

# Racial Identity in American Literature of the 1930s: Three Examples

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**Abstract.** Views of racial identity have shifted greatly throughout American history and are a crucial part of American culture. The 1930s was an era in which national policies redefined what it meant to be “white”, and the great depression impacted the poor disproportionately. This paper explores the development of racial identity in the 1930s by focusing on three particular literary works from this time in the United States using both textual analysis and qualitative analysis. By analyzing these three novels, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth*, it can be found that not only the larger social and economic background of the time affected and even created these works, but authors’ personal experiences played important roles. The proportion of the effect of the social environment to the effect of unique personal circumstances in these novels varies greatly—it can be found that while *The Grapes of Wrath* can almost be entirely attributed to what happened in real life (thus the use and development of realism), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Good Earth* have personal experiences integrated into the lines that have close connections to the author’s personal identity as a member of a certain cultural group. These differences might stem from the difference between being in the majority or minority racially.

**Keywords:** 1930s, realism, race, American.

## 1. Introduction

The history of America is not a history of only one race—it is a history of how different ethnicities and races have gradually formed what is perceived as “American” and how Americans have perceived other countries and acted toward them. In this process, Americans’ views of race, immigration, and citizenship have shifted radically; specifically, new immigration and citizenship laws during the 1920s and 1930s reflected and shaped these changing notions [1], redefining the rights of the white citizen simultaneously. The development of African American culture, mainly through the Harlem Renaissance and the humanization of Chinese people, were also salient topics during this decade’s literary works.

It is important to recognize the establishment and progression of racial connections and views presented through literature during this decade while being aware of the average American’s experience during the great depression. Understanding historical context not only through historical records but through the representation of one family’s vivid experience, such as in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, is crucial for comprehending the great depression’s impact on future generations and realizing its place in the American consciousness. The development of realism is also prominent in this decade as authors wanted to represent the lives of common folk. Literature spoke for both the majority and minority, which both hold crucial positions when glimpsing at the nation’s history.

This paper centers around three main topics, exploring the portrayal of different racial groups during the 1930s: The depiction of the life of working-class or poorer white citizens during the great depression through realism, specifically in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, the recognition and development of a new African American culture formed during the Harlem Renaissance through African American literary works such as Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the emergence of new and more human identification of Chinese people through Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth*.

The methodology utilized in this paper includes textual analysis, which looks closely at the content, themes, literary devices, and style of texts. Additionally, qualitative analysis of individual literary

works is used in selecting representative examples in texts and coming to a conclusion about the text, historical background, or reason that it was written a particular way.

The aim of this research is to explore American literature, specifically novels in the 1930s, coming to an overview of the decade's work in regard to racial identity centralizing on White, African American, and Asian perspectives while putting forward and analyzing three classics of this period. This paper then aims to conduct a cause analysis of these works, concluding why they emerged. Moreover, the research questions proposed are: What was a theme during the 1930s in literature (particularly novels), especially in the development of racial identity? What were works that illustrate this? Why did they appear?

The main body of this paper is divided into two main parts, with the first overall analysis of the background and historical context and the latter exemplifying three famous novels of the time. These three novels, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, are then analyzed, and reasons for their creation and publication are presented.

## 2. General Information

As this article aims to focus on three general racial identities, it is important to first investigate immigrant and citizenship policies in the United States during this period. This was considered a dark time for immigration policies: for instance, consular officials who were "under quota" — who kept admissions below strict (racist) national-origin quotas set by Congress — got letters of commendation under both Presidents Herbert Hoover and Roosevelt, according to American University history professor Alan Kraut<sup>[2]</sup>. The immigration act of 1924 set the basis of a more hostile approach to immigrants by setting up this national origins quota, which restricted entrance according to country. It further consolidated the category of whiteness by defining all Euro-peans as white <sup>[2]</sup>. The categories of "national origins" in the Act contrasted with racial categories that lacked national specificity: "The new taxonomy was starkly represented in a table of the population of the United States published in 1924, in which the column 'country of birth' listed fifty-three countries (Australia to Yugoslavia) and five 'colored races' (black, mulatto, Chinese, Japanese, Indians)." Thus national belonging was defined as white, and those who were categorized as "colored" were denied nationality <sup>[2]</sup>. Asians, especially the Chinese, were denied any consideration for immigration. Not until 1940 would the Nationality Act of 1940 be passed, and nationality would be defined by birth in United States' mainland or US territories.

As for the larger social and economic background, the great depression occurred from 1929 to 1939. Economic hardship and natural disasters such as the Dust Bowl, a series of harsh dust storms, dealt a heavy blow to the country. Coupled with banks and landowners forcing tenants to move, the working class bore the bulk of the depression. Moreover, African Americans suffered disproportionately from this economic disaster, leading to a decline in the Harlem Renaissance. However, to Zora Neale Hurston, a central figure in the Renaissance, this did not pose a challenge. She kept on writing, going on to publish *Mules and Men* in 1935, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* in 1934, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1937, and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* in 1939<sup>[3]</sup>. Her childhood experiences and studies as a student who participated in anthropological and ethnographic research, combined with profound experiences as an African American woman, contributed largely to her works.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

*The Grapes of Wrath* is no doubt a work focused on the common white man during the great depression. It is a historically authentic story of the Joad family; Oklahoma farmers are dispossessed of their land and forced to become migrant farmers in California <sup>[4]</sup>. However, despite its advocacy

for tenant farmers, laborers, Okies, and other poor migrants across the United States, John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* seemingly ignores the Black Americans among them and effectively erases the history of African Americans even as it elevates Route 66 and the overlooked and forgotten trials and tribulations of White, rural, farming families who lived along it [5].

The Joads represent countless other families on the road west, and other characters are also illustrations of a certain role in society. For example, in chapter 15, when illustrating a hamburger stand along the 66 highway, Steinbeck goes from "Al and Susy's Place– Carl's Lunch– Joe and Minnie– Will's Eats" to "Minnie or Susy or Mae, middle aging behind the counter" to "Mae is the contact, smiling, irritated, near to outbreak". It is clear that Mae's actions are not only an indirect characterization of her character but also representative of the many women working at hamburger shacks along the highway. Her story is not only hers but so many others' stories.

This work is evidently a direct product of the great depression and its effects. The development of realism is predictable— what better way to express the helplessness of tenants against great machines and banks than describe it as it is? Xinyu Zhang points out that realism is embodied in the conflict between the migrants and the established. The migrants' agrarian way of life has all but disappeared, threatened not only by nature's drought and dust storms but also by big farms and financial establishments called "the Bank" in the novel [4]. The ending, in particular, can feel depressing, wrong, and uneasy, revealing the extreme poverty, destruction, and helplessness the depression has caused. However, although controversial, it is believable and real to what those traveling west would have experienced.

### 3.2. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

While this novel is written about Black people in the South, it is not primarily about a racist society. In the novel, Nanny is the first character to discuss the effects of slavery—"Ah was born back due in slavery, so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of what a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery." It can be seen that this novel is mostly concerned with differences within the black community and discusses the relationship between the sexes. Although Hurston was one of the most prominent authors of the Harlem Renaissance, it can be inferred that the novel is not only a product of the continuation of the Renaissance but is also condensed from Hurston's own thoughts from her experience as an African American woman. The most evident and widely known is the inspiration she drew from one of her lovers, Percival Punter [6]. He served as a basis for one of the lovers of the protagonist Janie, "Tea Cake". Eatonville, the all-black town in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is based on the town of the same name in which Hurston grew up. Additionally, the main theme in writing is the liberation of women, which no doubt had to do with Hurston's personal identity. The story also has a historical foundation: In 1927, a decade before writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston traveled south to collect folk songs and folk tales through an anthropological research fellowship arranged by her Barnard College mentor Franz Boas [6]. The hurricane that symbolizes the climax of Hurston's story also has a historical inspiration; in 1928, "a hurricane-ravaged both coastal and inland areas of Florida [7]. Personal experience, historical context, and a reviving environment during the Harlem Renaissance all contributed to the shaping of this novel.

### 3.3. Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

Of the three works discussed, *The Good Earth* is possibly the most connected with the author's personal experiences and identity. The reason this book was written and published is less because of the large economic and social background of the 1930s, but it still made an influence as Pearl Buck present(ed) a sympathetic portrait of a Chinese farmer and his family that rang true to the American experience of rural existence [8]. She demythologized the stereotypical image of China in Western (and specifically American) literary discourse in the first half of the 20th century [9].

Although born in the United States, she (Buck) was taken to China by her missionary parents, Absolom and Caroline Sydenstricker, when she was but a few months old. She spent most of her early years in a small bungalow situated atop a hill that overlooked Chinkiang's crowded city and the

Yangtze River. Their (her first stories') inspiration was wholly Chinese; in her youth, Pearl Buck knew far more about China than the country of her birth. "I lived with Chinese people," she relates in one of her autobiographies, "and spoke their tongue before I spoke my own, and their children were my first friends" [10]. When she was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, Buck spoke of the Chinese novel and its influence on her own philosophy of composition. There was no doubt that the term "Chinese novel" for her meant the traditional Chinese works of fiction, not the novels of contemporary Asian writers strongly under foreign influence and somewhat ignorant of the riches of their own indigenous literature. She had selected the subject of the traditional Chinese novel for two reasons: first, her own concept of the novel was wholly Chinese, and second, her belief that the Chinese novel possesses an illumination for the Western novel and for the Western novelist [10].

Buck's life was deeply influenced by her childhood experiences in China and her Asian-American identity, and she comparatively drew less inspiration from the great depression or revival movements that embraced a new culture, although her motivation may have stemmed from prejudices against Chinese people. Her work changed American perception of the Chinese at a time when Chinese were viewed in negative stereotypes and, in a way, found possibilities of the United States working with China during World War II. Some argue that the novel's wide influence even helped repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act [9].

### 3.4. Discussion

The three are common in the fact that they both contribute to the development of racial identity, portraying characters in a more realistic, human way, leading to new perspectives and a deeper understanding of racial identity for the reader. The realism used in these novels reflected and revealed real experiences people with different racial identities were going through, which made the novels touching. However, there is a differentiation in the combination of historical background and personal experience that contributed to these works, expanded on in summary.

## 4. Conclusion

The development of racial identity in the 1930s is particularly represented in *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *The Good Earth*. These works respectively illustrate the story of a common white man's family during the great depression, how an African American woman comes to peace with herself after enduring three marriages, and a traditional Chinese family's suffering and enduring in 19th-century China. These works appeared for somewhat different reasons: *The Grapes of Wrath* was more of a product of the large social and economic environment and used realism to portray the life of a family facing countless challenges in order to survive, while *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Good Earth* both have more of a personal facet—Zora Neale Hurston's personal experience as she grew up, especially as an African American woman, coupled with historical inspiration, formed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* while Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* was even more of a tale from personal experiences. Buck's childhood profoundly influenced her career as an author and pushed her towards articulating the concept of "the Chinese novel". However, all three brought new perspectives to the table using realism to portray and reveal real experiences ordinary people were going through.

However, the conclusions of this paper are limited in the fact that there are numerous vivid works from the 1930s that also give insight into the development of racial identity but are not explored and analyzed above. Additionally, a potential topic to be discussed in the future could be if the difference between being members of different cultural groups was what affected a novel's inspiration. For example, would being of European descent, as John Steinbeck was, mean that his novels would stem more from the impact of historical events that affected the common man as opposed to his personal experience? Would being of a minority mean that literary creations would spring more from unique personal circumstances from being in this minority? Would being in the majority or minority affect an author's work to what extent? This remains to be considered.

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