Chapter 4

Misreadings of American Literature

Bloom’s assessment of American playwrights and novelists and their works can be gathered from a number of introductions that he wrote to the Chelsea series like *Modern Critical Views*, *Bloom’s Major Novelists*, *Bloom’s Major Dramatists*, *Bloom’s Major Poets*, *Bloom’s Bio-Critiques* and *Major Literary Characters*. He has also brought out brief introductions to the works of eminent American writers and their works with biographical and critical comment in his series called *Bloom’s Notes*. Bloom’s introductions to the first two series are not stray comments brief though they are; on the other hand, these introductory comments reveal his critical insight and vast knowledge. They show that he has an uncanny ability to get at the heart of every work he discusses. His introduction to a work rouses our interest and it always offers some original and provocative ideas about the work. It is as significant as any scholarly essay on the work, throwing some new light upon the achievement of a particular writer or some special quality of the work changing the entire critical studies on it. Bloom’s introductions to hundreds of critical volumes on American writers and works have established him as the central critic of American literary tradition, justifying his own claim that his major concern is to establish the Americanness of American literature.
In an attempt to place Eugene O’Neill in the American literary tradition, Bloom observes that he is the “most American” dramatist of dramatists but his precursors are not American. He owes his debt to Strindberg and Ibsen. Bloom says, “Intellectually, O’Neill’s ancestry also has little to do with American tradition, with Emerson or William James or any other of our cultural speculators” (Intro. 1, The Iceman Cometh). Bloom admits that an American quality that is literary but not related to domestic literary traditions is nearly always present in O’Neill’s strongest works. The dramatist is not a celebrator of the possibilities of American life and is opposed to the central tradition of American literature which is Emersonian. Bloom argues that O’Neill is out and out an Irish American. He resented the New England Yankee tradition and Emerson’s celebration of individualism. Bloom holds that O’Neill’s own individualism is Irish Jansenism which is close to New England puritanism. The will to live is set against New England puritanism in what O’Neill himself once called ‘the battle of moral forces in the New England scene’” (2).

O’Neill’s will to live is Schopenhauer’s, he is in the terrible position of opposing one death-drive with another. His self-representations – Edmund in Long Day’s Journey into Night and Larry Slade in Iceman are astonishingly negative identifications, especially in an American context. These characters long to die because life without transcendence is impossible, and yet transcendence is totally unavailable. The theme of The Iceman is not the limitations of America as a nation as seen by O’Neill: “its main idea is that
everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside it” (3). Bloom claims that the play’s true argument is that your own soul cannot be possessed, whether by possessing something or someone outside it, or by joining yourself to a transcendental possibility, to whatever version of an Emersonian over-soul that you might prefer. America as a nation has failed to learn truths of the spirit, which are that “good and the means of good, love and the means of love, are irreconcilable” (3). Regarded as O’Neill’s masterpiece, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* cannot be equal to the best of American literature. Listing O’Neill’s limitations, Bloom holds that his conversations lack rhetorical exuberance and are unremarkable, though deeply held, and his ideas about his country, his own work, or the human condition are embarrassing. The principal limitation of *The Iceman Cometh* “stems from its tendentious assumption that “we are tragedy”, that these states have become the “most appalling of tragedies” (3). The play does not have a transfiguring nobility. O’Neill’s strength is neither in stance nor in style, but in “the dramatic representation of illusions and despairs, in the persuasive imitation of human personality particularly in its self-destructive weaknesses” (4). Bloom argues that O’Neill doggedly tells one story only, and his story turns out to be himself. *The Iceman* raises the vexed question of whether and just how “dramatic value can survive a paucity of eloquence, too much commonplace religiosity, and a thorough lack of understanding of the perverse complexities of human nature” (4). Though splendid in stage performances, the plays of O’Neill give neither
aesthetic pleasure nor spiritually memorable pain when read. O'Neill also fails
on the mythic level and his fury against God is personal and petulant and his
attempt to universalize that anger by turning it against America's failure to
achieve spirituality is wrong. Bloom observes that no nation achieves anything
spiritual: "We live and die, in the spirit, in solitude, and the true strength of The
Iceman is intense dramatic exemplification of that somber reality" (5).

The confessional element is strong in Iceman but Bloom refuses to
ascribe it to Catholicism. The terrible confessions in Iceman and Journey are
not made to religious priests but to fellow sinners without hope of absolution.
Bloom remarks that "confession becomes another station on the way to death,
whether by suicide, or by alcohol or by other modes of slow decay" (5). The
strength of the play lies in its three figures – Hickman, Slade, and Parritt and of
whom only Hickman can survive. A nihilist, Hickey, is a desperate self-
deceiver and so deceiver of others. A more authentic nihilism than Hickey's
can be seen in Slade who is evasive and solipsistic. Young and self-haunted
Parritt cannot achieve the sense of nothingness that would save puritanical
self-condemnation.

Bloom argues that life in Iceman is illusion. In his quest to destroy
illusion, Hickey does not destroy others. His judgments are not intended to
liberate his friends but to teach them to accept them and live with failure and he
realizes that men are destroyed by vain hope rather than dark despair. Bloom
wants to locate the authentic mode of tragedy in such grim knowledge. The
play in a sense portrays Hickey’s tragedy more than Slade’s for Hickey is slain between right and right: “To deprive the derelicts of hope is right, and to sustain them in their pipe dreams” (6). Hickey is caught between right and right and in a state of phantasmagoria he makes the horrid confession that he killed his unhappy, and dreadfully saintly wife, Evelyn. Hickey asserts that he was driven by love to kill his wife but it is uncertain whether he is moved by love or hate. He confesses that he murdered Evelyn to give her peace and to free her from the misery of loving him.

Bloom claims that Hickey becomes a tragic enigma who does not know whether it is mutual hope or despair that has motivated him to murder. Bloom observes that Hickey’s weird idealism makes a figure of High Tragedy, Parritt is a figure of pathos as he is caught in a moral dialectic of guilt and suffering. Bloom’s concluding comments throw light on the tragic dignity of the play. The momentary return of Catholicism is at variance with the despair of the death-drive here, and Slade does not understand that he has not been converted to any sense of death. His only strength would be in emulating Hickey’s tragic awareness between right and right, but of course without following Hickey into violence: “I’ll be a weak fool looking with pity at the two sides of everything till the day I die!” (3) That vision of the two sides, with compassion, is the only hope worthy of the dignity of any kind of tragic conception. O’Neill ended by exemplifying Yeats’s great apothegm: he could embody the truth, but he could not know it.
Bloom praises *Long Day's Journey Into Night* as a masterpiece and a strong work, but it does not have the aesthetic distinction or brilliance that American fiction or poetry has nor can it be a match to the intellectual essays of Emerson or William James. Bloom argues that O'Neill lacks rhetorical exuberance, and laughing speech, his convictions have a sullenness, his ideas are repugnant, his art is nonexistent, not merely non-verbal. He lacks mimetic force and linguistic exuberance, but O'Neill has mastery over language and theatrical art. Bloom praises the power and extraordinarily effective stage directions of O'Neill, for instance, he cites the following passage from *Long Days Journey*.

TYRONE (trying to shake off his hopeless stupor). Oh, we're fools to pay any attention. It's the damned poison. But I've never known her to drown herself in it as deep as this. (Gruffly) Pass me that bottle, Jamie. And stop reciting that damned morbid poetry. I won't have it in my house! (Jamie pushes the bottle toward him. He pours a drink without disarranging the wedding gown he holds carefully over his other arm and on his lap, and shoves the bottle back. Jamie pours his and passes the bottle to Edmund, who in turn, pours one. Tyrone lifts his glass and his sons follow suit mechanically, but before they can drink Mary speaks and they slowly lower their drinks to the table, forgetting them). (4)
Bloom finds exceptional the gestures and glances, the grim ballet of looks made by the characters. He admires the power of the mimetic art of *Journey* and asserts that O’Neill is unmatched in depicting the nightmare realities of American family life.

Miller is not a bad writer but he is scarcely an eloquent master of the language whose *Death of a Salesman* has strength and a continued vitality. The play presents an American kind of writing which is also a universal mode of pain. Bloom guesses that something crucial in Willy Loman is Jewish whose pain and fate are deeply moving:

His tragedy makes sense only in the Freudian world of repression, which happens to be the world of normative Jewish memory. It is a world in which everything has already happened in which there never can be anything new again, because there is total sense or meaningfulness in everything, which is to say, in which everything hurts. (Intro. 4)

Willy is in perpetual exile and that partly justifies Miller’s claim that *Salesman* is a tragedy. Bloom quotes Miller’s comment on Loman: “The truly valueless man, a man without ideals, is always perfectly at home anywhere” (4). But Willy has a desire to be elsewhere and the desire to be different. Mary McCarthy’s assessment that Willy could not be Jewish because he had to be American is quite revealing. Bloom claims that Willy is a representation of
pathos and not a tragic figure. A survivor who has no desire to survive cannot be called a tragic figure. Linda throws light upon Willy when she says that a small man can be just as exhausted as a great man and the following lament of Linda has a universal poignancy:

Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He is not the finest character that ever lived. But he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He’s not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person. (Intro. 4)

Willy lives in a state of phantasmagoria; he is lost in the American Dream and cannot tell his past from present. As Willy is dying throughout the play, Bloom suggests that it can be called “The Dying of a Salesman”. He further observes: “That is the pathos of Linda’s passionate injunction that attention must be finally paid to such a person, a human being to whom a terrible thing is happening. Nothing finds Willy anymore; everything loses him. He is a man upon whom the sun has gone down” (5).

What leads Willy to his doom is love and Bloom surmises on it. Miller, a passionate moralist, all but rabbinical in his ethical vision, insists upon giving us the sexual infidelities of Willy and his sons as synecdoches of the failure of Willy’s vision of reality. Presumably, Willy’s sense of failure, his belief that he
has no right to his wife, despite Linda’s love for him, is what motivates Willy’s deceptions, and those of his sons after him. Yet Willy is not destroyed by his sense of failure but by love, by his sudden awareness that his son Biff truly loves him. Bloom says that Miller may be a better interpreter of Miller than he is a dramatist and cites Miller’s insightful comment that Willy resolves to die when “he is given his existence [. . .] his fatherhood, for which he has always striven and which until now he could not achieve” (Intro. 5). That evidently is the precise and terrible pathos of Willy’s character and of his fate. He is a good man, who wants only to earn and to deserve the love of his wife and sons. He is self-slain, not by the salesman’s dream of America, but by “the universal desire to be loved by one’s own, and to be loved beyond what one believes one deserves. Miller is not one of the masters of metaphor, but in Death of a Salesman he memorably achieves a pathos that none of us would be wise to dismiss” (5).

Arthur Miller’s hero Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman is a major dramatic character and Bloom observes that he merits “inclusion in the vital company of major American literary characters” (Willy Loman Intro. 1) and that Miller’s play is a legitimate tragic drama. Bloom tries to account for Loman’s fall and he says that the protagonist of the play is slain by his need for love, for familial love. Linda’s comment upon her husband, Loman is that a small man can be just as exhausted as a great man. But Bloom reminds us that if
exhaustion were his salient quality, then Miller’s creation would be an aesthetic disaster and he observes that the exhaustion of Willy Loman lacks the cognitive and spiritual qualities that mark the exhaustion of Lear. He argues that what Loman shares with Lear is agony, there is no other likeness whatsoever and says that Miller has no knowledge of classical or Shakespearean tragedy. He is a disciple of Ibsen and Bloom insists that a tragedy of familial love is not primarily a social drama, one concerned with the illusions of society. Ibsen has kept the two types unconfused whereas in his depiction of Loman, Miller is confused but this confusion does not destroy Loman as a dramatic character because in Miller family tragedy and social realities are inextricably linked by a tragic social history. This social history is that of the Jews who are socially persecuted. Though Loman is not a Jew he makes sense as an internal exile. Miller has remarked: “Jews can’t afford to revel too much in the tragic because it might overwhelm them. Consequently, in most Jewish writing there’s always caution. Don’t push it too far toward the abyss, because you’re liable to fall in” (2). Bloom tries to explain whether Loman’s fall is tragic or pathetic and suggests that Loman doesn’t have enough individuality to sustain the context of tragedy. There is more pathos in Loman than the aesthetic dignity of tragedy and Bloom claims that pathos has a possible aesthetic dignity and need not be witless, insensitive or incapable. Pointing out that Miller overestimates and underestimates his hero’s stature, Bloom comments on Loman:
The aesthetic dignity of Loman is substantial, yet essentially is one of pathos rather than of ethos, of personality rather than of character, needs the love of his family, and needs to love them. It is a terrible pathos that Loman has confused himself into the belief that without success he does not deserve to be loved. But this is a generous pathos, and moves us profoundly. In exile from himself, Loman fails to see that familial love never can be deserved, or undeserved, but only is, or is not. (3)

Bloom accounts for the factors that led Loman into an internalized exile and he observes that it is unappeasable yearning. What appeals to us is Loman's psychic poverty. "Poor Loman essentially wants to sell himself, so nothing could suffice for him to buy himself back" (9). Bloom holds that Loman is a dreamer and he is fated to dream only dreams of guilt, the guilt of a bad father and a bad husband. Loman tried to be the best of fathers and the best of husbands. Bloom argues that what kills Loman is love—Linda's love and Biff's love. Linda's love for Loman is devoid of any understanding of her husband and Biff's love is so marked by ambivalence that Willy is doomed to interpret it wrongly. Excessive love, "love without understanding, his own love, and his family's love, have combined to send Willy into the desert of himself, to wander there as an exile from the only affections that could sustain and save him" (6). Bloom gives just praise to Miller by observing that he has an immense capacity for the dramatic representation of the destructive sorrows of familial love.
Bloom describes Tennessee Williams as the most literary of major American dramatists and he belongs to the American tradition of self-destructive genius. Williams's true precursor is Hart Crane, a fine lyricist and the most self-destructive figure in American literature who made Williams a fine dramatic lyricist. The influence of Crane can be seen in plays like *The Glass Menagerie, A Street Car Named Desire, Summer and Smoke* and *Suddenly Last Summer*. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* does not show any influence of Crane. Bloom eloquently argues that "Williams's long aesthetic decline covered thirty years, from 1953 to 1983, and reflected the sorrows of a seer who, by his early forties, had outlived his own vision. Hart Crane, self-slain at thirty-two, had set for Williams a High Romantic paradigm that helped cause Williams, his heart as dry as summer dust, to burn to the socket" (Intro. 3 *A Street Car*).

It is significant to note that *A Street Car* has as its epigraph, a passage from Hart Crane's "The Broken Tower". The play is brilliant on the stage and there is a marvelous blending of the lyrical and dramatic talents in it. Its flaws proceed from its tendency to sensationalize its characters, especially Blanche Du Bois, an observation made by Kenneth Tynan who argues that Blanche's strengths are nostalgia and hope, that she is the desperate exceptional woman and that her fall is a parable. Bloom quotes a passage from Tynan which stresses the passing away of American nobility:
When, finally, she is removed to the mental home, we should feel that a part of civilization is going with her. Where ancient drama teaches us to reach nobility by contemplation of what is noble, modern American drama conjures us to contemplate what might have been noble, but is now humiliated, ignoble in the sight of all but the compassionate. (Intro. 3)

Blanche does not have the values of the aesthetic though she craves for them. Bloom sees in her failure a masochistic self-parody of Williams himself. As he remarks, “The fall of Blanche is a parable, not of American civilization’s lost nobility, but of the failure of the American literary imagination to rise above its recent myths of recurrent defeat” (4).

Bloom asserts that the aesthetic identity of Blanche Du Bois is that of a failed Whitmanian. When her young husband expresses his sexual preference for an old man, she “falls downwards and outwards into nymphomania, phantasmagoric hopes. pseudo imaginative collages of memory and desire” (4). In Blanche’s agonized cry against Stanley Kowalski, Bloom sees William’s skilful mixing of lyrical vision and dramatic irony, an argument which clearly demonstrates Bloom’s critical insight. To Blanche, Kowalski is an animal and eats and talks like one and has its habits. He is almost like an ape and belongs to the stone age. Man is made in the image of God but Kowalski is a brute and has nothing to do with culture, with music, poetry and tender feelings.
Bloom argues that Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* is the most surprising and the largest intimation of Hawthorne’s farthest imaginings. He tries to relate Pearl to Gnosticism:

In Gnostic symbolism, the pearl is identical with the spark or pneuma that is the ontological self of the adept who shares in the Gnosis, in the true knowing that surmounts mere faith. The pearl particularly represents what is best and oldest in the adept, because creation is the work of a mere demiurge, while the best part of us, that which is capable of knowing, was never made, but is one with the original Abyss, the Foremother and Forefather, who is the true or alien God. When Hawthorne’s Pearl passionately insists, she was not made by God, we hear again the most ancient and challenging of all western heresies. (Intro. 4)

In his ‘Introduction’ to the Chelsea collection of essays analyzing the character of Hester Prynne, Bloom puts forward an argument emphasizing Hester’s centrality as the first heroine of the Protestant will in American prose fiction. She occupies a central place in American literature and possesses a force and vivacity. Bloom claims that she is larger than her book, admirable as *The Scarlet Letter* certainly is, because she incarnates more paradoxes and even contradictions than Dimmesdale does, let alone Chillingworth or the visionary Pearl. Commenting on Hester, Bloom holds that she is sensual and tragic and Hawthorn portrayed in her an overwhelming personality and a puzzling moral character who is a representation of the author’s deep inwardness.
Bloom admits that she is a sexual being and her heroic sexuality has yielded her two impossible men, her satanic husband Chillingworth and her inadequate lover Dimmesdale. Her sexuality has been balked, yet it constitutes the core of her resistance to her puritan persecutors. Bloom certainly gives prime importance to her sexuality and argues that what gives charisma to her is her sexual charm. What matters most about Hester is "the vital intensity of her being, her frustrated promise of more life, which is the Hebraic sense of the Blessing". There are a number of valid ways of explaining Hester's "charismatic quality both in and out of the pages of The Scarlet Letter, but the most accurate, [...] is to see her charisma as implicit sexual power" (2).

There are Puritan and Emersonian strands in her, a blend of Calvinism and self-reliance which can also be found in her creator Hawthorne. Bloom argues that there is more to Hester Prynne than Hawthorne is willing to reveal which makes the book irritating to some readers but contributes to its aesthetic strength. Hester does not run away from her story. But she runs off with it. Stressing the peculiar aura of her character, Bloom observes:

Critics who chide Hester for her self-deceptions and her moral inconsistencies always sound as silly to me as the endless heaps of scholars who denounce Shakespeare's Falstaff. Hester does not contain us as Falstaff and Rosalind. Hamlet and Cleopatra contain us. But Hester always precedes us as the most representative fictive portrait of an American woman. (Intro. 2 – 3)
She cannot hold together her incompatible impulses, and yet she survives an outrageously dreadful societal and erotic context that ought to have driven her either to madness or suicide. It is absurd for any critic not to learn from her, while speculating again as to the sources of her extraordinary strength of being.

Bloom maintains that Hawthorne gives Hester extraordinary vitality but inadequate articulation. Hester goes on telling fictions about her situation, and her refusal to forsake her role, in the conclusion, is a stubborn extension of her will to power over her own story and she refuses to become a figure of romance. Bloom observes that Hester has made Hawthorne to change novel into psychological novel instead of a romance and the author has failed to conform Hester to his expectations. She deceives herself and others for a time and She is a dark figure of romance but is neither a masochist nor sadist. She has immense vitality and it is Hawthorne who defrauds her for the sake of his art.

Bloom holds that the highest achievements of Hawthorne are his tales and sketches. The last of these, the extraordinary “Feather top”, sub-titled “A Moralized Legend”, is as “uncanny a story as Kafka’s “Country Doctor” or “Hunter Graccus,” and has about it the dark aura of Hawthorne’s valediction, his farewell to his own art. In “its extraordinary strength at representing an order of reality that intersects our own, neither identical with the mundane nor quite transcending the way things are, ‘Feather top’ may be without rivals in our language” (5).
Bloom holds that *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *Benito Cereno* are Melville’s strongest works and *The Piazza Tales* – a volume of novellas with four near master-pieces is an extraordinary achievement. *Moby Dick* today is, together with *Leaves of Grass and Huck Finn*, one of the three candidates for American national epic. *Moby Dick* and the *Piazza Tales* have their precursors in the Bible. Melville’s rejection of biblical theology and his almost Gnostic distrust of nature and history alike, find powerful expression in *The Piazza Tales*.

Bloom expresses his admiration for Ahab who is described as the greatest of American fictive hero-villains whose strongest precursors are Macbeth and Satan. Though Ahab destroys his crew, except Ishmael, as well as himself, Bloom refuses to regard him as culpable. Ahab’s defiant assertion, his fierce vows of revenge are noteworthy and he is unwilling to succumb but chooses to curse God and die. Bloom views Ahab as “the Archetypal American Gnostic and so is one of the fictive founders of what should be called the American Religion, post-Christian yet somehow still Protestant. Ahab is an Emersonian gone even wilder, a transmitter of self-reliance into the final quest for metaphysical vengeance upon the normative God of the Jews and The Christians” (*Ahab* Intro. 1). Ahab’s Gnostic venture is revealed in the following passage:

> If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the
The white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me [...]. (qtd. in Intro. 2)

Bloom gives a Gnostic interpretation to the passage. To strike through the mask is to break through Kenoma, cosmological emptiness into which we are thrown during the Creation-Fall. The Kenoma is a prison and Bloom argues that its wall is Moby Dick who is the Demiurge or false God himself, or merely a servant of the God of nature or the fallen world. Either way the Gnostic challenge is enough. The Creation-Fall represents a malicious strength, to which the Gnostic quester responds with pride and defiance. Ahab has been injured and insulted by Moby Dick or by the White Whale's normative creator. To strike at Moby Dick indeed is to strike the sun, because the sun, like the White Whale, indubitably represents Ignorance, and Ahab asserts a higher Knowledge as his ultimate moral sanction.

Ahab's address to the fire is explained in the light of Parsee religion. Invoking fire, Ahab says: "Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, breathe it back to thee" (qtd. in Intro. 2). In Bloom's
explanation of the passage he remarks that "worship of fire means to defy fire, then Ahab's defiance of Moby Dick is also a kind of worship" (3). The clear fire of Ahab is at one with the fathering force invested in the Zorastrian fire. "That force is an impersonal power; Ahab confronts it as the American personality, free of the creation, because what is best and oldest in him goes back before the creation" (3).

Bloom argues that Ahab is hero-villain and his villany is close to Edmund and Satan. He sees the Whiteness of the Whale as an affront to Ahab because it is emblematic of the sanctioned tyranny of nature over man. He thinks that Ahab's quest is supremely American because its God is identical with the inner self.

Bloom's reading of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* attempts to establish his place in American literary tradition and he relates it to the aesthetic impressionism of Walter Pater and Joseph Conrad. What is exceptional in Hemingway is that he is a supreme stylist and he rivals the principal American poets such as Stevens, Eliot, Frost, Hart Crane, aspects of Pound, W.C. Williams, Warren, and Elizabeth Bishop. Hemingway's excellence is closer to poets like Whitman, Stevens, Eliot rather than to Twain, Faulkner and Fitzgerald. But this does not mean that he fails at narrative or in the representation of characters. Bloom maintains that Hemingway is an elegiac poet who mourns the self, who celebrates the self, and who suffers the divisions in the self. "In the broadest tradition of American literature, he stems
ultimately from the Emersonian reliance on the God within, which is the line of Whitman, Thoreau, and Dickinson” (3). His stories like “God Rest You Merry, Gentleman” or “A Natural History of the Dead” celebrate the real absence. His character Doc Fischer in “God Rest You Merry, Gentleman” has his precursor in Nathaniel West’s Shrike in Miss Lonely Hearts, and the Doc’s suave, implicit religiosity prophesies Shrike’s Satanic stance and the entire daemonic world of Pynchon’s.

There is a nostalgia for Catholic order always abiding in Hemingway’s consciousness but Bloom argues that the cosmos of his fiction is American Gnostic. In any assessment of Hemingway’s achievement, it is a truism to argue that his genius is for short stories rather than extended narratives and Bloom claims that his stories possess an aesthetic dignity. An intensity of style is not merely the feature of his stories, but a feature characterizing his novels, too, and The Sun Also Rises reads now as “a series of epiphanies, of brilliant and memorable vignettes” (4). Hemingway employs a system of ironies and understatements and when they are coherent his writing becomes brilliant. But Bloom claims that Hemingway is good at presenting vignettes: “Vignette is Hemingway’s natural mode, or call it hard-edged vignette: a literary sketch that somehow seems to be the beginning or end of something longer, yet truly is complete in itself” (5).

One of the shortcomings of Hemingway as a fictioneer is the monotony of repetition. Hemingway’s life and his works have made him a myth like
Byron: “As with Byron, the color and variety of the artist’s life becomes something of a veil between the work and our aesthetic apprehensions of it” (5). Hemingway’s four marriages, his service as an ambulance driver during the Second World War, his job as a war correspondent, his love for hunting and fishing, safaris, bull fighting and his winning of Nobel Prize and his suicide, in short, his is a life lived in imitation of his own fiction. His life and effect of his work raised him to the status of a myth. Bloom contends that he has become an image of American heroism, or perhaps more ruefully the American illusion of heroism. The best of Hemingway’s work, the stories and *The Sun Also Rises* have also become a permanent part of the American mythology.

In his discussion of *A Farewell to Arms* he makes the point that it fails to sustain itself as a unified novel, though it is his strongest work: “It also participates in the aura of Hemingway’s mode of myth, embodying as it does not only Hemingway’s own romance with Europe but the permanent vestiges of our national romance with the Old World. The death of Catherine represents not the end of that affair, but its perpetual recurrence” (5). Bloom quotes the comment of Leslie Fiedler about Catherine’s death: “Only the dead woman becomes neither a bore nor a mother; and before Catherine can quite become either she must die, killed not by Hemingway of course, but by childbirth” (Intro. 5). Bloom discusses the ending of *A Farewell to Arms* and argues that it is a moving one where Catherine’s death is part of the tropological cosmos. He also praises Hemingway’s gift for portraying personal relationships.
The strength of Hemingway’s fiction lies in its ability to invest its energies in the representation of personal relationships. Hemingway worshipped physical strength, vitality and regarded the matador as messiah and values: “courage, dignity, the aesthetic exaltation of the moment, and an all but suicidal intensity of being – the sense of life gathered to a crowded perception and graciously open to the suddenness of extinction” (5).

Bloom claims that Hemingway has been influenced by the aesthetic impressionism of Pater who recognized the rude, crude, naked force in men and women. As Bloom maintains:

The hero of *A Farewell* Frederick Henry experiences a loss of vividness and intensity experienced by the senses. In the aura of his love for Catherine, Frederic Henry knows the beauty of nature – smell of the dew on the roofs, and the aroma of the coffee being enjoyed by the anti-craft gunners. We are reminded that Pater’s crucial literary ancestors were the unacknowledged Ruskin and the hedonistic visionary Keats, the Keats of the ‘Ode to Melancholy’.

Bloom claims that Hemingway is an heir of Keats, particularly in *A Farewell to Arms*, with the poet’s passion for sensuous immediacy, in all of its ultimate implications.

While discussing the singular achievement of Hemingway Bloom refers to his great style and unique sensibility, but admits that the novelist was not a
major speculative intellect, an original moralist, a master of narrative or gifted in the representation of characters. Bloom’s analysis of *The Sun Also Rises* centers around Hemingway’s use of metaphors, his style and his rhetorical stance. He remarks that Hemingway used metaphors to portray reality. His is an art of evocation which he presents by parataxis. Bloom claims that “The stance of Marlow in *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* is the closest analogue to Hemingway’s own rhetorical stance in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*.

Bloom has no hesitation to praise the fiction of Carson McCullers as it exquisitely portrays Eros. She is a fictioneer who is out and out human. “Nothing human is alien to me” the words of Terence form her aesthetic credo and the program for her “limited yet astonishingly intense art of fiction” (Intro. 1). Love is the major theme of her fiction. Her fiction “risked that perpetual crisis of Eros of which D.H. Lawrence was the poet and Freud the theoretician” (1). Bloom points out that her first and best book is *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter* and its heroine Mick Kelley is her achievement. In representing a personality her predecessors are Faulkner, Eugene O’Neill and Flaubert. Bloom judges her artistic achievement and observes “Few writers have expressed so vibrantly, and economically, a universal yearning for love, and simultaneously acknowledged the reality that such yearning almost inevitably wanes into the morasses of What Freud called the ‘erotic illusion’” (5). McCullers, has an ability to ascribe aesthetic dignity upon even the most grotesque of our own
desires and our ongoing illusions. Bloom offers a brilliant interpretation of Nathaniel West’s novel Mrs. Lonely Hearts, claiming that it is another displaced version of the Miltonic Romantic crisis poem. The central character in the novel Shrike is a very American Satan. Its precursor works are Milton’s *Paradise Regained* and Wordsworth’s the *Borderers* and Blake’s *Milton*. Bloom argues that West’s character Shrike is a far more resourceful and subtle tempter than Milton’s Satan portrayed in *Paradise Regained*. Shrike is a demonic rhetorician and his techniques and motives are similar to those of Satan.

Bloom has edited two volumes of critical essays on Zora Neale Hurston, and she is the first Afro-American writer included in the Chelsea series. He is fascinated by his most accomplished and acclaimed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Most of the critics in the collection entitled *Modern Critical Views: Zora Neale Hurston* concentrate on her personality and biographical details. Feminist critics and writers have stressed social and political issues which have received little attention. Her novel *Their Eyes* has been acclaimed by a number of critics, especially its narrative technique and the essays included here are sophisticated and highly original scholarship.

Bloom despises the attitude of critics who praise her novel for extraliterary concerns: “Extraliterary factors have entered into the process of even secular canonization from Hellenistic Alexandria into the High Modernist Era of Eliot and Pound, so that it need not much dismay us if contemporary
work by women and by minority writers becomes esteemed on grounds other than aesthetic” (1). Feminists take serious objection to Bloom’s prioritizing aestheticism which they feel conceal his sexism and ethnocentrism. Bloom claims that Hurston is a genius who is free from economic and social concerns. Hurston herself was refreshingly free of all the ideologies that currently obscure the reception of her best book. Her sense of power has nothing in common with politics of any persuasion, with contemporary modes of feminism, or even with those questers who search for a black esthetic. As a vitalist, she was “of the line of the Wife of Bath and Sir John Falstaff [...]. Like them, she was outrageous, heroically larger than life, witty in herself and the cause of wit in others” (4). Hurston has exercised a considerable influence on younger generation of black women writers especially Alice Walker.

Bloom remarks that Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man is an American classic. It will be judged as the principal work of American fiction between Faulkner’s major phase and Gravity’s Rainbow by Pynchon. Rejecting R.W.B. Lewis’s contention that Invisible Man is an apocalyptic work, Bloom argues that Ellison gave us a Book of Jonah in descent from Moby-Dick: Ellison’s novel is the narrator’s book, and not the book of Rinehart or of Ras the Exhorter, and the narrator goes underground only as Jonah does, to come up again, in order to live as a narrator. Like Jonah, like the Ancient Mariner of Coleridge, like Melville’s Ishmael, and even like Job, the narrator escapes apocalypse and returns to tell us his story” (Intro. 1).
When we first meet the narrator in *Invisible Man* he is leading an underground existence and he speaks of the Invisible Man’s struggle against Monopolated Light and Power which is revealed in the following speech:

That is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light and Power.
The deeper reason, I mean: It allows me to feel my vital aliveness [...]. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin. Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a ‘thinker-tinker.’

(qtd. in Intro. 2)

Bloom suggests that the antinomies between which Ellison’s narrator moves are Rinehart and Ras the Exhorter. The first is more an image than a man and the second is very much a man, a poignant figure and is the most sympathetic personality in the novel. Ras becomes Ras the Destroyer, at once Ahab and Moby Dick. He is silenced by his spear, slung back at him by the narrator, and Ishmael turned avenger in self defense. But Ras is no Ahab, though he suffers Ahab’s fate and he represents an uncanny prophecy to blacks and whites alike. Cliftan remarks that “it’s on the inside that Ras is strong. On the inside he’s dangerous” (3). Ras gives expression to the dangerous eloquence of justified indignation and despair. Ras struck his things with his fists:

Me crazy, mahn? You call me crazy? Look at you two and look at me—is this sanity? Standing here in three shades of blackness!

Three black men fighting in the street because of the white
enslaver? Is that sanity? Is that consciousness, scientific understanding? (qtd. in Intro. 3)

Bloom argues that Ras is imagination ruined by apocalyptic expansiveness. Rinehart represents chaos, but chaos verging upon an entropy that negates any new origin out of which a fresh creation might come. Bloom finds the narrator representative of Emersonianism and argues that he is the only authentic American, because he follows the American Religion, which is Emersonian self-reliance. He insists upon himself, refused to go on “imitating his false fathers and evades both Rinehart and Ras. True, he is the Emersonian driven underground, but he will emerge more Emersonian than ever, insisting that he has become representative man” (5).

Sinclair Lewis is almost forgotten or ignored and critical interest in him has declined: “Essentially a satirist with a camera-eye, Lewis was a master neither of narrative nor of characterization” (1). Bloom singles out his novel *Arrowsmith* for detailed examination. A morality tale, with a medical research scientist as hero, *Arrowsmith* has enough mythic force to compel a young reader to an idealism of her or his own. Critics have found in *Arrowsmith* Lewis’s version of the idealism of Emerson and Thoreau, pitched lower in Lewis, who had no transcendental yearnings. Bloom observes that “The native strain in our literature that emanated out from Emerson into Whitman and Thoreau appears also in *Arrowsmith*, and helps account for the novel’s continued relevance as American myth” (1 – 2). Bloom speaks of its failings
and the first is that Arrowsmith is not and a typical American not a persuasive representation of a person. No character in the novel is a convincing mimesis of actuality, and Lewis’s strength, lies in his satiric caricature. Arrowsmith is too eccentric a work to be judged a period piece and Bloom maintains that “It is a romance, with allegorical overtones, but a romance in which everything is literalized, a romance of science, as it were, rather than a science fiction.” (3)

Bloom is not all praise for the writers that he discusses for instance he observes that Thomas Wolfe’s works have no literary merit nor is the writer a great literary talent. But he views him as “a very full chronicler of the cultural and social sorrows of that bad American decade, 1928 – 1938, a passionate beholder of America in trouble” (Intro. 1). He also possessed a human value in understanding his era and had an intense love for his region.

Bloom endorses the general evaluation of Wright as a universally acknowledged starting point for black literature in contemporary America. Canonical critics of Wright speak of him as a pioneer, a man of rare courage, as a teacher and forerunner:

I myself would praise him for will, force, and drive, human attributes that he carried just over the border of aesthetic achievement, without alas getting very far once he had crossed over. His importance “transcends the concerns of a strictly literary criticism and reminds the critic of the claims of history, society, political economy and the longer records of oppression and injustice that history continues to scant. (Intro. 2, Native Son)
Bloom contends that the hero of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, has become a myth without first having been a convincing representation of human character and personality. He admits that reading *Native Son* is an experience of renewing the dialectical awareness of history and society, but is not in “itself an aesthetic experience” (3). He views *Black Boy* as a far more political work than *Native Son* and what survives best in *Black Boy* is Wright’s gentle account of his human rebirth as a writer. The novel *Black Boy* performs an ethical function for us by serving as a social testament.

Eudora Welty and Hemingway descend from Huckleberry Finn. All that Welty and Hemingway share as story tellers is Twaine’s example. Their obsessive American concern is Huck’s: “the freedom of a solitary joy, intimately allied to a superstitious fear of solitude” (1). Commenting on the dominant concern of Welty as a storyteller, Bloom writes: “The truth of Welty’s fictive cosmos, for all her preternatural gentleness is that love always does come first, and always does yield to an irreparable separateness. Her genius is for comedy and her comedy is a graceful defense against that cosmological emptiness” (2). Bloom singles out for praise two stories by Welty “The Burning” and “A Still Moment”. He claims that they are well written and fully composed as the best poems of Stevens or Crane or as the best stories of Faulkner and Hemingway. As he observes,

American writing in the twentieth century touches the sublime mode only in scattered instances, and always by reaching the
frontier where the phantasmagoric and the realism of violence, are separated only by ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds. Welty's high distinction is that in her the demarcations are as ghostly, the sounds as keen, as they are in her greatest narrative contemporaries, Faulkner and Hemingway. (Intro. 1)

Bloom represents Tom Wolfe as an essayist turned novelist and there is not much difference between his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and his book of essays. His gift is for the journalistic essay and he raised it to an aesthetic realm. His characters lack vitality but he can vividly portray social issues and concerns.

Updike is a stylist among contemporary novelists who is admired aesthetically by his religious yearnings. His religious beliefs and postures do not enhance the narrative voices of Updike nor do they add any authority to Updike's skill as a storyteller. Bloom observes that Updike is a representative novelist of his time, his place, his society. But his Rabbit novels do not sustain rereading and Bloom's favorite one is *The Witches of Eastwick*, which is a unique book where Updike's "religious polemic and his imagination of the natural otherness of particular human lives come into productive conflict" (Intro. 1). This conflict is pervasive in Rabbit novels and in *Couples* but it is obscured by heavy satire. *The Witches of Eastwick* is free from satire and Bloom discusses the three highly dangerous witches who are very human. Alexandra and Sukie are winsome and winning witches, Jane is malevolent.
Alexandra appeals to male readers whereas Sukie enchants female readers. Updike possesses a vividness but authentic exuberance or narrative gusto is not his strength. Bloom argues that what is new and unique in Updike is “his ability to extend an imaginative empathy to his three witches” (5).

Bloom remarks that Norman Mailer possesses immense imaginative energy. His proper métier is the mode of the fantastic and his most impressive book is *The Executioner’s Song* which is a realistic novel like Dreisier’s *American Tragedy*. He also praises Mailer’s *Ancient Evenings*. Bloom enjoys reading Saul Bellow’s novels, which provide him enormous pleasure, but Bellow does not make things difficult for his readers. His minor male characters have a Dickensian exuberance and his central protagonist is some version of himself and is invariably an absurd failure. Bloom claims that his narrative line lacks interest and Bellow is an immensely wasted talent. He finds Philip Roth an extraordinary talent who goes from strength to strength and Bloom describes his novel *Deception* as an extraordinary *tour de force* and Roth’s *The Counter Life* is an astonishing book. Roth’s *My Life as a Man* and *Portnoy's Complaint* are remarkable books and *Patrimony* is a real achievement, beautiful and immensely moving. Roth is a prose writer of great accomplishment and possesses tremendous narrative exuberance. Bloom argues that Roth is an “authentic comic novelist” and the “laughter he evokes is painful.” (Weiss 194) “Roth is the greatest sit-down and stand up comic I’ve heard in my entire life. He is outrageously funny almost painfully funny,
compulsively funny”. But Roth’s Sabbath’s Theater provoked a terribly defensive, laughter in him (65). Bloom opines that Nabakov is one of the great conic writers of this century and Pale Fire may be the most hilarious book by a modern American writer because he writes in the American language. The notes in Pale Fire, and this sort of psuedo-Frostian poem itself, must be the most high pitched successful humor, deliberately deadpan comic” (59).

Bloom claims that the most distinguished living writer of narrative fiction in America is Thomas Pynchon, but his book Vineland is a disaster, a piece of sheer ineptitude. Bloom praises Ted Mooney’s novel Traffic and Laughter and claims that the work has éclat and a lot of intensity. He thinks highly of Don Delillo and remarks that he is a superb inventor. He is the most amazingly inventive novelist who can really work out new forms, though he is right in the middle of the contemporary nightmares. He is an awfully hard novelist to evade. A remarkable writer, Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian, Suttree and Child of God are highly rated by Bloom who extols Blood Meridian. Bloom describes Meridian “a scary real nightmare of a book, which rings absolutely truthfully about the massacres constantly going on of Indians and everyone else on the American frontier in the nineteenth century” (25). Bloom objects to Toni Morrison’s political concerns, but thinks highly of Sula and The Bluest Eye, and Song of Solomon is “a great book” (25). He thinks that Miss Morrison in Beloved and even more in Jazz “has gone wrong. She’s taking
her political responsibilities, her social and communitarian responsibilities, very seriously, and I think they are producing [. . .] what am I to say? A sort of a strange mock up of Garcia Marquez which she hasn’t really got the power for” (25). Miss Plath and Miss Sexon had limited talents and he does not think they were ever able to discipline their hysteria into permanent expressiveness. He dismisses the poetry of Adienne Rich and his remarks on her will evoke strong feelings in her admirers. “I am aware that there’s now total massive support for Miss Rich on all fronts, I cannot help that. She is not a poet. I have nothing against her personally (25). “I’ve read Meridian twice and I could not believe what I was reading. Stanley Crouch [. . .] the best African American critic said it best: that white America is looking for its Aunt Jemima and finds it in Alice Walker” (25). Bloom denounces Alice Walker and describes her as the worst writer in America.

Bloom’s introductions to Chelsea Modern Critical Views and the series entitled Major Literary Characters are an ongoing project. More than four hundred volumes in these series have been published and they are not merely concerned with American literary texts but European masterpieces as well. Bloom’s introductions enlighten us about various aspects of the texts he discusses. His method here is to establish a writer’s relation to his literary predecessors and how he has succeeded in finding his place in literary canon. He also discusses the text’s relationships with other texts.
In his introductions on major characters he compares them with other literary creations of the same writer or others. Bloom's erudition is clearly demonstrated in these pieces and they also provide useful guides to students and general readers. What is revealed in these introductions is Bloom's active engagement with literary works and his fierce desire to canonize. These introductions will earn him a prominent and permanent place in the history of literary criticism.