

# Afro-American literature in the wake of the Civil Rights movement

“The bland of American democracy displayed a rotten truth: the plight of the American Negro” (Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of United States of America*)

# Antecedents

- Slave Narratives written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century
- The Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s: Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Alain Locke, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay.

# The Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement

- It was centered in Harlem, New York, but had far-reaching influence in art, music and literature
- The interplay of race and culture and the developing of aesthetic appreciation in writing are some of the intellectual legacies of the Harlem Renaissance.

# 1950s and 60s: the social context

- The spirit of the **Jim Crow laws** that had been passed in the South between 1890 and 1910 was still prevalent in the 1950s
- The Civil Rights movement
- The Second Great Migration
- Urban realism – urban sensibility defines much of the African-American literature of this era.

- Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison as eminent writers in the 1940s and 1950s. Landmarks:
- *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) by Richard Wright
- *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953) by James Baldwin
- *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison (National Book award)

# James Baldwin (1924-1987)

- Lived in Harlem as a child, after his mother had divorced her husband and married a preacher
- Extremely difficult childhood (beaten up by a gang of police officers at ten, abusive adoptive father...)
- The quest to explain familiar and social repudiation became main motifs in his writing

# James Baldwin

- Role of religion in his life
- Expatriation to Paris in 1948, where he became part of the Left Bank community
- Return to US in 1957. Social and political activism (met Malcolm X, Luther King and Senator Kennedy), “the latest slave rebellion”. Called for civil disobedience after a bomb exploded in a church (“the good white people on the hill”)



- *First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists* held at la Sorbonne in 1956

- According to James Baldwin, black writers shared common features, such as a painful relation to the white world, a lack of self-confidence and the necessity to rename the world in his own image.

- The challenge that the black writer is facing today is "the creation of a language that is faithful to the experience of blacks in the New World, a language that expresses the adaptation of traditional African and European forms, and the dynamic transformations and reinventions of self that results" (Baldwin)

# JAMES BALDWIN

- "It is astonishing that in a country so devoted to the individual, so many people should be afraid to speak."

# Ralph Ellison (1914-1964)

- Early life: son of a construction foreman who encouraged his artistic aspirations
- Moved to New York and joined the communist party
- Became a teacher of Russian and American literature
- In 1957 he became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters

# *Invisible Man* (1952)

- The novel confronts the social invisibility of black people in America
- Author refuses to sentimentalise black culture or present it in terms of an “authentic” ethnic heritage or descent

- Title coming from H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*
- The overarching theme is the social invisibility of Black people
- The book begins and ends in a small underground room, a symbolic location

# African American Literature

## The 1970s to the Present

- African-American literature began to enter the mainstream of publishing.
- African American literature began to be defined and discussed by scholars
- Black women began to achieve success as novelists, poets, writers and artists.



# Black women writers

- Women take central stage in the 1970s and 1980s
- Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison...
- Alice Walker won the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 and Toni Morrison was the first black writer to be credited with the Nobel Prize in 1992

- They share with black writers a painful relation to the white world and the necessity to remake the world in their own image
- Use of a syncretistic language that blends different cultural traditions
- In their writing, gender is as relevant a factor as race and class

# Here are some great web sites for further research:

- [http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/slavenarratives/Slave\\_Narratives.htm](http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/slavenarratives/Slave_Narratives.htm)
- <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/ebooks/subjects/subjects-afam.html>
- <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/texts.html>
- <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awafc11/ex-slave.html>