

A Study of the Influence of Afro-American Culture on Anglo-American Fiction

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Abstract

In the making of American literature, “race” is a crucial factor. Among various racial elements contributing to American literary independence, blackness is a vital one. The paper aims to analyze how Afro-American culture and language interacts with Anglo-American fiction, respectively exploring the impact of three main black cultures on the white text, namely blackface minstrelsy, black English and jazz. In the literary world, whiteness and blackness are not entirely divorced from each other but closely interrelated. The overwhelming presence of black characters and black culture in the Anglo-American fiction cannot and should not be denied.

Keywords: Anglo-American fiction, blackface minstrelsy, black English, jazz, blackness

1. Introduction

Blackness is the prominent feature that Afro-Americans possess and express in their literature. As solitary outsiders and marginal people in American culture, Afro-Americans construct their individual visions of the human condition by exploring the literary possibilities of their African cultural heritage. Besides, it is worthwhile to note that blackness also manifests itself in the novels by Anglo-Americans. Cooper, Melville, Poe, Mark Twain, Faulkner, and many other white authors have tried their hands at picturing Afro-American life and character in their novels.

In a society where racial prejudice against blacks still exists, there is no escape from “blackness” for both Afro-American fiction and Anglo-American fiction. With strong vigor and energy, Afro-American culture has exerted great impact on American culture and literature. Just as Ellison noted, “I recognize no American culture which is not the partial creation of black people. I recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in music, even in assembling processes, which does not bear the mark of the American Negro.” (McPherson, 1995) Robert Farris Thompson, an American art historian, also persuasively wrote, “To be white in America is to be very black. If you don’t know how black you are, you don’t know how American you are.” (Fishkin, 1993) Also, as Vann Woodward put it in 1919, “so far as their culture is concerned, all Americans are part Negro.” (Fishkin, 1993)

2. The Influence of Blackface Minstrelsy on Anglo-American Fiction

From the early nineteenth century well into the twentieth century, the “blackface minstrelsy”, also known as “minstrel show”, was the most popular form of entertainment, not only in American South, but also throughout the United States. Even in England and many places of Europe it could also find very large audiences as well.

As *The Random House Dictionary* defines, minstrel show is “a popular state entertainment featuring comic dialogue, song, and dance in highly conventionalized patterns, performed by a troupe of actors, traditionally comprising two end men and a chorus in blackface and an interlocutor, developed in the U.S. in the early and mid-19th century (1865-70).” (Flexner, 1987) The name “blackface” derives from the fact that the majority of minstrel performers are white people and they usually blacken their faces with burnt cork in order to masquerade as blacks. The blackface entertainers “imitate” or “caricature” black slaves in the South and perform songs and dances inspired by African folk culture.

On the surface, blackface minstrelsy was about lively songs and dances, but its greater impact was on the display and cultivation of false stereotypes concerning Afro-Americans. The typical black character in the play was invariably demeaned and represented as naïve, childlike, unintelligent and clumsy. He would usually be a slave on a southern plantation, dressed in rags, and using coarse and offensive dialect. As Eric Lott argues, wearing

“blackface” was to “inherit the cool, virility, humility, abandon, gait de coeur that were the prime components of white ideologies of black manhood.”(Lott, 1993) Although it may have included some aspects of the reality of black life, the minstrel show remained an inherently racist enterprise.

Blackface minstrelsy was one of the most prevalent and recurring themes in the mid to late 19th century American literature. The impact of blackface minstrelsy on Anglo-American fiction mainly resides in the characterization of the black image. The most common identifiers of “blackface characters” are the use of unintelligible dialect, showing inferiority toward the white people, being content in poor conditions, and basically de-sexualized personas. The false stereotypes that blackface minstrelsy forms and spreads to white America have helped shape white reinventions of black culture as a whole. Many black characters in the novel by white authors, such as Stowe, Mark Twain, Faulkner, more or less display traits pertaining to the minstrel stereotypes.

In terms of depicting black characters, Stowe “owes a great deal to the darky figures who capered across minstrel stages and white imaginations in the antebellum year.” (Yarborough, 1986) She has created many black characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, who bear noticeable resemblance to the stage performers in blackface minstrelsy. Topsy, a little black girl, manifests clear-cut blackface traits. When asked to give some performance before her new mistress, Miss Ophelia, Topsy displays an amazing trick like a pet:

“The black, glassy eyes glittered with a kind of wicked drollery, and the thing struck up, in a clear shrill voice, an old negro melody, to which she kept time with her hands and feet, spinning around, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which distinguish the native music of her race; and finally, turning a somersault or two, and giving a prolonged closing note, as odd and unearthly as that of a stream-whistle, she came suddenly down on the carpet, and stood with her hands folded, and a most sanctimonious expression of meekness and solemnity over her face, only broken by the cunning glances which she shot askance from the corners of her eyes.”(Stowe, 1981)

Topsy’s ridiculous performance in the incredible passage reveals the Stowe’s odd conception of Afro-African folk music and dance, for she identifies personally with the performance by the minstrel troupe. Topsy’s antics make her a clown-like figure, which is typical of the performers on the minstrel stage. After the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, plenty of playwrights adapted the book for stage, which was then called “Tom show”. “Tom Show” was played relentlessly in America, winning wide popularity at that time. With its great popularity, the images of black characters, such as Uncle Tom and Topsy, were promulgated among the general public and went deeper into the American popular imagination.

As a popular entertainment form, minstrel show is mainly targeted at lower-class white people. They lived in dire conditions and were also discriminated against by upper-class whites. Hence, they were referred to as “wage slaves”. Thanks to the similar economic and social conditions, they would sympathize with black slaves and even sought to cross the color line unconsciously. Therefore, as W. J. Cash put it,

“With Jim Crow we see manifested the deepest kind of ambivalence of the Southerner toward their black charges who they dominated and intimidated but could not help but imitate and even lean on: thus, they deployed the black-face, the ‘broken speech’, the sentimental and satiric songs and dances as a way of exploring their misgivings about their precarious hold on social order and even psychological stability.” (Cash, 1941)

As a poor white in the childhood, Mark Twain was inevitably under the influence of the cultural phenomenon. He really loved the minstrel show which was prevalent in his time. He recalled in his autobiography that blackface minstrelsy was “the genuine nigger show, the extravagant nigger show” (Twain, 1959). He even held that minstrelsy was better than opera. He made such a remark, “if I could have the nigger show back again in its pristine purity and perfection I should have but little further use for opera” (Twain, 1959). He was so fond of this performance that he gave an elaborate description in his autobiography:

“The minstrel used a very broad negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny—delightfully and satisfyingly funny ... The minstrel troupes had good voices and both their solos and their choruses were a delight to me as long as the negro show continued in existence.” (Twain, 1959)

The minstrel show therefore serves as a source for his novel. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jim sometimes acts like a minstrel performer. Although with a kind heart, Jim’s superstitious acts somehow retain the vestige of minstrel show. For instance, his telling Huck’s future through his hair ball have clear “minstrel roots”

(Lott, 2001). Jim's dialogue with Huck was so funny that they are just like two blackface comedians in a minstrel show. As Ellison put it:

“Writing at a time when the blackface minstrel was still popular, and shortly after a war which left even the abolitionists weary of those problems associated with the Negro, Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it was from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human capacity—and Twain's complexity—emerge.” (Ellison, 1964)

After a close examination of the novel, one could be shocked to discover that the narrative structure of the novel just echoes the process of a minstrelsy performance. As Anthony J. Berret argued, the text can be divided into three parts: “comic dialogues between Huck and Jim (much of the humor at Jim's expense), many and various novelty acts (the king and the duke's scams, the circus, etc.), and riotous burlesques of social and cultural matters (Emmeline Grangerford's sentimental poetry, the final setting-free of an already free Jim).” (Lott, 2001) The three parts therefore accord with “a tripartite minstrel show structure of comic dialogues, olio, and Southern burlesque.” (Lott, 2001)

In addition to *Huck Finn*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is another novel which is profoundly influenced by the minstrel show.

The story took place in a small town called Dawson's Landing. Roxy, a slave woman with one sixteenth African descent, gave birth to a boy—Chambers, who was “thirty-one parts white ... and by a fiction of law and custom a negro.” (Twain, 1989) She exchanged her son with her white young master Tom for fear that her son would be sold down river. Her switch of babies was not discovered because they resembled each other much in appearance.

Before Tom went to rob the safe of his uncle, he wore women's clothing and “blackened his face with burnt cork” (Twain, 1989). However, Judge Driscoll happened to discover his dirty act and Tom mercilessly dabbled him to death. It seems that Twain deliberately let “Tom” kill his uncle with the blackface mask and it's his one-thirty-second black blood that drove him to kill the judge. Profoundly influenced by minstrel show, Mark Twain here exhibits ambivalent feelings towards slavery. Just as Eric Lott observes, “Blackface furnished Twain's very language of race, a language riddled with ambiguities Twain did not so much illuminate as reiterate.” (Lott, 2001)

With the foregoing analysis, we can conclude that blackface minstrelsy has fully engaged and haunted the imagination of the American people, leaving an indelible vestige in Anglo-American fiction.

3. The Influence of Black English on Anglo-American Fiction

African slaves who were forced to the New World must use some means to communicate with their masters and also among themselves. To adapt themselves to the new environment, black slaves had to adopt the new language of English. Due to the mixing of some African words with British English and unsystematic learning, the language they acquired on the new continent was not standard. Therefore, a distinctive black dialect, or Black English, came into being. Black English originates from Standard English, but differs from it in many ways. As an effective communicative medium, Black English has increased in-group cohesion and cultural solidarity.

Literature is a form of art, in which language serves as the essential medium to express information and reflect reality. As an important part of American English, Black English plays an important role in American literature. The presence of Afro-American dialect in American fiction is so significant that no people can disregard its existence.

The first American novel, which records black dialect, is *Modern Chivalry* (1792) by Hugh Henry Brackenridge. In the novel, there is a black slave named “Cuff” who speaks like this:

“Massa shentiman; I be cash crab in de Wye river: found ting in de mud; tone, big a man's foot: holes like to he; fetch Massa: Massa say, it be de Indian Moccasin ... O! fat de call it; all tone. He say, you be a filasafa, Cuff: I say, O no, Massa, you be de filasafa. Wel; two tre monts afta, Massa call me, and say, You be a filasafa, Cuff, fo' sartan: Getta ready, and go dis city, and make grate peeche for shentima filasafa.” (Dillard, 1973)

McDowell holds that Brackenridge is the first American novelist in terms of “introducing negro dialect into native fiction” and accordingly *Modern Chivalry* becomes “the earliest attempt at recording negro dialect in an American novel.” (Fishkin, 1993) On the other hand, there are also some people doubting the authenticity of the presentation of black dialect in the novel and regarding the rendition as “a form of phonological caricature”. In spite of various comments, black dialect had been introduced into the American fiction for the first time.

Since then, a great number of white novelists have rendered the speech of Afro-American characters and presented the voices of black people, consciously or unconsciously. Cooper, one of the founders of American literature, endows Caesar, the black character in *The Spy*, with black vernacular speech. As Sterling Brown put it, “though crudely recorded, his dialect rises above the usually impossible Negro speech in early novels.” (Fishkin, 1993)

In the work of early white novelists, black dialect is usually represented into a grotesque form and black characters therefore tend to become the laughing stock of the white. In Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Gold-Bug* (1843), there is a black character—Jupiter, whose diction is regarded as “at best a source of humor, at worst of condescension or parody.” (Fishkin, 1993) When inviting the narrator to meet his master, Jupiter said, “I don’t think noffin’ about it—I nose it. What make hi dream ‘bout de goole so much, if ‘taint cause he bit by de goole-bug? Ise heerd ‘bout dem goole-bugs ‘fore dis.” (Poe, 1965, p. 150) After reading the story, Toni Morrison fights vehemently against Poe’s misuse of black dialect. She takes his rendition as “something as close to braying as possible, in an effort so intense you can see the perspiration—and the stupidity—when Jupiter says, ‘I knows,’ and Mr. Poe spells the verb ‘nose’.” (Morrison, 1999)

Before the Civil War, abolitionist literature abounded. It was in that period that the language of the black slaves really became familiar to almost every serious reader in the United States. In addition, such local color fiction writers like Mark Twain, Irwin Russell, Joel Chandler Harris also attested the existence of Black English in their works.

As we all know, it’s Mark Twain who establishes the vernacular style in the American novel. He transforms elements of regional speech into a medium for American literary expression and thus sets a good example for the following novelists. He catches the racy rhythms of the black dialect and offers his text an American flavor. His dexterous use of black dialect is inseparably connected with his experience.

Mark Twain lived and communicated with black people from his early age. As a child, Mark Twain had a lot of black playmates. As he noted in his autobiography, “All the negroes were friends of ours, and with those of our age we were in effect comrades.” (Twain, 1959) Every summer he would go to his uncle’s farm in Missouri. There was a black adult, called Uncle Dan’l, who told many African ghost tales. Twain was genuinely fascinated with the black folktales. The richness of black dialect left an indelible impression on him, which could be seen in his works, such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*.

His early representation of black dialect can be seen in “A True Story” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. With the depiction of Aunt Rachel in the story, Twain deftly translates black speech into print. As the key character, Aunt Rachel tells her story with moving power and directness. Afterwards, Twain portrays more black characters and manifests black vernacular style more adeptly. For example, In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Roxy, black servant, reveals the true identity to her son, she talks like this:

“Does you think you kin skyer me? It ain’t in you, nor de likes of you. I reckon you’d shoot me in de back, maybe, if you got a chance, for dat’s jist yo’ style—I knows you, throo en throo—but I don’t mind gitt’n killed, beca’s e all dis is down in writin’ en it’s in safe hands, too en de man dat’s got it knows whah to look for de right man when I gits killed. Oh, bless yo’ soul, if you put yo’ mother up for as big a fool as you is, you’s pow’ful mistaken, I kin tell you! Now den, you set still en behave yo’self; en don’t you git up ag’in till I tell you!” (Twain, 1989)

With the diction and rhythm of black vernacular, we can sense the power of Roxy’s emotion and intelligence. Besides Roxy, Twain successfully endows Jim with “Missouri negro dialect”, convincingly delineating a memorable black character in American fiction. Mark Twain incorporates the sounds of real language of black people and records Jim’s diction and life with accuracy.

With scrupulous reading of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one can amazingly discover that the speech of Huck, the white boy, actually takes on many black vernacular characteristics. Twain himself reveals in his autobiography that the archetype of Huck is “Tom Blankenship”, a poor white child living in Hannibal. Therefore, almost nobody has been doubtful of Huck’s whiteness. However, with regard to his speech, Huck is more like a black boy and shows rich blackness in his language. Just as Fishkin demonstrates with sufficient convincing materials, a black boy called Jimmy is more likely to be the model of Huck. Before publishing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain once published a short article in *New York Times* in 1874, entitled “Sociable Jimmy”, in which the title character tells his story totally in black vernacular. Jimmy, a black boy, did exist in reality, who once waited on Twain when he had supper in a hotel. Twain was greatly impressed with Jimmy’s speech style that he regarded the black boy as “the most artless, sociable, and exhaustless talker ... I listened as one who receives a revelation.” (Fishkin, 1993) Juxtaposed with the speech style of Huckleberry Finn,

it can be discovered that there are a variety of linguistic similarities between Huck's voice and Jimmy's, such as repetition, frequent use of "present participles" and conjunction "and".

In addition to the linguistic similarities between the two boys, it should be noted that Huck's speech takes on some peculiar features of black vernacular style. In terms of the cadence, rhythm, syntax and diction, Huck shows more blackness than whiteness. Just as Harrison demonstrates, Huck employs many black expressions in his speech:

- "Powerful" and "monstrous" to mean "very";
- "Lonesome" to mean "depressed";
- "I lay" to mean "I wager";
- "To tell on" to mean "to disclose something against";
- "Warn't no use" to mean "there is no use in";
- "Study" to mean "to meditate";
- "Squish" to mean "to crush";
- "To let on" to mean "to pretend";
- "I reckon" to mean "I suppose, think, or fancy"
- "Considerable" and "tolerable" as adverbs to mean "very" or "pretty";
- "Disremember" to mean "forget". (Fishkin, 1993)

Moreover, the use of repetition, active verbs, double negatives and redundancy of subject ("Tom he") are also characteristic of black vernacular style. In Standard English, negation is expressed just once, but in Black English, it is usually expressed twice or several times. Double negatives can be frequently found in Huck's speech, for instance, "I didn't want to see him no more ... But I couldn't see no profit in it." (Twain, 1981)

Although Huck's speech obviously exhibits many features of black dialect, this is not to imply that Mark Twain relies totally on Black English to delineate characters. Due to the frequent contact with black people from childhood to adulthood, Mark Twain was more likely to endue Huck's speech with some elements of black dialect in a subconscious level.

As we all know, the vernacular style of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has such a tremendous impact on the future of American literature that many following novelists regard him as their forefather. Ernest Hemingway is just one of them. Profoundly influenced by Mark Twain, Hemingway has made such a well-known announcement that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." When reading the works by Hemingway, Ellison was fascinated by "the use of vernacular speech, the rhythms, the ability to use understatement, which again, I have a connection with through my own folk tradition: so much is said, implied, in Negro folk songs, Negro folklore, and so on." (Fishkin, 1993) Therefore, as Fishkin justifiably argues:

- "the voice we have come to accept as the vernacular voice in American literature—the voice with which Twain captured our national imagination in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and that empowered Hemingway, Faulkner, and countless other writers in the 20th century—is in large measure a voice that is 'black'." (Fishkin, 1993)

The inscription of the black voice in the white novel has preserved the cultural differences and eventually maintained a tradition of black difference. With the efforts of both white writers and black writers, Black English doesn't fall into obscurity, but comes out to appear in many novels, constituting a particular pattern of discourse and fostering the formation of "Americanness" in American literature.

4. The Influence of Jazz on Anglo-American Fiction

Of all the musical forms in the United States, the Jazz music is so far the most significant and influential one. Jazz is indigenous to the United States and is America's greatest contribution to the world's music history. Jazz, originating primarily from ragtime and blues, was born in the early twenties in New Orleans and came about through a mixture of African and European musical heritages, but in essence Jazz belongs to the musical tradition of African Americans.

Music is the most vital and demonstrative form of expression in the life of Africans. The call-and-response pattern, which could be heard repeatedly in jazz, could be tracked down straight to African tribal traditions. In its original form, the call and response was a ritual in which a leader shouted a cry to which the group responded. A

common, present-day form is congregation's response to a priest when preaching in a church. In Jazz, call-and-response pattern occurs when a voice is answered by an instrument, or one instrument is answered by another instrument. In addition to African musical elements, Jazz is also receptive to other diverse cultural and musical aspects. It borrowed some elements from European music and tradition, such as hymns, popular songs, folk tunes, piano music, etc.

The most noticeable characteristic of Jazz is its improvisation. Improvisation is its life and its soul. The passion and life of Jazz mostly rests on the spontaneity of improvised performance. Most of the improvised performances are spontaneous without any preparation or rehearsal. Jazz performers play according to their emotions and feelings rather than strictly following music score. In the very beginning, the jazz music usually included sections of collective improvisation, during which several musicians played out different melodies simultaneously. Their music was held together by the underlying chords. Afterwards, solo improvisation gradually took the place of collective one. Since then solo improvisation has become the main trend and more and more famous jazz musicians have emerged.

The 1920s is called by Fitzgerald as "the Jazz Age" because the decade is so profoundly influenced by Jazz that its social spirit is similar to that of Jazz. After the first world war, America experienced economic booming, which mainly resulted from the increased mechanization of industry and production on a massive scale. The decade saw a period of rapid industrial growth, economic prosperity, and cultural change. With unprecedented abundant material wealth, America turned into a paradise-like place and American people then seemed to become quite hedonistic. Disregarding the traditional mores and conventions, Americans, the young generation in particular, resorted to pleasure principle and frantically indulged themselves in drinking, parties, sex, etc. On the other hand, constant carousing didn't make them feel really happy. After experiencing the cruel and inhuman war, they became disillusioned with the government. Hence their drinking and dancing is just a futile distraction, a purposeless activity characteristic of a wandering, aimless life. They became "the Lost Generation".

As an art, Jazz was easily accepted by the general public and quickly came to dominate popular entertainment of that period. Jazz spread first among younger audiences, mainly due to its spontaneous nature and its association with wild parties and chaotic dancing. Americans were so obsessed with Jazz that Ward expressed his fear that "it is possible to experience a profound emotional response to syncopated rhythms and at the same time to feel that jazz is for Europe and America a dance of death." (Elliott, 1988) In addition to the function of entertainment, Jazz also produced obvious dramatic social and psychological effects. It touches the hearts and minds of people of different social and racial backgrounds. With the improvisational performance at its core, Jazz stands for something new and something revolutionary that overturned the old order of traditional music. For the black race, it was a unifying force, an outcry against the injustice and inequality imposed on them. On the other hand, to the white people, jazz symbolized something other, something daring and exotic. It entered the consciousness of the nation and musicians as the reigning popular music.

Its spirit and art power were tightly connected with the movement of the social culture and politics then. As Neil Leonard perceptively observes:

Jazz fulfilled various aesthetic needs for those who rejected traditional values. For the jazzmen and their close followers it provided a voice of rebellion and a source of positive morality. For its less ardent young supporters, jazz furnished accompaniment to their growing pains and adolescent enthusiasms. Intellectuals found it an exciting new form of art ... However differently people responded to jazz, it provided all of them with emotional symbols for the relative values that were replacing the standards of traditional idealism." (Leonard, 1962)

"The Jazz Age" is closely related to "the Harlem Renaissance", which can also be called "the Negro Renaissance" and "the New Negro Movement". It is the second birth of Afro-American culture. The black people in Harlem made every effort to cast off the past passive image and strived to take on the image of a "New Negro". Like black jazz players, black novelists struggled to break through the barriers erected against them in the world of white-dominated culture. In a sense, jazz can be regarded as an open rebellion against the European cultivated tradition and it "authorized a distrust of rationalism, a celebration of sensuality, a separateness from conventional society, and a belief in improvisation and authenticity of feeling that were becoming the ideology not only of blacks but also of whites in this period." (Elliott, 1988)

In literature, the 1920s is characterized by the writings related to what Gertrude Stein called "the Lost Generation." Writers such as Fitzgerald, Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and Sherwood Anderson reflect the shattered idealism and morality of the Jazz Age through writing modernist novels. These writers are disillusioned by America's involvement in the First World War and this disillusionment is naturally reflected in

their writings. Modernism is particularly concerned with the invention of new techniques and new methods of showing meaning. In their search for a faithful representation of their real feelings, the modernist novelists discovered in Jazz a metaphor for them.

Hailed as the “chronicler” of the Jazz Age, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) availed himself of his brilliant talent to record the period and depicted the real life of “the Lost Generation”. *This Side of Paradise* (1920), his debut in novel writing, turned out to be an instant success that marked the dawn of “the Jazz Age”. The novel served as a landmark in modernist fiction that challenged literary tradition and helped give a voice to a younger generation shocked by the horrors and sufferings of World War I. The protagonist of the novel, Amory Blaine, is a privileged, aimless, and self-absorbed Princeton student, whose life experience and psychological process are typical of “the lost generation”. The young egoist symbolizes what Fitzgerald perceptively describes as “a new generation grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in men shaken.” (Elliott, 1988) *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is unanimously acclaimed as his best novel by critics. The glitter and recklessness of the Jazz Age form the backdrop for this novel. The protagonist, Jay Gatsby, is quite rich and attempts to recapture the love of Daisy Buchanan in desperation. To win her attention, Gatsby leaves extravagant lifestyle and holds endless parties in his palatial estate. Fitzgerald creates in Gatsby a flawed materialist who believes in a dream beyond what his money can buy. As Gatsby pursues his doomed obsession with Daisy, Fitzgerald pictures the essence of the Jazz Age, and probes into the empty heart of the American Dream. The author portrays the life of Gatsby mostly out of his own experience. Fitzgerald was born into a fairly well-to-do family. After marrying beautiful Zelda, he embarked on a rich life of parties and travels to meet Zelda’s seemingly insatiable vanity and greed. Their extravagant lifestyle was so widely known that Fitzgerald once made such a remark, “Sometimes I don’t know whether Zelda and I are real or whether we are characters in one of my novels.” (Fitzgerald, 1994)

Besides Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway is another influential novelist in the 1920s. In *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Ernest Hemingway represents the social spirit of the Jazz Age. Jake Barnes, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, epitomizes the Lost Generation. Barnes is a veteran of World War I and works as a journalist in Paris, where he and his friends engage in an endless round of drinking and parties. Physically (sexually impotent) and emotionally wounded from the war, Barnes no longer believes in anything and loses the traditional notions of morality, faith, justice and love. Hemingway uses his pen to display the real living situation of the lost generation and makes the novel resonate with the sound of jazz.

As Irving Howe observes, American literature is “a new idea ... a new voice. Thought and language, idea and image fold into a new being, and we have the flowering of our literature.” (Elliott, 1988) Jazz, the best representative of Afro-American musical genres, transforms the form of American novel and endows the literary genre with the “new idea” and “new voice”. It sets the tempo of the decade and affords an artistic pattern for modernism.

The Jazz music resonates with the disillusioned mentality of the Lost Generation, and ushers in the literary modernism of America, which can be illustrated in novels by Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and other modernist novelists. With the efforts of such modernist novelists, the era witnesses the most energetic production of fiction. The fiction of this era breaks through traditional aesthetics of fiction and mounts the summit of aesthetics of the modernist novel.

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