

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PORTRAIT OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALS IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FICTION

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**Abstract:** The last century has observed massive shifts in culture, society, and psychology within the United States. Thus, American literature turned into a reflection of the internal turmoil experienced by an individual grappling with feelings of alienation, moral dilemma, or crisis related to self-identity. In this analysis, the researcher examines how celebrated American authors like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, J. D. Salinger, Sylvia Plath, or Toni Morrison managed to create ‘psychological images’ of an individual living amidst the dramatic shifts in society. With a focus on a ‘qualitative analysis’ methodological approach, this piece aims to unpack ‘psychological themes’ like disillusionment, existential anxiety, or self-discovery found in American literary movements like Modernist or ‘Post-Modernist’ literature.

**Keywords:** American Fiction, Psychology, Alienation, Identity, Modernism, Self

### Introduction

The twentieth century was actually a pivotal point in American Literature. With two global conflicts, a Great Depression, and a period of consumerism, American writers’ attentions turned not only to reflecting American society but to reflecting the inner workings of the American psyche. American Literature became a platform where writers explored the inner workings of the American mind.

The psycho-social description of the American individual was to become central to both modernist and postmodernist literary movements. Modernist authors like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, J. D. Salinger, Sylvia Plath, and Toni Morrison explored how people coped with forces driving them in modern society or with a crisis of faith. The goal of this paper can thus be defined as analyzing twentieth-century American literary trends in terms of which modes of individual psycho-social development are utilized.

### Literature review

In terms of scholarly focus on the psychology in American fiction, there has been increasing interest since the mid-twentieth century. As suggested by Frederick Hoffman (1952), American authors who belonged to the period of modernist writing turned to fiction because these stories functioned like “psychological self-analysis” so that “the fragmentation of self” was portrayed. In his interpretation (1950), Trilling found that “the moral realism of self” was presented in American literature.

The Freudian school of psychoanalysis had a major influence in forming literary imagination. Freud’s psychoanalytic thoughts regarding “unconscious,” “repression,” or “trauma” motivated writers to engage in explorations of the subconscious elements of character behavior. “Iceberg principle” in Ernest

Hemingway's writing technique was largely based on the principle of hinting "more" below "less," or beneath "the surface" (Berman, 2001).

Feminist writers along with writers from the "African American tradition" continued to explore other areas related to psychology in fiction. *\*The Bell Jar\**, published in 1963, gives a profound insight into female depressive episodes. Toni Morrison in *\*Beloved\**, published in 1987, interlinks trauma psychology with historical memories—specifically "the memories associated with slavery." As Judith Lewis Herman states in *\*Trauma and Recovery\**, published in 1992:

"Trauma lives outdoors in history. But its story can never be told until there are listener[s].to bear its truth. Literature was one arena wherein people who had not been heard could tell their stories.

### Method

In this paper, a methodological approach using literary analysis will be used. These literary pieces—Ernest Hemingway's *\*The Sun Also Rises\** (1926), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *\*The Great Gatsby\** (1925), J.D. Salinger's *\*The Catcher in the Rye\** (1951), Sylvia Plath's *\*The Bell Jar\** (1963), and Toni Morrison's *\*Beloved\** (1987

The way in which authors create character inner worlds.

"What Psychological Conflicts Reflect The American Condition?" Techniques used in narratives to represent cognitive and emotional experiences (stream-of-consciousness narration, symbolism, fragmentation).

The book uses a combination of psychological analysis and literary critique to interpret how individual and collective experiences are interwoven in American fiction.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Alienation remains one of the preeminent psychological motifs playing itself out in American literature in the twentieth-century American literary scene. In *\*The Great Gatsby\**, Jay Gatsby's fixations with the past and his ideals of love stand for the hollowness of the American Dream. In Ernest Hemingway's stories, characters like Jake Barnes in *\*The Sun Also Rises\** are unable to move past drastic trauma inflicted upon them by disillusioning experiences. The terse narration in Hemingway stories conveys that which cannot actually be expressed—the pain couched beneath resilient endurance.

The issue of youth crisis and the loss of innocence in post-war literature was illustrated in Salinger's *\*The Catcher in the Rye\**. Holden Caulfield's mental trauma represents the apprehensions of his generation experiencing authenticity amidst a society that was conformist. He represents existential bewilderment due to his distaste for hypocrisy in adult society.

Women authors brought new elements into this quest for identity. In *\*The Bell Jar\**, a semi-autobiographical account reflecting mid-century American women's suffocating expectations, *\*Sylvia Plath\** examines these repressive ideologies that trap women. In *\*The Bell Jar\**, *\*Sylvia Plath's\** protagonist, *\*Esther Greenwood\**, embodies *\*Depression\**—an individual problem with socially deviant traits. *\*Sylvia Plath*

In contemporary fiction in the late twentieth century, Toni Morrison brought to literature the psychology of collective trauma. *Beloved* traces “the lingering traces” of trauma upon memory and motherhood. The protagonist Sethe represents “the psychological aftermath of violence,” reflecting “the trauma inflicted upon history’s slaves” to show “the impossible character” of maternal love. Toni Morrison’s focus on non-linear narrative structuring equals “the intermixture of forgetting and remembering” based upon “a specific model of psychological functioning” related to trauma. “Literature,” according to Caruth (1996), offers “a specific horizon” to represent trauma linguistically.[2]

American prose fiction underwent a narrative shift to convey the unconscious. Stream-of-consciousness narrative, symbolism, and soliloquies are indispensable elements. The unreliable narrator in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* unmasks the illusion of objectivity. The confessional narration in Plath’s writings dissolves borders between reality and imagination. The multiple narratives in Morrison’s texts position readers to piece together fractured identities. [6]These psychoanalytic methods enabled a new literary realism—that of subjective experience rather than exterior events.

### Conclusion

Modern American literature offers a complex psychological portrayal of an individual caught between self-disclosure and conformity. Various male and female authors belonging to caucasian and Negrocaucasian backgrounds utilized fiction to explore the subconscious elements of those days. In Hemingway’s stoics, Fitzgerald’s dreamers, Salinger’s rebels, there are so too the confessional analysis of Plath or Morrison’s scarred survivors. American literary history thus symbolizes the progression of its own mentality.[7] Indeed, American literature of these decades shows there to be to the search for self not merely an individual but a profound cultural quest. Through a combination of psychology and art, these American authors from the twentieth-century redefined literature itself. And those influences continue to shape contemporary American literature to date.

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