



**The Representation of the Ethic
Problem in Literature**

By

Shadwa Safwat Shaker
Department of English,
Faculty Of Arts, Assiut University□



Because “Nobody has had to resist more in American society than African Americans.” (Gray 296), that resistance had had to be reflected in literature where many writers addressed the ethnic problem from different perspectives and with different approaches. Those writers who addressed the ethnic problem were black and white, and they addressed it from both the white people and the black people perspective. Those writers – who include Harriet Beecher Stowe, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Harper Lee, Toni Morrison and several others – had to struggle immeasurably to defend their case and their opinion. Through their writings, those writers

“has constantly documented the struggles of African Americans with race and (anti-black) racism, African heritage and Euro-American influence, slavery and freedom, constitutional enfranchisement and educational progress, political agency and social assimilation, as well as the specters of history and modernity” (Jarrett 1).

Recording and narrating the black people struggle in America did not start recently which means not after the civil rights movement in the 1960s nor even after the abolition of slavery in the 19th century; but it started with the beginning of slavery and the slave trade in America where the first published works of an African American writer was in the 18th century in the pre-revolutionary war period. These writings at that time were called “slave

narratives” as they were mainly around their lives as slaves. These writings after that evolved and took the generic form of literature whether novels, plays or poems.

With each historic stage, the African American writings flourished and took a new turn. For example, before and during the civil war, the slave narratives contributed to the abolitionist movement. After the end of the civil war and during the Jim Crow era, “Black writers grew more prominent in genres of fiction and poetry” (Golden). Some of the black writers at that time, like Claude McKay and his poem *If We Must Die*, which addressed the violence towards the black because of the Jim Crow laws, helped in the rise of Harlem Renaissance.

However, the optimum of the African American literature was during the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movement. The uprising and the call for equal rights for the black people was accompanied by an equal literary up rise where these movements were aided by black writers who called for an end to racism and segregation. Because of the contributions of those writers, who helped to stir the community and the world and draw a vivid picture of the black people lives, the black people managed to win many of their lost rights and up until now, the black writers manage to help their people to gain and win more and more of their rights.

William Edward Burghardt "W. E. B." Du Bois (1868 - 1963):

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (W.E.B. Du Bois), was an African American sociologist, historian, author and an advocate for the rights of black people who is considered "the most important black protest leader in the United States during the first half of the 20th century" (Rudwick). He was the first African American to earn a doctorate and was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Du Bois most important contribution was:

"His analysis of the nature of a social problem and, specifically, his diagnosis of the Negro problem; his social constructionist accounts of race and racial differences; his ongoing reflection on the methods, purposes, and sometimes moral significance of social inquiry; and his elaboration of the claim that the concept of race, operating as a mechanism of power, structures relations of social domination, all played a critical role in what he ultimately came to call his "evolving program for Negro freedom". (W.E.B. Du Bois)

Du Bois was a gifted writer who wrote several fiction and non-fiction books about racism and the discrimination that the black people face especially in education and employment. His book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, is considered one of the most important landmarks in the African American literature as well as the science of sociology. In *the Souls of Black Folk*, in his attempt to

describe the life of the African American people, Du Bois coined some new sociological terms like double consciousness and the veil. He explained that because the black people must be conscious of how they see themselves and how the world sees them all the time they developed a double consciousness. He used the term veil to explain how the black people are always forced to see the world through racism because it has affected everything in their lives.

The Souls of Black Folk was not the only book Du Bois wrote about the black people. In fact, all Du Bois writings were about the black people, racism and how to improve their lives. Besides *the Souls of Black Folk*, some of his most important books are *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924), *Black Folk Then and Now* (1939) and *Worlds of Color* (1961).

James Arthur "Jimmy" Baldwin (1924 – 1987):

James Baldwin was an American writer and political activist whose participation in the civil rights movement and his writings about the racial problem and what does it mean to be a black in a white America made him one of the most prominent figures in the 1950s and 1960s.

Like most of the black Americans at that time, he was raised, along with his siblings, in destitution in the black ghetto of Harlem in New York City. The harsh treatment he received from his stepfather and what he had to face as a young black teenager, he managed to depict in his semi-autobiography novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), which is his first novel and considered his

best. In that novel, he did not just talk about his personal experience as a black boy, but he drew from it to present the position of blacks in America in general, where he used the biblical story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt as an allegory that the blacks need a similar exodus of the inferior position they settled in.

His novel was followed by another notable work and his first non-fiction book, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). The book contained ten long essays which were “a mix of autobiography and political commentary on race in America that identified Baldwin as the new conscience of the nation on racial matters” (Andrews). However, because he criticized Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son*, the famous African American writer – (Baldwin’s friend who helped Baldwin at the beginning of his career), in his essay *Everybody’s Protest Novel*, the friendship between the two writers ended. Baldwin believed that the novel offered a degrading image of the black people presented in its main character – Bigger Thomas.

After these two books, Baldwin produced several other literary works like his non-fiction *The Fire Next Time* (1963) in which “Baldwin insisted that America could never truly be a nation until it had solved the color problem. If it did not solve it, he warned, it would face apocalypse” (Gray 303). He also wrote *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), his tragedy *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968) and several

other groundbreaking which “underlined Baldwin’s fame as the most incisive and passionate essayist ever produced by black America” (Andrews).

Amiri Baraka (1934 – 2014):

Born as LeRoi Jones, Amiri Baraka was an “American poet and playwright who published provocative works that assiduously presented the experiences and suppressed anger of black Americans in a white-dominated society” (Britannica). “He is a prolific writer who has worked across a range of genres: drama, poetry, novel, jazz operas and nonfiction” (Diyaiy). His writings about racism made him one of the most influential African-American writers of the 20th century.

Amiri Baraka (still called LeRoi Jones) started writing at the end of the 1950s where after a while he managed to produce his first major collection of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note (1961)*. In 1964, he published his play *Dutchman* in which he wanted to show

“the agonized tense life of a black man in a white man's world ... There is cultural-racial injustice. The play stresses the conflict between two hostile visions. The white culture is guilty of oppressing and exploiting the black minority” (Diyaiy).

“The assassination of Malcolm X was a turning point in his life ... he changed his name to Amiri Baraka. He became a black nationalist” (Baraka

Biography) and he became involved in the Black Nationalist poetry and literature scenes” (Baraka Biography).

“Among Baraka’s other works are *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963), *Black Magic: Collected Poetry 1961–1967* (1969), *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (1984), and *the piercing Tales of the Out & Gone* (2006), a fictional social commentary” (Britannica).

Although Baraka was known for his incendiary style and uncaring for praise or criticism, his poem “*Somebody Blew up America*”, which he wrote after the 9/11 attacks, caused an uproar and an outcry against him that continued until he lost his position as New Jersey's poet laureate. Baraka’s literary works like

“*Dutchman* (1964), *The Slave* (1964), and *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* (1967) all deal with relations between black and white people. As works of “revolutionary theatre,” they demonstrate Baraka’s awareness of himself as a leader of a movement that seeks to use drama as a weapon against American racism”. (Gray 297)

Toni Morrison (1931):

Born as Chloe Ardelia Wofford, Toni Morrison is an awarded Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize American novelist who is “noted for her examination of black experience (particularly black female experience) within the black community” (Britannica). Her work is considered “an attempt to write several concentric histories of the American experience from a distinctively African American perspective” (Gray 691) and “Her novels are known for their epic themes, exquisite language and richly detailed African-American characters who are central to their narratives” (Morrison Biography). Morrison’s novels mainly evolve around “the black American experience; in an unjust society her characters struggle to find themselves and their cultural identity” (Britannica).

In 1970, Morrison published her first novel *The Bluest Eye* about a young black girl who was constantly regarded and treated as ugly and because of that, she developed an inferiority complex and desired for blue eyes which, in her opinion, symbolized beauty. At the end, this desire drove her to insanity. Morrison’s goal, throughout the novel, was to expose racism in the black and white community through something as simple as the concept of beauty where she showed how the black and the white community only embrace the white beauty standards and deem anything else to be ugly.

The Bluest Eye was followed by several successful novels like *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981). In 1987, Morrison published her most known and most celebrated novel *Beloved*. The novel was

about Sethe, a freed slave, who because of fear that her children might be enslaved and face what she had to face, decides to kill them where she only succeeds in killing her youngest baby daughter.

“The novel is based on the true story of a black slave woman, Margaret Garner, who in 1856 escaped from a Kentucky plantation with her husband Robert and sought refuge in Ohio. Slave catchers soon caught up with the family, and before their recapture Margaret killed her young daughter to prevent her return to slavery” (Lowne).

The novel became a sensation and achieved an immense success and even won both the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 1988. The novel was turned to a movie in 1998 starring Oprah Winfrey. After *Beloved*, Morrison wrote several other novels that included *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love* (2003) and her last novel *God Help the Child* (2015). She also wrote children’s literature, non-fiction books and 2 plays.

In 1993, Morrison became the first African American woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature where the Swedish Academy, in the prize motivation, said that Toni Morrison: “who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality” (Toni Morrison - Facts).

Bruce Norris (1960):

Bruce Norris is an American Pulitzer Prize winning playwright who is known for his shrewd satires and “how to make audiences squirm for their hypocrisies” (Gardner) especially when handling serious issues like racism and discrimination.

“Raised in Houston, Texas, playwright Bruce Norris was trained as an actor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois (B.A., 1982). He has had a long association with Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre, both as an actor and as a playwright. While continuing to make his living from acting on both stage and screen, he has increasingly done so in order to support his playwriting, from which he has developed a reputation as a provocative social satirist” (Bryer and Hartig 395)

After graduating from the university with a degree in theatre, he worked as an actor for a while⁸⁷, but he couldn’t secure a long-term acting job and because of that he decided to stop acting and to continue working solely as a writer (Bruce Norris). This experience gave him the idea of his first play *The Actor Retires* (1991) a comedy in which “an actor decides to end his career, burn his headshots and resumés, and become a serious furniture maker” (*The Actor Retires*).

The Actor Retires was followed by several plays including *The Vanishing Twin* (1996), *Purple Heart* (2002), *The Unmentionables* (2006), *The Low Road* (2013) and his latest play *Downstate* (2018). But Norris is mainly known for his two plays *The Pain and the Itch* (2005) which brought him to “national attention” and helped him to develop “a reputation for bloodletting with a smile and a classical sense of dramatic structure” (Bryer and Hartig 395), and the one for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama is *Clybourne Park* (2010) which featured characters “who are forced to closely examine, and sometimes revise or abandon, their ideas concerning race and their notions of social and economic justice” (Reimagining A Raisin in the Sun).

The Pain and the Itch (2005):

The Pain and the Itch is a play written by Bruce Norris which is “a scathing satire of the politics of class and race, a controversial, painfully human examination of denial and its consequences” (The Pain and the Itch). Norris’ main theme here is how the white people view and deal with anything that doesn’t compile with their belief system and how they try to depict themselves all the time as the good people. So, according to Norris, racism is not shown by white people against black people or even against all non-white people, but in fact, white people are racist against anyone who doesn’t abide with what they believe in whether in politics or in race.

The play is set in a lavishly furnished house of an upper-middle class family in an unnamed city and takes place in two separate time frames, one in a snowy afternoon in January and the other on the previous Thanksgiving. The play starts with a young couple, a stay-at-home dad, Clay, and a successful highly-paid lawyer, Kelly, trying to soothe Mr. Hadid, a non-American stranger who works as a taxi driver, for an unknown loss. Then, for some reasons which will be revealed later, they start reciting to him the events of the previous Thanksgiving where they are later joined by Clay's first-grade teacher mother, Carol; Clay's plastic-surgeon brother, Cash; and Cash's Eastern European girlfriend, Kalina.

The events of the previous Thanksgiving gradually unravel to show mysterious gnawed avocados and an equally mysterious but a more threatening genital inflammation of Kayla, the four-year-old daughter of Clay and Kelly. Clay and Kelly's seemingly innocent aim is to show how the disturbing news of Kayla's affliction has led to the tragedy that landed on Mr. Hadid and his family while their true aim is to deceive him to give up the compensation money his lawyers are asking for for the death of his wife which was caused by them.

“although the mystery is ultimately revealed, Norris's prime concern is with the unravelling of the hosts' domestic camouflage during a disastrous Thanksgiving dinner ... and this

exposes profound marital rifts, intense sibling rivalry and the condescension shown by Clay's plastic-surgeon brother to his East European girlfriend" (Billington).

"The *pain and the itch* is a deeply symbolical play about the repressions of the so called liberal and progressive middle-class American who is revealed to be as angst-ridden, money driven and hypocritical" (Review: the pain and the itch). Norris' main aim throughout the play was to attack mercilessly the hypocrisy and racism that lurk in the seemingly well-educated and well-intended middle-class family and through that to reveal how infested and decayed the liberal western values are.

Through this dysfunctional family, Norris managed to depict how phony and fake rich white people are where they keep talking about how they "don't do shooting games" (38) or "sword fight" (39) because of the "emphasis on conflict" (39), and how they don't "allow smoking in the house" (32) and how Kelly refuses to use glue traps because of the example they will set to their daughter.¹

¹ Norris, Bruce. *The Pain and the Itch*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008. PDF. 7 March 2016.

All further citation from this play cite direct quotes or material found on one or more specific pages from the same edition, therefore the page numbers of the source are included.

KELLY [*searching in a closet*]: Your mother needs that big salad bowl. And I did say specifically no glue traps.

CLAY: I took them out. I took them out.

KELLY [*from inside*]: I just don't think that allowing your daughter watch an animal writhe to a slow sadistic death in a puddle of glue is the best way to solve the problem. (17)

However, this seemingly nice moral abiding family did not feel the same urge about the family of Mr. Hadid where all the emotions and the sympathy they showed at the beginning when he was sobbing for the loss of his wife, who was their cleaning lady and whose death was their fault, and how they kept telling him not to "suppress his grief" (7) and "the importance of honoring emotions" (8) was only a pretense to hide their true aim which was avoid giving him any money.

CAROL [*with renewed purpose*]: Anyway. We all agree, I think. That it just seems so silly to have all of these *lawyers* involved.

KELLY [*likewise*]: And what we hoped was, that by inviting you here —

CAROL: I mean, the money is just *symbolic*.

KELLY: That we could make it about something else.

CAROL: It's a symbol. It's not what's truly important.

KELLY: What's important is the *loss*, obviously, is the *coming to terms*.

CAROL: Money isn't the same as *healing*.

KELLY: And moving on past the loss to a place of —

CAROL: Of recovery. (120, 121)

The tragedy that landed on Mr. Hadid family was that his wife, who worked for them, couldn't speak plentiful English and couldn't communicate with them, so when she wanted to take half a loaf of bread and she didn't ask because as she told her husband: "I do not know how to ask" (115), Carol insisted that she is stealing from them and when Carol saw the needle in Kayla's hand which the woman uses to take her medicine she came to the conclusion that whatever happened to Kayla was caused by the cleaning lady.

CAROL [*very quietly*]: Well, I don't mean to jump to conclusions. But we *know* she took the bread.

CLAY: Why? Why hurt our *child*? Why would she?

CASH: Hey Clay.

CAROL: We don't know. We don't know her reasons for *stealing*, either.

KELLY [*handing the needle to CLAY*]: I don't want to be touching this.

CAROL: But if your child is sick. And if she is alone with her.
(113, 114)

However, racism worst manifestation in the play was in the way the police handled the situation. Because of Carol's conclusion which she said to Clay while the latter was holding the phone and talking to the police regarding

his alarm, the police dealt violently with Mr. Hadid and his family. Upon arriving at Mr. Hadid house, they started to speak in very loud voices to the family members especially when the wife started shouting but not in English, and when the son tries to protect his family through only holding a broom stick, they were all pushed to the floor and handcuffed then they were put in separate police cars to be taken to the police station.

The tragedy happened because the wife was diabetic and she has just taken her medicine and she must eat, but because the police officers refused to listen, they failed to know the situation. Mr. Hadid kept telling them “please. My wife has the diabetes. She has taken the injection so now she must eat” (115) and however how many times Mr. Hadid told them that they are “happy to cooperate”, none the less, they refused to listen and the result was she went into a coma and died later.

MR. HADID: Now I can no longer hold my temper. Now I shout at them. I say my wife must eat. Why do you not listen? And the policeman, he takes my arm. He says hey. Hey buddy. *You* listen. You listen to *me*. You will calm down first. I say listen, please give her something to eat. He says listen, buddy. We will not listen until *you* are more calm ... You will get nothing if you do not listen to us and be calm. (116)

Norris' aim was to show how racism can be manifested in something as ridiculous as taking a piece of bread and how can this evolve to result in death.

He wanted to show that the problem of racism can have profound consequences and can even divide a house against itself like what happened when Clay discovered that Cash, his brother, is a Republican.

CLAY: As long as he *denies* it, sure, let him do whatever he wants! Let him steal! Just like the fucking president stole the election!! *Twice*. And I bet you a thousand bucks last time he *voted* for the asshole. [To CASH] Didn't you? Huh? A thousand bucks. Admit it. You *thief*. Come on. *Admit it*.

CASH: that's none of your business.

CLAY [*the ultimate triumph*]: *Ahhhhahaha!! He voted for Bush!! I knew it! Look at him, Mom! For Bush!! Your son is a Republican!! Your beloved little Cash is a fucking Republican!!!*

(60)

As racism can tear down a house, the ultimate consequence is that it can tear down a whole nation where as Kelly puts it when talking with Carol about "a young white man ... who is headed to West Africa to do his *missionary work* like *trick or treat* for the Republican Party" (25), she tells Carol that: "And I'm sorry, Carol, I'm all for inclusion. But that part of the country? Those are not my people." (26)



Works Cited

Amiri Baraka Biography. 29 March 2016. web page. 18 June 2018.
<<https://www.biography.com/people/amiri-baraka-9198235>>.

Andrews, William L. *African American literature*. 14 July 2016.

Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. . web page. 18 June 2018.

<<https://www.britannica.com/art/African-American-literature/The-advent-of-urban-realism#ref793866>>.

Billington, Michael. *The Pain and the Itch*. 22 June 2007. web page.
4 March 2017.

<<https://theatrekraut.wordpress.com/2007/06/19/review-the-pain-and-the-itch-by-rufus-norris-in-the-royal-court/>>.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. *Amiri Baraka*. 29 August

2017. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. . web page. 18 June
2018. <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Amiri-Baraka>
>.

—. *Toni Morrison*. 14 February 2018. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.
. web page. 19 June 2018.

<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Toni-Morrison>>.



Bruce Norris (playwright). n.d. web page. 27 June 2018.

<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_Norris_\(playwright\)#cite_note-20](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_Norris_(playwright)#cite_note-20)>.

Diyaiy, Sabah Atallah K.A. "The Dilemma of the Black Man in LeRoi Jones' Play Dutchman." *Al-Fatih Journal* 40 (2009):

13-22. PDF. 18 June 2018.

<<https://iasj.net/iasj?func=fulltext&aId=16905>>.

Gardner, Lyn. *Bruce Norris: squirm, you hypocrites!* 5 March 2013.

web page. 26 June 2018.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/mar/05/bruce-norris-interview-stage-theatre>>.

Gooding-Williams, Robert. *W.E.B. Du Bois*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta.

13 9 2017. web page. 6 6 2018.

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dubois/#DuBoisLifeMajorPubl>>.

Lowne, Cathy. *Beloved novel by Morrison*. 08 February 2017. web

page. 24 June 2018.

<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Beloved-novel-by-Morrison>>.

Norris, Bruce. *The Pain and the Itch*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008. PDF. 7 March 2016.

Recognizing James Baldwin's Legacy. 2 August 2016. web page. 13 6 2018. <<http://www.arthurashe.org/blog/recognizing-james-baldwins-legacy>>.

Reimagining A Raisin in the Sun . April 2012. Northwestern University Press. web page. 8 July 2018.

<<http://www.nupress.northwestern.edu/content/reimagining-raisin-sun>>.

Review: the pain and the itch by Bruce Norris in the Royal Court.

19 June 2007. web page. 4 March 2017.

<<https://theatrekraut.wordpress.com/2007/06/19/review-the-pain-and-the-itch-by-rufus-norris-in-the-royal-court/>>.

Rudwick, Elliott. *W.E.B. Du Bois American sociologist and social reformer*. 20 7 1998. web page. 6 6 2018.

<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/W-E-B-Du-Bois>>.

The Actor Retires. n.d. web page. 27 June 2018.

<<http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/plays/the-actor-retires-iid-140161>>.

The Pain and the Itch. 2006. web page. 5 July 2018.

<<https://www.playwrightshorizons.org/shows/plays/pain-and-itch/>>.

Toni Morrison - Facts. 2014. web page. 25 June 2018.

<http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-facts.html>.

Toni Morrison Biography. 27 February 2018. web page. 19 June

2018. <<https://www.biography.com/people/toni-morrison-9415590>>.