary or cultural movement, and how each has built off the one before it. As the first published American poet, Anne Bradstreet laid the groundwork for American literature by writing about the values most important to her. Her poetic elements of love and nature inspired Emerson and Whitman to write for the people of their time, instilling in them a sense of creativity and empowerment. Hughes and Cullen sought to portray the racial injustices of African Americans, while giving a voice to those who were not as well represented at the time. Lastly, through the works of Cheever and Carver we have seen how love takes on many different forms. Overall, these authors have built off one another in order to adapt to their time period and enhance American literature.

Works Cited

Baym, Nina, Ed. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Shorter 8th Edition*. New York: Norton, 2008.

Carver, Raymond. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love: Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1989.