
Racial Prejudice In American Literature

Racism is one of the most persistent and discussed problems in the world, particularly in the United States. As an underlying issue of many unjust acts, such as group hatred, racial prejudice tends to be a result of social ignorance and fear of privilege loss. In neglecting the principle of law equity, it becomes possible for one group to retain a social advantage over the other. Although the United States is attempting to eliminate racism, racist ideology is ingrained in many people's minds, which limits legal and political efforts and allows racism to be prevalent in modern society. As a form of social injustice, racism has become the central theme of many literary works. Thus, Flannery O'Connor, in her short story "The Barber," by portraying the unsuccessful attempts of a college professor to convince his ignorant barber to vote for a progressive political candidate, focuses on the polarized views of Americans regarding racism. Continuing the theme of difficulties in racial integration, Bernard Malamud in "Black is My Favorite Color" tells the story of a white man who is struggling to find a way to integrate into the African American community. The explanation of the uncompromised interracial relationship lies in the violence and suffering that the African American community has faced throughout history, which has been reflected in the poems "Cage Bird" by Maya Angelou and "History Lesson" by Natasha Trethewey. However, racial prejudice may be overcome if children are taught ethical principles, as shown in the film "To Kill a Mockingbird," directed by Robert Mulligan, in which children learn moral lessons from their father, an attorney who fights for justice. By addressing the issue of racial prejudice from different life perspectives, American literature and film are reflective of the multifaceted nature of racism in society.

The short story "The Barber" by Flannery O'Connor shows the political side of the issue of racism. In the discussion of upcoming elections, the main character, Professor Rayber, is caught off guard by his barber's question: "You a nigger-lover?" (O'Connor). He realizes that for many people, racial equality is an unknown concept, as the barber says, "I'm telling you, there is ain't but two sides now, white and black" (O'Connor). As a teacher, Rayber felt the moral responsibility to explain the complexity of the issue of racism and decides to change the barber's mind, as he says: "I'll give you as many reasons for voting Darmon as you want – better reasons that you've given me for voting for Hawkson" (O'Connor). However, he faces ignorance and a complete lack of understanding. Although the story demonstrates the frustration of being a minority, it emphasizes the importance of maintaining moral beliefs. In the circumstances of rapidly spread hatred and violence in the South, Flannery O'Connor stresses that racial relations cannot be considered simply as a "white and black" issue. As Davis Weinshilboum states in his thesis work, "Flannery O'Connor Uncanny Vision of Race and Race Relations," "O'Connor's fiction reflects the level of discomfort that she endured as she watched the south transform. She seemingly projects her uneasiness onto the page when her characters struggle to adapt to the changing landscape of race relations" (Weinshilboum). By illustrating the contrary positions of a simple-minded barber and a progressive professor, "The Barber" offers readers an opportunity to determine political views on the issue of racism.

Exploring interracial relationships, the short story "Black is My Favorite Color" by Bernard Malamud indicates the inherited nature of racial prejudice. The story concerns a 44-year-old white Jewish American man named Nat Lime who tries to integrate into the African American community. In the opinion of Anca Pirnoiu, as proposed in her thesis work "Drawing a Cross-

Racial Line: An Outlook on Bernard Malamud's 'Black is My Favorite Color,' "Black is My Favorite Color' is casting some light upon boundaries to which one can extend the desire for social and racial harmony since harmony and boundaries are co-dependent" (Pirnoiu). Since Nat's family moved near a black neighborhood in Brooklyn, he wanted to be a part of it by having friendships, dating women, and being beneficial to the community. However, the past prevents any relationships between races. When Nat proposes to his girlfriend Ornita, she responds, "I like you, but I'd be afraid. My husband woulda killed me" and confesses that he is alive in her memory (Malamud). Despite the transferable nature of racial prejudice, Nat continues to advocate racial equality. He repeatedly attempts to convince people to look beyond skin color. "Personally for me," he says, "there's only one human color, and that is the color of blood. I like a black person if not because he's black, then because I'm white. It comes to the same thing" (Malamud). Unfortunately, Nat's status as a white man makes all of his efforts futile, as he admits, "I've tried more than once, but the language of their heart either is a dead language or else nobody understands it the way you speak it" (Malamud). The heritage of brutal historical events does not allow the African American community to establish interracial boundaries. Mutual racial prejudice and the remaining social divide presented in the story "Black is My Favorite Color" reflect the deceptive reality of what is today a highly promoted discrimination-free society.

Sharing her personal experience of being racially discriminated against in her poem "Caged Bird," Maya Angelou encourages a deeper understanding of the difficulties the African American community faces. The poet presents to the reader two birds: the caged bird that represents African Americans and free bird that signifies white Americans. She shows how the freedoms and rights of white Americans contrast the status of African Americans. Illustrating anger and frustration that the African American community had to face during segregation, the poet says, "But the caged bird that stalks/down his narrow cage/can seldom see through/his bar of rage" (Angelou). The extreme difference between the free bird and caged bird symbolizes racial inequality. While the caged bird's "...wings are clipped and his feet are tied," the free bird "leaps on the back of the wind" (Angelou). Angelou associates herself with the caged bird and wishes to be free, as she writes, "The caged bird sings/with a fearful trill/of things unknown/but longed for still/and his tune is heard/on the distant hill/for the caged bird/sings of freedom" (Angelou). She wants the reader to hear the caged bird's voice. As discussed by Hilton Als in his article "Songbird": "Relegated to the margins of life, black women found it difficult to rewrite themselves as central characters. Only in private could they talk about their personal lives. But Angelou took those stories public. She wrote about blackness from the inside, without apology or defense" (Als). "Caged Bird" is a powerful metaphor that illustrates the experience of the African American community of being mistreated because of the color of their skin. It urges the reader to tear down the wall of ignorance that had been built up over the period of racial discrimination in American history.

The poem 'History Lesson' by Natasha Trethewey reveals an unvarnished history that has formed people's attitudes toward racial prejudice. The poet takes the reader back in time to give a history lesson about the cruelty of Jim Crow laws that touched every part of black Americans' lives. As the Supreme Court had ruled, black and white people could not work together in the same room or marry each other. The decision left a lasting mark on the collective conscious. Therefore, Trethewey, as a daughter of a white man and an African American woman, is committed to confronting the violent history by retrieving her memories: 'It is 1970, two years after they opened/the rest of this beach to us' (Trethewey). In his article 'History, Memory, and Nostalgia in the Works of Natasha Trethewey,' Warren Nagueyalti explains, 'Even though no

peace and reconciliation commission exists for the citizens of America's South, as it does in South Africa, where apartheid mirrored Jim Crow; and few efforts to remember, acknowledge, forgive injustice, and make peace with the past have occurred, Trethewey confronts this Southern history through the fabric of her own experience' (Nagueyalti). The poem reveals the reality of history by comparing snapshots taken at different times. By analyzing two pictures, the poet tries to answer the question of whether history has changed and progress has been made from the time of segregated beaches, as she says, 'Forty years since the photograph/where she stood on a narrow plot/of sand marked colored, smiling/her hands on the flowered hips/of a cotton meal-sack dress' (Trethewey). To Trethewey's disappointment, the photograph suggests that hatred and bitterness still persist in people's minds and memories even though time has passed.

In signifying family as the basis of a harmonious society, the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*, directed by Robert Mulligan, shows the importance of being an example for children in respecting people regardless of their race. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a memory of childhood from observing the adult world and their judgment. During the trial in which a respected attorney, Atticus Finch, is assigned by the court to defend 'a Negro' accused of raping a white woman, his children, 'Scout' and Jem, learn a valuable lesson from the terrifying realities of the adult world. Although Atticus fails to prove his client's innocence and the convicted man is killed while trying to escape prison, Mr. Finch's moral example forms his children's attitudes toward racial prejudice. His behavior is based on dignity and the importance of law, and therefore he encourages his children to respect and understand people regardless of their race, economic status, or mental development. In his mind, a lack of understanding leads to ignorance and prejudice, as he says, 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it' (*To Kill a Mockingbird*). Mitzi-Ann Stilner, in her thesis work 'Don't Put Your Shoes on the Bed: A Moral Analysis of 'To Kill a Mockingbird,' aptly concludes, 'Because of such moral character development, Atticus sees the prejudiced views of the community and sees the need for social change and acceptance' (Stilner). The public consciousness is affected by slavery and legal inequities; however, modern society is able to overcome racial prejudice if children, the next generation, are taught positive moral principles.

Throughout the eventful history of the United States, the many facets of racism have been reflected in American literature. By analyzing literature and film, people are able to vividly trace the changing of people's attitudes toward the issue of racial prejudice over time. As evidenced by contemporary American authors and filmmakers, discrimination based on skin color continues to affect this country even today. Although the literary works and film discussed here portray events that take place at the time of segregation and in the context of racial ideology retained in the memories of the main characters, they aim to prevent modern society from making irreversible mistakes. By highlighting unequal relations and the negative impact of racial discrimination on the individual and public, these works allow audiences to understand the reasons behind ignorance and form an emotional perception of the problem.

Serving as a bridge that connects contemporary society with the past, American literature provides for the audience an opportunity to reconsider its values and prioritize unity and tolerance. African Americans faced a cruel society that put them in a position of disadvantage, and they continue to face the repercussions of the racism that has carried through from the past. Therefore, by revealing disturbing truths, American literature and film intend to influence social consciousness and encourage their audiences to take actions that might change the situation.

