

Social Issues in World Literature

Summary

Literature is one of the ways to understand and combat the difficult social issues that shape our world. A few of the social issues that literature primarily wrestles with are age/aging, gender, ethnicity, and human rights.

Social Issues in World Literature: Diversity and Debate

Do you know the song 'It's a Small World After All'? It tells us that we all have a common bond: our humanity, and the planet we share. The lyrics suggest that we should focus on our similarities rather than our differences to bring about a peaceful world. While this is an admirable sentiment, it is easy to see that all too often, **injustice** and **oppression** within society prevent us from achieving that ideal 'small world' unity.

Overall, literature has proven to be one of the best ways to understand and combat the difficult **social issues** that shape our world. A few of the social issues that literature primarily wrestles with are age/aging, gender, ethnicity, and human rights.

Age in Literature

The **coming-of-age novel** emerged during the 18th century in Germany, with books such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). The book describes the process of individual maturation from adolescent to adult. The German word for novels with this same theme is the **Bildungsroman**, which literally means 'the novel of education'. The most famous recent coming of age novel is J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). The novel questions the authenticity of Holden Caulfield's maturation through the protagonist's childish language and behavior.

The concerns of old age also appear in literature. William Shakespeare's play, *King Lear* (1606), depicts a king whose mind is weakening with age. Other works deal with the physical problems of aging.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, tells the tale of an epic struggle between an old man and a fish he has hooked far out at sea. Both of these works problematize the limitations imposed by age.

Women and Literature

Women's literature has a long tradition in Western literature, but it only started to gain recognition in the 19th century. Novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) dealt with the confrontation between a woman and her desires. Later, authors such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir wrote about women's inability to assert their personal power in their essays *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *The Second Sex* (1949), respectively. The **feminist movement** struggled for **gender equality** between men and women and flourished in the 1960s. Women writers frequently condemned **patriarchal society**, which is characterized by sociopolitical male dominance.

Ethnicity in Literature

Ethnicity and Ethnic Studies have garnered much attention in the last 40 years. Many contemporary authors, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, have explored the dual oppression by ethnicity and gender of black women in the United States. The development of these themes goes back to Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech 'Ain't I a Woman' and also Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which appeared in 1937. Hurston's novel, with its strong female protagonist, is a direct precursor to Walker and Morrison's novels such as, respectively, *The Color Purple* (1982) and *Beloved* (1987).

The Black experience in the United States was also captured by poets such as Langston Hughes. 'Let America Be America Again' (1936) is a poem that explores how Hughes' identity as a black man complicates his patriotic feelings about the U.S. Novelists such as Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man* (1952)), wrote about the marginalization and **disenfranchisement** (lack of political power) of black men within a system characterized by institutionalized racism and bias.

Chicano/Latino authors have written about the struggles of being a **linguistic minority** in the U.S.. Julia Alvarez (*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, 1991), Sandra Cisneros (*The House on Mango Street*, 1984) and most recently, acclaimed author Junot Díaz (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, 2007) have written novels that address the social and political implications of living in a country that literally 'doesn't speak your language'. These novels sometimes inject Spanish words into English phrases--a phenomenon known as 'code switching'--as a way of demonstrating that language is fluid even when politics is not.

Sherman Alexie and Leslie Marmon Silko's novels illuminate the impoverished circumstances and rich cultural traditions of Native American tribes. Outside the U.S., other writers have also addressed the problem of the oppression of indigenous cultures.

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Rigoberta Menchu's autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1983), narrates the abuse of the K'ich'e people during the Guatemalan dictatorship of the 1980s.

Human Rights and Literature

Some of the topics in human rights that world literature has addressed are colonialism, genocide, and racial injustice. For example, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) dramatizes the abuses committed by the British colonial government against the Nigerian people in the 19th century.

Both Elie Wiesel (Romania) and Primo Levi (Italy) are survivors of the Holocaust. Their struggle to survive **genocide** sheds light on this systematic attempt by the Nazis to extinguish the Jewish population of Europe. Their works *Night* (1960) and *If This Is a Man (Survival in Auschwitz)* (1947) recount the horrors of Nazi concentration camps.

In the United States, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) exposed the cruelty of slavery and incited action to end it. But **racial injustice** itself did not end. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) deals with this topic, depicting the wrongful prosecution of a black man for a crime he did not commit. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee has a similar theme, in which a child tries to understand the racial prejudices of the U.S. legal system.

Lesson Summary

Literature about age ranges from the adolescent **coming of age** novel to depictions of the mental and physical limitations of old age. **Gender equality** and **women's rights** within a **patriarchal society** continue to develop as themes in women's literature. The politics of **ethnicity** and identity frequently confront the **disenfranchisement of marginalized** communities, which can be political, ethnic, and/or linguistic. Human rights literature has increased in visibility as more people have chosen, sometimes at great risk, to speak out about the abuses of **colonialism**, **genocide**, and **racial injustice**, among others.