33.9: Where is American Literature Today?- The Answer Might Surprise You

Since the dawn of the country, works been contributed to the vast group of texts considered American literature. From the works detailing the first colonial encounter all the way to poems hastily created within two-hundred and eighty characters on Twitter, all can fall under the umbrella. The multitude of works today were all influenced by their predecessors, earlier American texts. Often touching on early topics such as the colonial encounter, expansion, or slavery, these works make up the basis for what is deemed American literature today. American literature has undoubtedly changed and evolved a lot since then in its content, distribution, medium, and reaction. As we work to fit new molds into existing ideas of American literature, the very definition and notions held must be abolished if we are to be able to examine a new age of American literature.

“This is America” by Childish Gambino took the world by a storm when it was first released in May of 2018. It made a political commentary on a topic that people had been all too happy to sweep under the rug—racism in America. Gambino’s work was praised for being revolutionary and bringing to the forefront issues that have been mostly ignored since the civil rights movement. However, what Gambino was doing was not as new or revolutionary as the media reported it to be. Gambino had a long line of history that influenced multiple aspects in his music and video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY&w=560&h=315

“This is America” is loud and proud about its message. This song attempts to display the current climate surrounding race relations in America. Using many visual images from contemporary black history and contrasting them with earlier ones, the video is adamant about the fact that race relations today may not be much different from the time of early black advocates. Easily recognizable are the images of poverty, police brutality, and gang violence. However, these are contrasted by the much older images. A person riding by on a horse conjures images of the KKK. Gambino dons confederate army trousers through the entirety of the video. Gambino is seen striking an exaggerated pose before
shooting the guitarist in the beginning of the video. This is a reference to Jim Crow, the system for oppression used on slaves in the south. The scene at the end where Gambino is running terrified at the audience can easily be compared to enslaved people as they raced to freedom and the north. Gambino used his song as a call to action, to raise awareness for the state of black people living in America today.

Gambino utilizes a style that is raw and in-your-face. The video showcases multiple scenes that are violent and brutal; nothing is censored for the audience. Gambino puts on display death, murder, persecution, mass shootings, poverty, and supremacy to name just a few. They audience is expected to sit through four minutes of the authentic black experience in America. He utilizes complex scenes with most of the action taking place in the background. The bitter realities he attempts to show us are hidden behind his upbeat dancing. This parallels real life where issues that need to be addressed are often hidden behind “fluff” and entertainment.

So, what does a text like this have to do with the study of early American literature? This video connects strongly to many canonical texts in early American literature, specifically slave narratives. Gambino was doing with his music video what other activists have been doing since the dawn of slavery. Texts like Uncle Tom’s Cabin, The Heroic Slave, and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl all showcase the heart and message captured by Gambino in “This is America.” The Heroic Slave in particular shares an affinity with this song. Frederick Douglass, like Gambino, believes strongly in the cause to bring about change to the lives of black people. While he was advocating for the end to enslavement, Gambino calls to end black oppression, the modern-day slavery. “This is America” calls on images of slavery, the KKK and the running Gambino, to highlight to connection between the modern-day oppression of blacks and slavery. There is an interconnectedness to the two topics that Gambino did not ignore. Black people living in America today and slaves had a similar struggle, the context and means of the struggle is what has changed over the years. The authors of these early slave texts paved a path for Gambino to speak openly of his struggle today.

Undeniably different is the medium with which Gambino portrays his message from his predecessors. In the time of early American literature, texts had to be printed and distributed to their intended audiences. This took time and resources to make. These texts had to cost money because of the material and labor needed to make them, making them only available to people who could pay. Distribution is a key issue with this method for spreading information. Some people lived isolated on farms and received limited knowledge about what is happening in the real world; recent print material would be hard to come by for them. Additionally, many people were not literate at the time, even with access to the texts they would be unable to understand the message. The spread of knowledge, and conversation around these key texts, was also significantly different in the time or early American literature. Ideas were mostly spread through conversation. The types of insight gained through a conversation with someone is limited greatly to the people you are discussing with. The knowledge people have on the topic and their own personal opinions drastically change the trajectory of their interpretations and impact of the message. This differs drastically when compared to today. Today people primarily consume media through the internet. Modern texts can be found for free and can be watched infinite amount of times. While mediums like a high production music video like “This is America,” still takes time and money to make, it can be shared instantly to a widespread audience. The way in which people convey their messages has also changed profoundly. Today people are much more likely to opt for a song, video, or social media post. These are far more accessible to all people and lead to them being more widely appreciated. Conversations surrounding a piece have changed drastically as well, gone are the days a few people in a room constituted a sound dialogue for a text. Today texts can be talked about between a diverse range of people. The news might pick up a story and spread it. Conversations sparked on social media proliferates the message and sparks conversation between a widespread group
of people. This contributes to a stronger overall understanding of a text.

Modern technologies undeniably make a text more accessible and allow for a more widespread conversation sparked by a multitude of viewpoints to increase understanding. These new ways of portraying a message can also contribute to a sounder method for delivery. There are things that can be portrayed in a video that simply cannot be brought through in a written text. For instance, "This is America" creates a chaotic message through intense visuals. How could all of this be effectively portrayed through writing alone? Social media allows for more interaction with a text across demographic, geographic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, people can get closer to what the text actually means. With the accessibility of technology, a text can actually reach its intended audience. This contributes to an increased power to spark change compared to print media which is timely and hard to circulate.

The modern era has brought about big changes in the study of literature. People today are less likely to pick up canonical works outside of an educational environment. This contributes to a decrease in the overall readings of these pieces. Although people may have a better understanding for the ones that they do read. People spend a lot more time consuming digital media. However, are the works we consume today really disconnected from early American literature? Early American literature gave us the framework for many topics, subjects, stylistic element, grammar and modern struggles currently written about. When people do pick up a text today, they are more likely to read it on a device. This changes significantly how we interact with a text. Technology makes it a lot easier to share our ideas on what we read, watch, hear or see. The study of literature is no longer a solitary pursuit but a collaborative one. Programs like hypothes.is turn the reading on a text into a collaborative venture with people from across the globe. Collaboration contributes to a better overall understanding and interest in a subject. Open anthologies bring the study and conversations surrounding literature into an accessible, easy to use format. The internet in general serves us a place where information can be complied in vast quantities. Thus, allowing access to works that have not entered the canon.

The residual impact of early American literature is all around us in nearly all media we consume. It has infiltrated every area of our society. While the method for consuming these age-old messages has changed the desire for people to speak out on injustices and record the important events they see happening around them has not. Childish Gambino found a way to capitalize on the past and created the powerfully political work “This is America.”