

# Rewriting History: The Representation of Race in 19th-Century American Literature

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## Abstract

This paper explores the representation of race in 19th-century American literature, analyzing how racial identities, social hierarchies, and racial prejudices were constructed, challenged, and rewritten through literary works. Through an examination of texts by authors such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain, this paper argues that literature in the 19th century played a crucial role in shaping both the public understanding of race and the broader social and political movements of the time. The paper will focus on the ways in which literature reflected, resisted, and ultimately contributed to shifting racial narratives during a period of profound social change.

**Keywords :** Race, 19th-century American literature, slavery, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, representation, racial identity, abolitionism.

## 1. Introduction

The 19th century in the United States was marked by the deep entanglement of slavery, the Civil War, and the gradual shift toward racial equality through Reconstruction and beyond. American literature of this era reflected the complexities of race, not only by depicting the lived experiences of Black Americans but also by presenting racial ideologies and the dehumanizing effects of systemic racism. From the abolitionist works of Frederick Douglass to the more complex portrayals of race in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, authors engaged with race in ways that both mirrored and challenged the dominant racial narratives of their time.

The ways in which race was represented in literature not only reinforced the racial status quo but also provided a space to critique and deconstruct these oppressive structures. This paper

examines the representation of race in 19th-century American literature, focusing on how various authors, genres, and literary devices contributed to the creation, reinforcement, and eventual reimagining of racial categories.

## **2. Rewriting History Through Literature**

Throughout the 19th century, the United States witnessed the consolidation of racist ideologies that supported the institution of slavery. Literature served as a tool for both reinforcing and contesting these ideologies. Works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) presented race through the lens of moral suasion, portraying the brutality of slavery and invoking empathy for the enslaved. Stowe's depiction of Uncle Tom, a noble and long-suffering Black man, created a sympathetic image of slavery's victims and was instrumental in shifting public opinion on the morality of slavery. However, critics argue that Stowe's portrayal also reinforced racial stereotypes, particularly the idealization of the subservient Black figure.

Conversely, African American authors such as Frederick Douglass rewrote the narrative by providing firsthand accounts of the horrors of slavery. Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) served as a powerful weapon in the abolitionist movement. His work not only exposed the brutality of slavery but also highlighted the intellectual and moral equality of Black people, challenging the racial assumptions of his time. By centering the experiences and voices of Black individuals, Douglass's narrative resisted the dehumanization that defined much of the period's racial discourse. "Rewriting History Through Literature" refers to how authors in the 19th century used literature as a medium to challenge, revise, and shape the societal narratives surrounding race, slavery, and racial identity. During this period, the United States was embroiled in slavery, the Civil War, and the early stages of racial integration, and literature became a critical space for contesting the racial ideologies of the time.

For example, in works like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, race was represented in ways that both reflected and pushed back against dominant stereotypes, urging readers to reconsider the morality of slavery. Stowe's portrayal of Uncle Tom as a noble, suffering figure was meant to evoke empathy, but it also reinforced certain racial ideals, such as the subservience and passivity of Black characters. Conversely, African American writers like Frederick Douglass

used personal narratives, such as his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, to directly confront the brutality of slavery while also challenging the racist notions that justified it. By writing about their own experiences, these authors contributed to a new historical narrative that centered Black voices and critiqued the system of racial oppression.

In this way, literature from the 19th century did more than simply reflect the existing views on race—it actively rewrote the historical record by offering alternative perspectives and reimagining racial roles. These literary works provided both a critique of societal norms and a call to action, laying the groundwork for social movements and contributing to shifting views on race and equality.

### **3. The Role of Race in American Gothic and the Symbolism of Slavery**

In the realm of American Gothic literature, race was often portrayed as an inescapable force, shaping the destinies of both Black and white characters. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), for example, is a complex exploration of race, particularly through the character of Queequeg, a harpooner from the South Sea islands. Queequeg, despite his exoticism and initial depiction as a "savage," becomes a respected and equal member of the Pequod's crew, challenging racial hierarchies. Melville's ambiguous treatment of race, however, complicates the portrayal of racial equality, as Queequeg's status is ultimately shaped by the structures of white power.

Similarly, Nathaniel Hawthorne's works, including *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), explored racial and societal boundaries, although often in more subtle ways. In *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), Hawthorne critiques the idealism of social reform movements, with racial and gender issues at the periphery of his narrative. Hawthorne's exploration of the "other" – a concept often tied to racial identity – can be seen as a reflection of the era's ongoing debates about race and belonging. The role of race in American Gothic literature and the symbolism of slavery is deeply intertwined, often serving as a critique of societal structures and the dehumanizing effects of racial oppression. In the 19th century, American Gothic literature used elements of horror, the supernatural, and psychological dread to explore the moral and social decay of American society, including the horrors of slavery and the racial injustices tied to it.

Writers like Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne employed Gothic tropes to reflect the psychological toll of slavery and the pervasive presence of racial ideologies. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville presents the character of Queequeg, a Black harpooner, who is initially depicted as an exotic "savage" but gradually becomes a respected, equal member of the ship's crew. However, the novel also subtly critiques racial hierarchies by highlighting the tensions between the ostensibly egalitarian relationships aboard the ship and the oppressive racial structures of the society that surrounds them. Queequeg's representation is complex, symbolizing both the otherness imposed upon racial minorities and the potential for unity and equality, though the novel leaves unresolved questions about racial hierarchies.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's works, particularly in *The Blithedale Romance*, race and the symbolism of slavery are often more abstractly woven into the narrative, with characters struggling against societal constraints that echo the broader issues of racial and gender inequality. Hawthorne's use of Gothic symbolism often hints at the psychological repression caused by oppressive social norms, with race serving as a silent but powerful undercurrent in his exploration of individual and societal conflict.

In American Gothic literature, the symbolism of slavery is not always overt, but it operates on multiple levels: from the literal presence of enslaved people and their portrayal as tragic victims or symbols of moral corruption, to the psychological and symbolic effects of living in a society built on racial oppression. The genre provides a space to examine the destructive power of racial ideologies, using the Gothic form to evoke the horror, anxiety, and guilt that accompany the realities of slavery and systemic racism. Thus, Gothic literature reflects the pervasive fear and trauma generated by slavery, while also questioning the moral foundations of a society that relied on such an institution.

#### **4. Mark Twain and the Satire of Race**

Mark Twain, renowned for his use of satire, also engaged deeply with racial issues. His works, especially *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), presented race in ways that complicated conventional racial narratives. The relationship between Huck and Jim, an enslaved Black man, subverts the typical racial roles of the time. Huck, a white boy, comes to recognize Jim's

humanity and worth, challenging the entrenched racial prejudices of his society. Twain's portrayal of Jim as both a comic figure and a fully realized, dignified person critiques the racial stereotypes of the period and provides a space for readers to reconsider the moral implications of slavery and racial inequality. Mark Twain's treatment of race in his works, particularly through satire, offers a critical and often ironic examination of the racial prejudices and societal norms of the 19th century. Twain's satire works to expose the hypocrisy and absurdity of the racist ideologies that were entrenched in American society, particularly in the context of slavery and post-Reconstruction racial dynamics. His most famous work, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), is a prime example of how Twain used humor, irony, and social critique to address the issue of race in a way that both reflected and challenged prevailing racial attitudes.

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's portrayal of the relationship between Huck, a white boy, and Jim, an enslaved Black man, subverts traditional racial roles. Huck and Jim form a deep friendship as they travel down the Mississippi River, and Huck's gradual recognition of Jim's humanity challenges the racist views he has been taught. Twain uses Huck's moral dilemmas, particularly regarding his decision to help Jim escape slavery, to satirize the societal values that see Black people as property or inferior beings. Huck's internal struggle—where he believes he is committing a sin by helping Jim—becomes a powerful critique of the morally corrupt racial system that views Black people as less than human.

Twain's use of satire extends to his depiction of the "civilized" society that Huck and Jim encounter. Throughout the novel, Twain exposes the contradictions and moral failings of the characters who uphold the institution of slavery and the racial hierarchy. For example, characters like the Duke and the King, two con men who pretend to be aristocrats, represent the moral decay of a society that insists on racial and social hierarchies while also mocking the so-called superiority of white society.

Moreover, Twain's portrayal of Jim is both humorous and tragic. Jim is often depicted as a loyal and caring figure who, despite his lowly status in society, possesses wisdom, kindness, and self-sacrifice. Twain's use of humor in these portrayals allows readers to see the humanity of Black characters in a way that undermines the racist stereotypes that dominated the period. In doing so, Twain invites readers to question their own views on race, class, and morality.

Ultimately, Mark Twain's satire of race challenges readers to confront the inconsistencies, contradictions, and cruelty of racism in America. Through humor and irony, Twain not only critiques the racial attitudes of his time but also highlights the moral complexity of the characters who are part of the racial system. His works remain influential because they continue to provoke discussions about race, morality, and the enduring impact of racial prejudice in American society.

### **5. The Literary Legacy of 19th-Century Race Representation**

The 19th century's literary treatment of race did not just mirror its social and political climate but actively participated in shaping it. Works by authors such as Douglass, Stowe, Melville, and Twain contributed to the public discourse surrounding race and slavery. These texts challenged the prevailing racial stereotypes and, in some cases, promoted new ways of thinking about race, equality, and the humanity of Black Americans. The literature of the period helped to lay the groundwork for the abolitionist movement and later civil rights struggles, as it not only depicted the horrors of slavery but also emphasized the shared humanity of Black individuals.

In contrast to earlier portrayals of Blackness, the 19th century saw a move toward more complex, nuanced representations, particularly in the works of African American writers who had the opportunity to write their own histories. Douglass and other Black authors actively participated in the re-writing of history by asserting the intellectual and moral agency of Black people, challenging a society that sought to marginalize them. The literary legacy of 19th-century race representation is profound and enduring, as it laid the groundwork for future discussions on race, identity, and equality in American society. During a time of intense social and political upheaval—marked by slavery, the Civil War, and the early stages of Reconstruction—authors used their works to reflect, resist, and reshape racial narratives. These literary efforts not only documented the lived experiences of Black Americans and critiqued the racial systems that oppressed them but also challenged the social structures that perpetuated these inequalities.

A significant aspect of this legacy lies in how 19th-century writers, both Black and white, utilized literature to question and critique the prevailing racial ideologies of their time. Writers like Frederick Douglass, through his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, gave voice to

the enslaved, presenting their experiences and their humanity in ways that contradicted the dehumanizing views of Black people held by many Americans. Douglass's narrative challenged the racial norms of the era and demonstrated the intellectual and moral equality of Black people, laying a foundation for future civil rights advocacy.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) similarly had a significant impact by humanizing the plight of enslaved people and galvanizing anti-slavery sentiment. However, it also contributed to the stereotypical portrayals of Black characters, such as Uncle Tom, whose noble suffering reinforced certain racial hierarchies, even as it aimed to promote abolition. Despite its limitations, the novel played a crucial role in shifting public opinion on slavery, showing how literature could directly influence political and social movements.

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) stands as another cornerstone of 19th-century racial representation, not only because it examined the complexities of race through Huck's evolving friendship with Jim, an enslaved man, but also because it used satire to critique the deeply ingrained racial prejudices of the time. Twain's subversion of racial roles and his portrayal of Jim as both a tragic and dignified character contributed to a growing conversation about race, offering a critique of the institutionalized racism that dominated America's cultural and social frameworks.

Beyond the works of individual authors, the broader legacy of 19th-century race representation is also found in the ways that these literary contributions shaped the future of American literature. The themes of race, identity, and social justice explored in these texts set the stage for the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, and the ongoing fight for racial equality. Writers of the 20th and 21st centuries, including Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and others, have built on the foundations laid by 19th-century authors, expanding the discussion of race and racial justice while also critiquing earlier representations of Black life and identity.

Furthermore, the 19th century also saw the emergence of African American writers who were able to contribute directly to the reshaping of racial discourse, including the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, the essays of W.E.B. Du Bois, and the fiction of Charles Chesnut. These writers played a critical role in not only resisting racial stereotypes but in creating more nuanced and

empowered portrayals of Black identity, highlighting the intellectual and artistic contributions of Black Americans in an era that sought to deny them such recognition.

The literary legacy of 19th-century race representation, then, is both a testament to the resilience of marginalized voices and a challenge to the racial prejudices that persisted. These works serve as historical records, artistic expressions, and moral commentaries that continue to resonate with readers and scholars, fostering ongoing discussions about race, power, and the potential for social change. Through literature, the struggle for racial justice has been articulated, and through the power of these early texts, the fight for equality remains alive in contemporary literary and cultural discourse.

## **6. Conclusion**

The representation of race in 19th-century American literature was a powerful tool for both reinforcing and questioning dominant racial ideologies. Through literary works, authors of the period contributed to the formation of racial identities and provided platforms for challenging the structures of racial oppression. From the sympathetic depictions of Black characters in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the complex moral questions raised in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, literature played an integral role in shaping American perceptions of race. By analyzing these texts, it becomes evident that the literature of the 19th century was not only a reflection of its time but also an active force in the ongoing struggle for racial justice.

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