

"The Evolution of the Anti-Hero in 20th Century American Literature"

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Abstract

the history of the anti-hero in American literature of the twentieth century, from its genesis in the writings of the Lost Generation all the way to its intricate depictions in postmodern literature. In reaction to the existential and cultural crises of the twentieth century, the anti-hero—a person in literature who rejects conventional heroic traits like courage, morality, and idealism—rose to prominence. This study delves into three seminal works—American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis, The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger—to explore the ways in which the anti-hero embodies the modern American experience of moral ambiguity, alienation, and disillusionment. From the tragic heroes of the early 1900s, who struggle with disappointment and loss, to the morally grey characters of the middle of the century, who doubt social standards and the veracity of their own identities, the anti-hero reflects the shifting values and fears of the American mind. By the end of the twentieth century, the anti-hero had come to represent postmodern literature's ubiquitous cynicism and existential terror, and he had become a symbol of the broken self. This change demonstrates how the anti-hero continues to play an important role in American literature, as a character who forces readers to face difficult realities about themselves and the world around them.

Keywords: Anti-hero, 20th century American literature, Modernism, Postmodernism, Existentialism

Introduction

American society underwent a dramatic metamorphosis in the 20th century due to fast industrialisation, global conflicts, economic turmoil, and major changes in cultural norms. In this context of flux and unpredictability, literature blossomed as a potent tool for delving into the intricacies of the human experience. The anti-hero, a figure that embodies defects, contradictions, and moral ambiguity and stands in sharp contrast to the conventional heroic archetype, is one of the most interesting figures to emerge in this literary world. American literature's anti-heroes are more than just a character type; they mirror the changing consciousness of the nation at large. The anti-hero lacks the traditional attributes that identify the classical hero, such as bravery, honesty, and steadfast devotion to noble principles. Many readers could relate to these people because they were also dealing with the challenges of a fast changing world, such as existential angst, social disillusionment, and personal isolation. The anti-hero first appeared in American literature in the decades following World War I, when

members of the Lost Generation sought solace in figures who challenged conventional wisdom and the American Dream in the wake of the devastating loss they had endured. The anti-hero developed throughout the century, mirroring the increasing difficulty of modern, fractured society's dealing with issues of authenticity, morality, and identity. The anti-hero became a prominent figure in postmodern literature at the end of the twentieth century, representing the prevailing cynicism and existential doubt of the time. Looking at how the anti-hero has changed over the twentieth century in American literature, both in response to and as a product of the prevailing cultural and existential themes of that era. This study will provide insights into how the anti-hero reflects the anxieties and contradictions of each era through a close reading of seminal texts like *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. Doing so will help shed light on the anti-hero's long history of importance in American literature.

The Origins of the Anti-Hero in Early 20th Century Literature

Many literary works can be traced back to the early 20th century, a time of great change and revolution. The anti-hero was born out of the ashes of World War I, modernism's ascent, and the ensuing disappointment with conventional wisdom. A traditional hero exemplifies idealism, bravery, and moral clarity; an anti-hero, on the other hand, is characterised by ambivalence, introspection, and profound disappointment.

The Influence of Modernism

As a literary movement, modernism aimed to reject the norms and standards of the previous century. The emphasis was on the mind and its inner workings, as well as on subjective experience and fragmented narratives. The modernist writers' main concerns revolved around feelings of estrangement, existential crisis, and doubting long-held beliefs. As a result of this change in emphasis, stories featuring flawed, multi-faceted protagonists who struggle to find meaning in a world that is always evolving emerged.

A prominent figure in modernist literature, the anti-hero embodied the moral ambiguities and inner struggles of the period. These people represent a more grounded and frequently gloomy perspective on humanity, and they frequently turn their backs on conventional ideas of heroism. Rather than being motivated by a strong moral compass, their behaviours are shaped by their struggles for survival, uncertainties about themselves, and a search for purpose in a world that appears to be losing its significance.

The Lost Generation and Post-World War I Disillusionment

A significant sense of disillusionment was brought about as a result of the aftermath of World War I, particularly among the generation of young men who had witnessed the horrors of the conflict up close and personal. This group of authors, who are frequently referred to as the "Lost Generation," includes notable personalities like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and John Dos Passos. The works of these artists are a reflection of the widespread feelings of loss, disappointment, and scepticism that were prevalent during the post-war era. One of the most prominent characters in the works of literature produced by the Lost Generation is the

anti-hero. The majority of the time, these characters are disillusioned with the aspirations of their forefathers, disillusioned with the promises of the American Dream, and estranged from the culture that surrounds them. As an illustration, Jay Gatsby, the protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, is a tragic anti-hero who goes to great lengths to achieve an ideal that is ultimately impossible, which ultimately leads to his downfall. There are a number of characteristics that define Gatsby as an anti-heroic character. These include his moral ambiguity, his problematic history, and his preoccupation with a goal that will never be satisfied. Jake Barnes, the main character in Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises*, is a representation of the disillusionment and existential anguish that the generation that came after the war experienced. All of Jake's physical and emotional wounds, his inability to build meaningful connections, and his disconnection from traditional ideals combine to make him the epitome of an anti-hero. His fight is not to reach greatness; rather, it is to discover some semblance of meaning in a world that has been irreparably transformed by the tragedy of war. As a result, the anti-hero of the early 20th century is a product of the modernist movement as well as the larger cultural and historical background of the time period. These figures represent a departure from the idealised heroes of the past, and instead provide a representation of the human experience that is more nuanced and frequently unsettling. Their development laid the groundwork for the increasingly convoluted and ethically ambiguous anti-heroes that would come to dominate American fiction in the second part of the century.

The Anti-Hero in Mid-Century American Literature

The United States experienced a period of considerable social, cultural, and political upheaval throughout the middle of the 20th century. This period was characterised by the aftermath of World War II, the development of the Cold War, and growing conflicts regarding civil rights and personal liberties. These trends were replicated in American literature, where the image of the anti-hero continued to develop, becoming more complicated and significant as time went on. The anti-hero of the middle of the 20th century, in contrast to the tragic figures of the early 20th century, is frequently characterised by a more profound sense of alienation, existential distress, and a challenge to old moral and societal conventions.

Alienation and Identity in Post-War America

At the same time that the United States of America was experiencing a paradoxical combination of wealth and worry in the years following World War II. During the 1950s, the economy had a period of unparalleled growth, which resulted in record levels of consumerism and suburbanisation. However, underneath this veneer of prosperity was a profound sense of disenchantment. The atrocities of the war, in conjunction with the impending prospect of nuclear devastation during the Cold War, caused many people to reconsider the beliefs and ideals that had previously appeared to be unshakeable. A new form of anti-hero in literature emerged as a result of this cultural milieu. This anti-hero symbolises the profound sense of alienation and identity crisis that was prevalent during that age.

In the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), written by J.D. Salinger, the main character, Holden Caulfield, is considered to be one of the most memorable anti-heroes of the mid-century.

Holden is the epitome of an anti-hero because of his dissatisfaction with the world around him, his hatred for the "phoniness" of society, and his persistent pursuit of authenticity. Holden, in contrast to classic heroes who strive to follow societal norms, chooses to reject them, and as a result, his journey is one consisting of avoidance rather than achievement. His internal struggle with identity and purpose is reflective of the greater fears of a generation that is coming of age in a society that feels increasingly unstable and hypocritical.

To a similar extent, the protagonist in Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog* (1964), Moses Herzog, is an anti-hero who is fundamentally flawed and focused on introspection. The existential predicaments that many people in the United States of America struggled with during the middle of the 20th century are exemplified by Herzog's intellectual crisis, his failed relationships, and his persistent questioning of the world around him. The work delves into topics such as the dissolution of personal and societal identities, the search for purpose, and the feeling of being distant from others. The anti-heroism that Herzog possesses stems from the fact that he is unable to reconcile the intellectual principles he holds with the realities of his existence, which ultimately results in a profound sense of paralysis and despair.

The Challenge to Traditional Morality and the American Dream

At the same time as the anti-hero of the middle of the century struggles with issues of identification and alienation, they also provide a challenge to the conventional moral frameworks and the goals of the American Dream. In the years following World War II, there was a growing scepticism regarding the concept of success as being characterised by material prosperity, social prestige, and compliance to society standards. Scepticism is represented in the anti-heroes of literature from the middle of the century, who frequently reject or destroy the principles that are being discussed.

In the novel *Native Son* (1940) written by Richard Wright, the character Bigger Thomas is portrayed as an anti-hero whose acts and circumstances shed light on the profound racial and social inequities that exist in American society. Bigger's journey is one of defiance against a system that has dehumanised and marginalised him; nonetheless, his acts are morally ambiguous, which forces readers to confront truths about the American Dream that may be unsettling to them. Wright makes use of Bigger's character in order to provide a critique of the institutional racism and economic exploitation that are the foundations of the promise of success and upward mobility.

An additional illustration of this can be seen in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), in which the character of Willy Loman is portrayed as an anti-hero who personifies the failure of the American Dream. Willy suffers a mental collapse and ultimately dies as a result of his unrelenting quest of achievement, which is based on shallow measurements of worth and the favour of society. Not only does his tragic end serve as a forceful critique of the capitalist values that dominated American culture during the middle of the 20th century, but it also highlights the disillusionment that many people feel with a dream that is impossible to achieve.

The Rise of the Anti-Hero in Beat Literature

A group of writers who rebelled against the conformist culture of the 1950s was known as the Beat Generation. This group was another place where the anti-hero of the middle century found a voice. Characters that defied society conventions, embraced nonconformity, and sought spiritual and personal emancipation were developed by authors such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs to name a few. These anti-heroes were frequently displaced individuals, social outcasts, or rebels who chose not to follow the traditional routes to achievement and instead explored alternative ways of life that called into question the principles that are upheld by the majority of society.

The characters Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, who appear in Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957), are illustrative of the anti-heroic search for meaning that occurs outside of the confines of normal society. In their voyage across the United States, they are not looking for material achievement; rather, they are looking for escape from existential constraints and personal fulfilment. The anti-heroes of the Beat Generation are symbolic of a rejection of the uniformity that prevailed in the post-war age and an embracing of spontaneity, self-expression, and a more profound connection to the human experience.

Conclusion

When viewed through the lens of Victorian Gothic literature, the representation of women offers an illuminating perspective through which to investigate the concerns, conflicts, and contradictions that were prevalent in Victorian society. In this genre, female characters are frequently presented as both victims and transgressors, exemplifying the complicated roles that were ascribed to women during the historical period of the 19th century. As a result of its emphasis on the supernatural, captivity, and insanity, the Gothic genre evolved into a potent vehicle for investigating the constraints and expectations that were imposed on women within the framework of the traditional gender roles that were prevalent during the Victorian centuries. Ladies are portrayed as central roles in works such as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Dracula*. These ladies are the focal point of the narrative tension that can be found in these works. Commonly, these characters find themselves caught between the conventional standards of chastity and passivity, on the one hand, and the Gothic themes of violence, passion, and defiance, on the other. In Victorian society, there were deep-seated worries and ambiguities regarding gender and morality, and the representation of these characters, which is both innocent and corrupted, passive and powerful, represents these fears and anxieties deeply. In addition, the depiction of women in Gothic literature as being constrained, whether physically or psychologically, serves as a critique of the restrictive societal systems that aimed to regulate the autonomy and expression of women. At the same time, the genre frequently portrays these women as having an inner strength or a rebellious power, which challenges the very rules that are intended to tame them. In the end, Victorian Gothic literature not only reflects the prevalent beliefs of its time, but it also questions and complicates those attitudes, providing a complex investigation into the identity and agency of women. The genre's ability to convey the ongoing problems surrounding gender roles is the source of its enduring appeal. As a result, these works are relevant for contemporary conversations on women's rights and the demands of society.

Victorian Gothic works continue to stir debate and conversation about the roles and depictions of women, both in literature and in society as a whole, due to the fact that they depict women in a manner that is both complicated and frequently contradictory.

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