INTRODUCTION

As Aristotle thinks literature is a reflection of life. It is an expression of our experience, and also an expression of our desires, faiths and failings. Of course, literature needs to be traded for the sake of reaching mankind. Therefore William Ralph Inge says, “Literature flourishes best when it is half a trade and half an art.”

Literature has many functions to perform. It may provide entertainment, which may be elevated and intellectual. The witty and celebrated plays of Bernard Shaw provide an entertainment, much different from Emerson’s essays, or Frost’s poetry. Literature may be used for escape or comic relief as Khuswant Sing’s jokes. Literature may be valued for its moral and spiritual values as in the case of Puritan literature in America. Literature is also meant for protest as in the case of African American literature.

The present thesis “American Slave Narratives with Reference to Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God*” is a study of African American literature with reference to Dunbar, Wright and Hurston.

African American literature is so vast and varied, expressing centuries of struggle, achievement, pain and triumph. Here the thesis begins with an introduction. Chapter-II makes a critical survey of African American literature for the ‘sake of appreciating the works of Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*, Wright’s *Native Son* and Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God*.

American literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales, lyrics of Indian cultures. American English literature began with the first English colonies in Virginia and New England. In the 17th century pirates, adventurers and explorers opened the way to a second wave of permanent colonists. The man
sometimes called the first American writer was Capt. John Smith (1580 -1631). John Winthrop (1588 1649), the Governor of Massachusetts wrote the early records about his life with the natives. Anne Bradstreet (1612- 1672) was the first American poet. Edward Taylor (1644- 1729), like all of New England’s first writers, was an intense poet. Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705) was the third New England colonial poet of note.

Samuel Sewall’s *The Diary and Selling of Joseph* (1700), which records the years 1674 to 1729, is the earliest anti-slavery pamphlet in America. Roger Williams (1603 -1683) was an intellectual and rationalist who lived with Indians in Rhode island. He was an early critic of colonialism. Williams believed in equality and democracy. John Woolman (1720-1772) was a Quaker and he is known for his *Journal* (1774). Woolman was also one of the first anti-slavery writers.

Pre-revolutionary southern literature was aristocratic and secular, reflecting the dominant social and economic systems of the southern plantations. William Byrd (1674- 1774) describes the gracious way of life at his plantation, Westover. Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa, 1745- 1797), an important early black writer emerged during the colonial period. Jupiter Hammon (1720-1800), the black American poet, a slave on Long Island, New York, is remembered for his religious poems.

The hard fought American Revolution against Britain (1775-1783) was the first modern war of liberation against a colonial power. This made the blacks aware of their emancipation gradually. Benjamin Quarles thinks, “The American Revolution brought some gains to Negroes. Those who had joined the Army upon the promise of freedom usually obtained it. Moreover, since the war had been fought in the same of liberty, many Americans were led to reflect seriously upon the impropriety of holding men in bondage. The feeling that slavery was inconsistent with the ideals of the war cropped up in many quarters, becoming manifest in the
In the years immediately after the war a number of abolitionist societies emerged. The Pennsylvania Society, first formed in 1775 at Philadelphia, was revived in April, 1784. Less than a year New York organized a society, with John Jay as president. New Jersey came next, and by the end of 1790 Delaware, Maryland, Connecticut, and Rhode Island had followed suit. Supplementing these state-wide organizations were numerous local societies.

They attempted to help the bondman by urging the abolition of the slave trade, foreign and domestic, and by the gradual abolition of slavery itself. In some instances they paid master to free a slave; in others they guaranteed a master that if the freed his slave, they would be legally responsible if he slave failed to support himself. The Pennsylvania abolitionists tried to strike at slavery by refusing to buy the products of slave labor. Among Methodists antislavery sentiment was deepened by John Wesley's castigation of human bondage.

The 18th century American Enlightenment movement was marked by an emphasis on rationality rather than tradition, scientific inquiry instead of unquestioning religious dogma, and representative government in place of monarchy. Enlightenment thinkers and writers were devoted to the ideals of justice, liberty, and equality as the natural rights of man. Benjamin Franklin embodied the Enlightenment ideal of humane rationality. Franklin recorded his early life in his famous Autobiography. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (1735-1813), another Enlightenment figure, whose Letters from an American Farmer (1782), gave Europeans a glowing idea of opportunities for peace, wealth, and pride in America. Thomas Paine was a great thinker.

A small group of writers described as Hartford Wits included Timothy Dwight, John Trumbull and others. Philip Freneau, incorporated the new stirrings of
European Romanticism. Nationalism inspired publications in many fields, leading to a new appreciation of things American. Noah Webster (1758-1843) devised an American Dictionary, as well as an important reader and speller for the schools. The first important fiction writers widely recognized today, Charles Brackden Brown, Washington Irving, and James Fenimore Cooper, used American subjects, historical perspectives and nostalgic tones. Given the hardship of life in early America, it is ironic that some of the best poetry of the period was written by an exceptional slave woman Phillis Wheatley (c.1753-1784).

The Romantic Movement, which originated in Germany but quickly spread to England, France, and beyond, reached America around the year 1820, some 20 years after Wordsworth and Coleridge had revolutionized English poetry. In America, as in Europe, fresh new vision electrified artistic and intellectual circles. Yet there was an important difference: Romanticism in America coincided with the period of national expansion and the discovery of a distinctive American voice. In his essay The Poet (1844), Emerson, perhaps the most influential writer of the Romantic era asserts: “For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.” The Romantic spirit seemed particularly suited to American democracy. Certainly the new England Transcendentalists Emerson, Thoreau, and their associates were inspired to a new optimistic affirmation. The so called Boston Brahmins Longfellow, Lowell and Holmes may be added to the list. Emily Dickinson is, in a sense, a link between her era and the literary sensitivities of the turn of the century. Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe shaped heroic figures larger than life, burning with mythic significance. American women endured many inequalities in the 19th century. Through letters, personal friendships, formal meetings, women’s newspapers, and books, women furthered social change. Intellectual women drew parallels between themselves and
slaves. Abolitionist Lydia Child (1802-1880) was a leader of this network. Angelina Grimke (1805-1879) and Sarah Grimke (1792-1873) defended the rights of blacks and women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) abolitionist and women’s rights activist with Lucretia Mott, organized the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention for Women’s rights. Sojourner Truth (c.1797-1883) epitomized the endurance and charisma of this extraordinary group of women. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s (1811-1896) *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was the most popular American book of the 19th century.

Born a slave in North Carolina, Harriet Jacobs (1818-1896) wrote her autobiography. Harriet Wilson (1807-1896) was the first African-American to publish a novel in the United States. The most famous black American anti-slavery leader and orator of the era, Frederick Douglass, was born a slave on a Maryland plantation. Douglass was helped by abolitionist editor William Garrison and began to lecture for anti-slavery societies. In 1845 he published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. It is said, “*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), the gripping slave narrative that helped change the course of American history, reveals the true nature of the black experience in slavery.” The slave narrative was the first black literary prose genre in the United States. It helped blacks in the difficult task of establishing an African American identity in white America, and it has continued to exert an important influence on black fictional techniques and themes throughout the 20th century.

The U.S. Civil War (1861-1865) between the industrial North and the agricultural, slave owning South was a watershed in American history.

From 1860 to 1914, the United States was transformed from a small, young, agricultural ex-colony to a huge, modern, industrial nation. The 19th century American historian Henry Adams constructed an elaborate theory of history involving the idea of the dynamo, or machine force, and entropy, or decay of force.
The great tradition of American investigative journalism had its beginning in this period, during which national magazines such as McClure’s and Collier’s published many thought-provoking books. Muckraking novels used eye-catching journalistic techniques.

The literary achievement of African Americans was one of the most striking literary developments of the post-Civil War era. In the writings of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and others, the roots of black American writing took hold notably in the forms of autobiography, protest literature, sermons, poetry and song.

Many historians have characterized the period between the two world wars as the United States traumatic ‘coming of age.’ John Dos Passos expressed America’s postwar disillusionment in the novel *Three Soldiers* (1921). Western youths were rebelling, angry and disillusioned with the savage war, the older generation they held responsible, and difficult postwar economic conditions that, ironically allowed Americans like writers F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound to live abroad handsomely on very little money. Intellectual currents, particularly Freudian psychology and to a lesser extent Marxism, implied a ‘godless’ worldview and contributed to the breakdown of traditional values.

World depression of the 1930s affected most of the population of the United States. The large cultural wave of modernism, which gradually emerged in Europe and the United States in the early years of the 20th century, expressed a sense of modern life through art as a sharp break from the past, as well as from Western civilization’s classical traditions.

During the 1920s, Harlem, the black community situated uptown in New York City, sparkled with passion and creativity. The sounds of its black American jazz swept the United States by storm and jazz. Musicians and writers became star beloveds across the United States and overseas. Among the rich variety of talent in
Harlem, many visions coexisted. Langston Hughes (1902-1967) is one of many talented poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Countee Cullen (1903-1946), a poet, a native of Harlem wrote accomplished rhymed poetry. Jean Toomer (1894-1967), envisioned an American identity that would transcend race. Richard Wright (1908-1960), was the first African American novelist to reach a general audience. His *Native Son* (1940), in which Bigger Thomas, an uneducated black youth, mistakenly kills his white employer’s daughter, gruesomely burns the body and murders his black girlfriend fearing she will betray him. Zora Neale Hurston (1903-1960), born in the small town of Eatonville, Florida, is known as one of the lights of the Harlem Renaissance. Her most important work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), is a moving, fresh depiction of a beautiful mulatto woman’s maturation and renewed happiness as she moves through three marriages. The novel vividly evokes the lives of African Americans working the land in the rural South.

The force behind Lowell’s mature achievement and much of contemporary poetry lies in the experimentation begun in the 1950s by a number of poets. Black Mountain School’s poets Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley wrote great amount of poetry. The work of the San Francisco School, which includes most West Coast poetry, owes much to Eastern philosophy. Unlike the Beat and San Francisco Poets, the poets of the New York School are not interested in overtly moral questions.

Women’s literature, like minority literature, first became aware of itself as a driving force in American life during the late 1960s. Distinguished women poets include Amy Clampitt, Rita Dove, Louise Gluck, Jorie Graham, Carolyn Kizer, Maxine Kumin, Denise Levertov, Audre Lorde, Gertrud Schnackenberg, May Swenson and Mona Van Duyn. The second half of the 20th century witnessed a renaissance in multiethnic literature.
Contemporary black Americans have produced many poems of great beauty. Amiri Baraka (1934-), the best known African-American poet, has written plays and taken an active role in politics. Maya Angelous's (1928-) writings have taken various literary forms. Another recently honored African-American poet is Rita Dove (1952-). Dove, a writer of fiction and drama as well, won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for *Thomas and Beulah*. Michael Harper (1938-) has similarly written poems revealing the complex lives of African Americans.

Native Americans, as well, have written fine poetry, most likely because a tradition of shamanistic song plays a vital role in their cultural heritage. Recent developments in Asian American literature have included an emphasis on the Pacific Rim studies and women’s writing. As in the first half of the 20th century, fiction in the second half reflects the characters of each decade. The late 1940s saw the aftermath of the World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. World War II offered prime material for many writers.

By the mid-1970s, an era of consolidation began. In literature, old currents remained, but the force behind pure experimentation dwindled. New novelists like John Gardner, John Irving, Paul Theroux, William Kennedy and Alice Walker came up.

Toni Morrison (1931-), African American novelist wrote excellent fiction. She treats the complex identities of black people in a universal manner. *Sula* (1973) describes the strong friendship of two women. It is said, “*Sula*, looks at destruction and devastation on several levels: individual, between friends and within a community.”5 Morrison paints African American women as unique, fully individual characters rather than as stereotypes. She is the first African American writer to get Nobel prize for literature.
The second chapter of the thesis is “Paul Laurence Dunbar’s The Sport of the Gods.” Dunbar is an important African American writer. He wrote both poetry and fiction. He was born to slaves in Dayton, Ohio in 1872 and grew up there. He began to write poetry quite early. His two early collections of poetry are Oak and Ivy (1893) and Majors and Minors (1895). William Dean Howells prefaced his third book of poetry Lyrics of Lowly Life (1896). This made Dunbar a national poet and he became a famous speaker.

Dunbar’s writings are in dialect and they depict Southern life. He records the troubled social climate of his times. His other poetry collections are Lyrics of the Hearthside (1899) and Lyrics of Love and Laughter (1905).

Paul Laurence Dunbar was also a novelist. He wrote four novels—The Uncalled (1898), The Love of Landry (1900), The Fanatics (1901) and The Sport of the Gods (1902).

Dunbar’s famous novel The Sport of the Gods is known for its poetic quality and then for its depiction of a hapless black family that moves from the South to New York. The novel is rather a tragedy in its nature. The story is full of lyrical lilt, easy reading and romance like descriptions.

Chapter-III is entitled as “Richard Wright’s Native Son.” Richard Wright (1908-1960) was a great African American writer. He was born near Natchez, Miss., on Sept. 4, 1908. During his childhood he suffered from poverty and parental neglect, and at the age of 15 he began to shift for himself in Memphis, Tenn. There he developed an interest in reading that awakened a desire to become a writer. After roaming about the country for a few years, he went to Chicago in 1934, began to identify himself with Communist activities, and found employment with the WPA Federal Writers’ Project, moving to New York in 1937. After World War II he lived in Paris, France, where he died in 1960.
Wright’s first book *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), depicts melodramatic, highly emotional scenes of violence and injustice arising from conflicts between whites and blacks in the South. A Guggenheim fellowship enabled him to complete a full-length novel *Native Son* (1940), which was universally acclaimed. In *Black Boy* (1945), a distinguished autobiographical novel about his own unhappy childhood and teenage years in the South, Wright reached the height of his literary powers. Later novels and short stories were less successful. *The Outsider* (1953) draws upon his experiences as a Communist before he denounced the party. *The Long Dream* (1958) deals with racial prejudice in the South. *Eight Men* (1961) is a collection of short stories. His nonfiction is that of a deeply subjective reporter: *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), a short illustrated history of the blacks; *Black Power* (1954), an account of his visit in 1953 to the Gold Coast (now Ghana); and *The Color Curtain* (1956), a report of the Asian-African conference at Bandung in 1955. *White Man, Listen!* (1957) is a book of lectures on the international race issue. Wright’s fame rests upon his championing of the black cause. His writing may be said to contain more anger than art, but despite some unevenness of style he sustained in his works a narrative power and disturbing emotional impact.

Wright’s novel *Native Son* narrates the story of 20 years old Bigger Thomas, an African American living in poverty. Bigger lives in Chicago’s south side ghetto in the 1930s. He gets into trouble as a youth but he gets the job of a driver in the white family of the Daltons. Then on, he gets an awareness about social conditions and identity. He drives the car for his boss’s daughter Mary and her lover Jan. Once he takes her for an outing. She drinks heavily. When he takes her home, he kills her by design. He runs from the police to a girl-friend’s house and she too criticizes him for his act of murder. He murders her also. He is caught. His communist lawyer Max tries to save him. It is said, “Wright gets inside the head of ‘brute Negro’ Bigger,
revealing his feelings, thoughts and point of view as he commits crimes and is confronted with racism, violence and debasement. The novel’s treatment of Bigger and his motivations conform to the conventions of literary naturalism.”

Wright’s novel *Native Son* is a powerful black narrative. The novel has three parts - Book One “Fear,” Book Two “Flight” and Book Three “Fate.” Many publishers have republished the narrative. Jonathan Cape’s edition of 1970 has an introduction “How ‘Bigger was Born” by Richard Wright himself. The book is aptly dedicated to Wright’s mother with the words’ “who, when I was a child at her knee, taught me to revere the fanciful and the imaginative.” In this introduction Wright reveals that an imaginative (creative) work is a reflection of one’s experience. He observes, “The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them.”

The fourth chapter of the thesis is “Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God.*” The chapter critically analyses Hurston’s black narrative *Their Eyes were Watching God.* As we know, Hurston was an important activist of the 1920 Harlem Renaissance. Hurston was born in 1891. She was raised in America’s first all-black incorporated town, Eatonville, Florida. Her father, John Hurston, was a former sharecropper who became a carpenter, preacher, and three-term mayor of Eatonville. Her mother, Lucy Hurston, died in 1904; two weeks after her death. Hurston had her education in Jacksonville. She did a variety of menial jobs. In 1917 she began studies at Morgan Academy in Baltimore and in 1918 attended Howard University. She later won a scholarship to Barnard College to study with the eminent anthropologist Franz Boas. Hurston worked as a secretary to the popular novelist Fannie Hurst. She is considered a major force in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. She collaborated on several plays with various writers, including *Mule Bone,* written with Langston Hughes. Boas arranged a fellowship for Hurston that allowed
her to travel throughout the South and collect folklore. The result was the publication of her first collection *Mules and Men* (1935). Her interest in anthropology took her to several Latin American countries, including Jamaica, Haiti, and Honduras. Her travel experiences appear in her second book *Tell My Horse* (1938). Then she wrote many more books of fiction and non-fiction. Hurston’s first novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934), is loosely based on the lives of her parents. Her best-known work, the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was written after a failed love affair. She wrote *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), an attempt to fuse biblical narrative and folk myth. *Dust Tracks on a Road* is her autobiography. Hurston’s other honors include Guggenheim Fellowships in 1936. She died on January 28, 1960, in Fort Pierce, Florida.

Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* begins with a description of the text as a figuration of male struggle: “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.” In a different, less metaphorical voice we confront Hurston’s answer to this voice, the construction of a female authorial and narrative voice. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* focuses on a middle class and middle-aged woman’s quest for fulfillment in an oppressive society. The novel depicts an African American woman’s struggle to assert herself in rural Florida in the early 20th century. The protagonist is Janie Crawford, granddaughter of Nanny Crawford, a maid to a white family. Janie is the product of two generations of racial and sexual violence. Nanny gave birth to Janie’s mother after being raped by her owner and Janie’s mother bore Janie after being raped by her schoolteacher. The novel opens when Nanny, who has kept Janie secluded to prevent more sexual violence, discovers her granddaughter kissing a boy over the fence. Nanny believes that she needs to find Janie a husband quickly. She
chooses a local farmer named Logan Killicks, and the two are married. However, Janie quickly becomes bored with Killicks and runs off with Joe Starks, a storekeeper in Eatonville, Florida. Joe Starks proves to be more complex than Killicks had been, but Janie soon realizes that he regards her as little more than window-dressing for his political ambitions. For about twenty years, Joe Starks dominates Eatonville. He isolates his wife, setting her above the rest of the village but also depriving her of her identity. Finally Janie asserts herself. Joe never recovers from this blow, and he dies soon after. Janie inherits the house and store, and begins living with Tea Cake Woods. For a time the two travel through southern Florida, working with migrant laborers. However, Woods is bitten by a dog and contracts rabies. As he sickens, he becomes both violent and paranoid, and he threatens Janie. Finally she is forced to shoot him to save herself. The novel is narrated by Janie after she returns to her home in Eatonville and tells her story to her best friend, Pheoby. The novel vividly evokes the lives of African Americans working the land in the rural South.

The thesis has a conclusion where the probings of each of the preceding chapters are summed up. There is a select bibliography.
Reference:
6. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.