

# How World War II Shaped the Art and Literature?

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## Özet

İkinci Dünya Savaşı, kültürel alanda etkili olmasının yanı sıra özellikle sanat ve edebiyat alanında büyük değişimlerin yaşanmasına neden olmuştur. Bu çalışmada, II. Dünya Savaşı'nın sanat alanında Birinci ve İkinci Kuşak Soyut Dışavurumculuk; edebiyat alanında ise *Madde-22* romanı üzerindeki temel etkileri incelenmektedir. İlk bölüm, resimlerin üretildiği ve romanın yazıldığı dönem olan İkinci Dünya Savaşının tarihi alt yapısı hakkında bilgi verir ve çalışmanın yöntemini açığa kavuşturur. Daha sonraki bölümler ise, savaş döneminin tarihi altyapısı, kültürel yönleri, insan psikolojisi ve felsefi etkilerini, Birinci ve İkinci Kuşak Soyut Dışavurumculuk ve *Madde- 22* romanı üzerinde birleştirerek ele alır. Sonuç bölümü ise, makalenin amacını sunar ve savaşın etkilerini tekrardan göstererek onun sonuçlarını sanat eserleri ve *Madde-22* romanı üzerinde sunar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İkinci Dünya Savaşı, Karakter, Soyut Dışavurumculuk, Biçim, İçerik

## İkinci Dünya Savaşı Sanatı ve Edebiyatı Nasıl Şekillendirdi?

## Abstract

The Second World War led to major changes in the cultural field as well as being effective especially in the field of art and literature. In this study, the effects of World War II on art are handled by examining the First-and Second-Generation of Abstract Expressionism and also the impact of it is examined by focusing on the novel *Catch-22*. The first chapter gives information on the historical background of the World War-II period which the paintings were produced and the novel was written, and clarifies the aim and methodology of the study. The following chapters analyse the historical background, cultural aspects, human psychology, philosophical influences of the war by combining their impact on First and Second Generation of Abstract Expressionism and the novel *Catch-22*. The conclusion presents the aim of the article and depicts the impact of the war and its conclusions over the works of art and *Catch-22*.

**Keywords:** WWII, Character, Abstract Expressionism, Style, Theme

## I. Introduction

With the drop of atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nothing was the same anymore all over the world. As many countries were devastated enormously, America was, probably, the only nation to get profit from the war. From blue jeans, Coca-Cola, Mcdonalds to economical, political and cultural spheres, directly or indirectly, the world was under American influence. American supremacy was also valid and suitable for the artistic arena. Europe was under the

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dominancy of dictatorships and artists, intellectuals were not free to produce their works. Many artists and writers found salvation in flight to the United States. Thus, Paris lost its prominence and New York became the center of art. However, it was not only European artists who caused the rise of the art in America. Political, economical, cultural and philosophical developments within the nation were also forming the background of the artistic outputs. All of these developments shaped the works of artists and writers, and inspired them to create their distinctive styles. The artists called their artistic genre, generally, as “Abstract Expressionism” and divided it into many sections. First generation of Abstract Expressionism including sub-genres of Action Painting and Color-field painting was representing hardly-painted works which were carrying the traces of war heavily. Whereas, the follower of Second Generation, consisted of mostly women painters, reduced the traces of war in their works. The writers were another group that really felt the oppression of the war. Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* created a big sensation in the country in terms of reflecting the devastating effects of WWII on people. Additions to the effects of the Second World War, traces of the Korean War were the sensational elements that changed the direction of literature and Abstract Expressionism to a sharper point. Thus, it can be put forward that after the devastating end of the Second World War, historical events, cultural developments and philosophical influences, which affected the psychology of people, gave way to the birth of a new genre in art and shaped the content of the literature. First Generation of Abstract Expressionism, with the follower of second generation was the distinctive artistic innovations that shaped the painting; *Catch 22* was also the work which reflects the effects of WWII on characters, theme and style.

## **II. BIRTH OF AMERICAN ART: first generation of abstract expressionism**

The most obvious characteristic of American painting since 1944, the end of the Second World War can be considered as the trend toward abstraction, which causes the each artist to develop a highly personal and unique style of painting. When Paris fell into the Nazism in 1940, during the Second World War, the center of the global art was suddenly cut off from the rest of the world. Leading European artist, many of them surrealist, fled to America and New York became the international art capital. “The awareness of being at the center of the international art scene gave the American modernists a sense of confidence and encouraged them to stop imitating imported traditional genres of cubism, surrealism, fauvism and impressionism. They directed American painting into new methods of exploration” (Adams 213). They turned their vision and insights in an ambition for new values. They rejected the formalist approaches, which narrowed their interpretations in terms of style and content. They assimilated themselves from the traditions, avoid repeating exhausted ideas and looked for fresh directions.

The “zeitgeist” of the post-war era was, also, influential in the birth of pure American painting, Abstract Expressionism. The younger man in the army, who saw the great collections of Europe, associated themselves with the great arts of the old times. They wanted to develop a distinctive art aftermath. The horror, waste, and tragedy of war made it difficult to glorify man and his work, therefore; American painters wanted to depict disillusion and disbelief in traditional institutions. As the American painter Barnett Newman said:

Artists of that generation felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world devastated by a great depression and a fierce world war, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of painting that we were doing -flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing cello... This was our moral crisis in relation to what to paint. (Arnason 437)

Under the influence of Cold War paranoia and national McCarthyism hysteria, the artists faced a crisis in their works. In order not to be accused of being communists, they censored their paintings. Rather than creating concrete images, they leaned toward abstraction to reflect their messages to the masses. With the help of existentialism and sub-conscious theory of Freud, they sought to externalize their internal psychological reality via abstraction. Each artist wanted to form his own style by following his sub-conscious thoughts, ideas, feelings and motivations. The abstract expressionists left formal compositions and representation of real objects. They associated their own unique style with their individuality. They emphasized on instinctual elements and depicted the effects of the physical action of the painting on canvas. Each artists of the New York School were developing distinctive formal styles, vocabularies. For instance, as Mendelowitz says:

Jackson Pollock was forming his works by dripping paint on canvas, while Willem de Kooning was interlacking biomorphic forms. Mark Rothko invented his own signature motif of using two or more rectangular clouds of color in vertical canvas and Barnett Newman is recognized by his narrow vertical line or “zip” which transected broad fields of color. (548)

They painted their works freely; their abstractions were dictated by the natural movements of the hand, shapes of the brushes and texture of the paints. “Abstract Expressionist painters were the artists who risk spoiling a canvas to say something in their own way” (Seitz 155). They relied on their own particular experiences and visions, which they painted as directly as they could. They refused to set limits on the emotional content of their painting no matter how ambiguous, irrational and undecorative they are. They, also, rejected pictorial elements that resemble machine made works. Accurately forms that look as if they were drawn by the helps of mechanical devices such as ruler, and unpsychological colors were disregarded by the Abstract Expressionists.

In the genre of Abstract Expressionism, there is no single leading figure or pioner who painted what first. It is accepted that most significant qualities of artists’ work embody artistic identities that spring from individual’s efforts; yet there are also external factors that shape them. The Abstract Expressionists, infact, formed a loose community, meeting frequently in each others studios and homes, in certain restaurants, bars and galleries. They followed each others’ work closely and everybody knew who was painting what, why. However; they never created a consensus about how to paint. They, generally, agreed that past elements and styles were no longer valid and it was that they did not want to paint. Their distinctive styles shaped expansion of the American painting and caused the birth of two sub-tendencies of Abstract Expressionism: “action painting or gesturalism” and “color- field painting”.

### **A. Action Painting- Gesturalism**

Action Painting, one of the significant steams of Abstract Expressionism, is a product of the post-war period, in which psycho analysis and mechanical equipments were developing. The term action painting was coined by art critic Harold Rosenberg in 1952, in his article “The American Action Painters”. In this article, he mentioned that:

At a certain movement the canvas began to appear one American painter after another as an arena in which to act rather than a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or express an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. (129)

The nature of painting had shifted from a space for picturing things to an arena in which to act. "Action Painters" stress direct performance, so that the observer can respond to the movements whereby the painting was created. The medium and the tools that are used in the paintings have an important role since they facilitate, inhibit and to a degree, control the painting activity. Frequently, the action painters start out without guide or plans beyond their instincts. The painting develops from the painters' continued power to invent, improve and expand. When the painting is completed, it reflects the pure expression of the artist's creativity; reflection of his inner sight in a mixed, crazy like interactions of color, line, tone and action. As Sandler emphasized, "they believed that if, during the direct process of painting, they followed the dictates of their passions, the content would finally emerge" (93). Just as brush strokes are significant aspect of Gesture Paintings, painters developed characteristic methods of applying paint. They dripped, splattered, roled and threw paint on to their canvases; with the result that the final image reflects artist's activity in the creative process.

As a reaction to these unconventional methods of action painters, many people criticized and mocked their works. Norbert Lynton talked about those conditions with those words:

There were people who threw the paint on the canvas from a distance, rode bicycle on the fields of works; marked a bag of paint above the surface of canvas and blew up it immediately; rolled a bodily painted nude woman on the material; and used their children to drop paint on their work. (135)

However, despite all these reactions and criticisms, action painting became an admired artistic genre and was followed by many American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.

## **B. Colorfield Painting**

Another significant stream of Abstract Expressionism is the color-field painting. It refers to expansion of colors to a flat surface in contrast to the domination of lines in action painting. In order to maximize the visual impact or the immediacy of colors, the color-field painters including Mark Rothko, Bernard Newman, Clifford Still, found that they had to apply colors in large expanses to draw attention. They eliminated figuration and symbolism, simplified drawing and gesture and suppressed the contrast of light and dark colors in the paintings. They wanted to create a unified area where the chromatic intensity is equal. They asserted that "We favour the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shapes because it has the impact of the unambiguity. We wish to assert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth" (Arnason 446). Drawing was important to color-field painting. However, making so simple paintings was disadvantageous because any mistake in it was easily visible and would destroy the picture. The intentions of the color-field painters were visionary. They applied the color in an open area, which overwhelms the eye with immediacy; shocks the viewer. Simple, indefinite and large expanses produced an "effect of infinity" in the works of color-field painters. To intensify the sense of boundlessness they favoured closely valued colors, avoided a sharp transitions in drawing. Goldwater expressed his views about that situation "a simplification of technique and an omission of all detail, a deliberate suppression of nuance and overtone... (could lead to) a single, undifferentiated overwhelming emotional effect" (Sandler 153). The color-field painters carried this tendency to an extreme in the history of art. The leading member of this genre is Mark Rothko whose works can be examined from many aspects.

### III. The Second Generation Of Abstract Expressionism

With the successful arise of New York School, artists who developed distinctive styles through abstraction, New York became an important art center. From small towns and college campuses, young artists came to New York in the fifties to be near their new heroes, de Kooning and Pollock. As the leading figures of the First Generation of Abstract Expressionism were meeting frequently in the “Club”, an organization they founded in 1949, they invited the new artists to their round table discussions. The Club was male dominated; however, the wives of the artists, Lee Krasner, Elanie de Kooning and many other women, including Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell and Grace Hartigan were invited to attend. Thus, a Second Generation of Abstract Expressionism, dominated mostly by women, was ascending on the shoulders of the first. Basically influenced by the works of First Generation, these artists had different qualities. Since they were women, their works were lyrical and softer. They did not face with the brutality of the hot war as the male artists who had attended to the army and been to Europe. Thus, their works did not include a sense of angst and tragedy as the first group. They began to return to recognizable subject matters of landscape, figure and life, which are reflecting the hopeful, wishful and optimistic point of views. Their avant-garde paintings were showed at the art galleries of New York and like the First Generation, “they created cooperatives such as Jane Street, Tanager, Hansa and March to meet and discuss their art” (Rubinstein 279). Joan Mitchell was the one who primarily reflected the effects of the war on his painting.

### IV. Impact Of World War II On Literature

Apart from painting, the literature was another field that affected by the war itself. As Gray told “By the close of the Second World War, the mood had changed” (87). The U.S.A converted into the most influential nation on earth. Although other nations involved in the war invested billions to reconstruct their cities and their industry, American economy was increasing by leaps and bounds. As a consequence of those developments, war became the main subject matter in literature. As Rainer Puster expressed in his book “ It is not surprising that a war of such magnitude was very often represented in literature” (Puster 12). He also adds “In the United States alone (...) more than four hundred novels about the war published (between 1945 and 1973) (Puster 11). Some of these novels were related to adventures or propaganda; the novels did not try to give reader perspectives about life and war started to be in the focus of literary works. The use of abstract words lost their value in this new world, the writers tried to use a clear and basic language as Hemingway. Since the post-war authors noticed the existing values in literature, most of the audience thought there was a huge transformation in literature. As Jason and Graves mention in *Encyclopedia of American War*:

Post-war novels were neither formally nor thematically innovative nor did they have the wide and powerful effects on their audience that many novels about the previous war could achieve. There is some truth to this change, as the first generation of WWII authors did not feel an immediate need to look for new and adequate forms of literary discourse. (297)

Most of the writers were against the war. Instead of mentioning the war to the reader directly, they preferred to give clues, use words which remind the reader war and thus they made them realize that there was a war outside. Ellen Fitzgerald points about that in the book of *Literature at War* “On

the whole (...) the novelist of the Second World War rebelled against the war in much more limited ways than their predecessors had against the First World War (...) (Puster 12). Post-war writers dealt with every piece of problem in life. "The absurdity of every day life has had a deep impact on the narratives. This absurdity is believed to create the concept called "mass society" (Puster 40). As it is mentioned in the previous lines of the study, the "mass society" is one of the terms that occurred in post-war era and became the subject matter of the novels. It was the period that people began to buy more than they needed, which gave way to the emergence of consumer culture and mass culture. "Mass society" was first used by American social and literary critique Irving Howe in his article called "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction" Howe explains the term "mass society":

A relatively comfortable society, half welfare and half garrison society in which the population grows passive, indifferent and atomized; in which traditional loyalties, ties and associations became lax or dissolve entirely in which coherent publics based on definite interests and opinions gradually fall apart; and in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass-produced like the products, diversions and values that he absorbs. (Howe 1992:24)

Howe also clarifies how American writers reflect the individual and mass society as follows "They preferred to reflect American life not through realistic portraiture but through fable, picaresque, prophecy and nostalgia (Howe 26). As a result of WWII, post-war writers (post-modern writers) had difficulty in comprehending the reality, time and the changing values. Thus, they produced works where there is no limitation on time, place and characters. Ronald Sukenick in his novel *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* points out that:

Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, and personality doesn't exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot, and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there is no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. (Sukenick 2003: 41)

The idea of "loss of faith" changed the fact that reality is a relative and questionable subject. Furthermore, what people perceive as "real" is radically shaped, exaggerated or filtered by the works of literature. As a result, loss of distinction occurred between the real and the imagination. Thus, "The real can be reproduced an indefinite number of times" (Elliott 2000:2). Second World War also affected the style of literature and fragmentation of time, structure and character became as an influential device in the literary works. Writers started to use it in order to unify the non-linear narrative. According to Peter Barry:

"Fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. In other words, the modernist (pre-war writer) laments fragmentation while the postmodernist (post-war writer) celebrates it". (84)

Crucial historical events, shaping the American history such as World War II, The Vietnam war and the Cold War period were criticized in both alternative contexts and forms. War also led to the use of forms such as parody, pastiche, and burlesque in literature.

#### A. *CATCH-22* by JOSEPH HELLER

*Catch 22*, which was written by Joseph Heller in 1961, is a fictional novel that reveals the perversions of the human character and society. It also addresses to the different tastes of people. As Bloom puts forward:

*Catch-22* obviously appeals to the student who beneath his complacency and hipster frigidity is very confused and afraid. It appeals to the sophisticated Professional the educator, lawyer, professor-who must work at something he cannot fully trust. It appeals to the businessman who does not really believe that his empire primarily serves the public good. It certainly appeals to all the new professionals- the advertisers, publicity men, television writers-whose world is little different from the absurd one Heller presents. (22)

It also portrays the feeling of the counter culture in America. Heller satirizes war and its values as well as using the war setting to satirize society at large in *Catch-22*. The reader can also come across with the events such as the Korean and Vietnamese Wars in the novel.

Although it is considered as one of the signature novels of the 1945s, Robert Merrill puts forward that “*Catch-22* is a novel which tells the issues of 1960s and 1970s” (Merrill 43). However, when the novel is closely read, the effects of the Second World War over people can be seen easily. He also depicts the effects of the war over people with the usage of different characters. Furthermore, Heller uses implications about the real reason of the war and wants the reader to see that WWII broke out, because of the competition between capitalism and communism. Bloom explains the reason of giving this title to this book like these:

*Catch-22* is the unwritten law which empowers the authorities to revoke your rights whenever suits their cruel whims; it is, in short, the principle of absolute evil in malevolent, mechanical and incompetent world. Because of *Catch- 22*, justice is mocked, the innocent are victimized. (4)

The Nation, which is a weekly magazine in the United States, also summarizes the book with those words “Below its hilarity, so wild that it hurts *Catch-22* is the strongest repudiation of our civilization in fiction to come out of World War II. (Bailyn, 69)

## V. Conclusion

In conclusion, American art experienced enormous changes throughout the history. Until the 1940s, it was under the pressure of European styles. However, the Second World War changed the balances and caused the birssth of a pure American art, Abstract Expressionism which is away from old traditional genres. Influenced by the “zeitgeist” of the American society, their sub-conscious feelings, social experiences, psychological conditions, each artist developed their distinguished styles. To reflect the effects of war and criticize it, they followed different methods of applying paint. First Generation of Abstract Expressionists including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman used either thick layers of paint, broad fields of color or straight lines to form their works. Their paintings were carrying hard brush strokes since they felt the effects of the war more intensely in the forties. On the other hand, the Second Generation artists, Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler reflected the after math atmosphere with their softer lines, symbolic usage of colors, and shapes. Sub-conscious feelings, existentialist philosophy, alienation, distortion, escape of reality, dehumanization, loss of sense of faith, reaction, absurdity and ambiguity were the main subjects of all these already mentioned artists of Abstract Expressionism.

Toward the end of 1950s, American art of Abstract Expressionism began to lose its effectiveness. Thereafter, the literature started to reflect the effects of WWII with its content, style and characters. Every piece of literature, especially novel, put the war on the centre of their work.



There was a belief among people “For everybody after Pearl Harbour, it was a war we wanted to fight- a war we knew we had to win” (Gregson 11). While this strong belief was dominating the country, it was inevitable for the writers to mention about war. Heller supported this point of view by those words “the war is a perfect objective correlative, as it was for Hemingway in a Farewell to Arms” (Bloom 88). They tried to remind the reader that there was a war outside. They preferred to depict life through fable, picaresque, prophecy and nostalgia.

Most of the novels mention about some of the terms which gain importance after WWII. Individualism, mass society, capitalism, dehumanization, fragmentation in time, language and events, broken reality or distorted reality were some of the concepts that really changed the structure of all works of literature. In this study, Joseph Heller’s novel *Catch-22* was handled and Yossarian was chosen as the protagonist of the novel. He was one of the characters or representative of the post-war era who rejected the social norms, and tried to stay alive for the sake of him. Heller depicted him different than the conservative society of the 1950s. Shortly, he was the man who tried to create his destiny by denying the existence of God and religion. He could not dare to be one of the “mass societies”. Heller tells about that “Yossarian was willing to be the victim of anything but circumstance” (Heller 4). As well as individualism, capitalism also gained importance with the WWII. Since post-war caused the American nation develop their industrialization, the competition among the factory owners increased. The competition was defined by famous critics like “survival of the fittest”. Each factory started to present more attractive advertisements to sell their products. Heller reflected this capitalist side of the period via Milo. He was the one who marketed his products with more profit. While the individualism and capitalism were gaining importance in the country, their effects over people were negative. They caused to the birth of a new term named “dehumanization”. Most of the writers chose characters that have the characteristics of dehumanization. The soldiers in *Catch-22* are an example for this situation. They were reflected like animals or machines. In some of the chapters, Heller resembles characters to “bird, rat or snake”. Shortly, he assumes them as the “deadly creatures”. Lastly, post-war writers use fragmentation in their works. Since they believe the society or character live in a troublesome era, they could not belong to anywhere. Thus, Heller uses fragmented language, time and events to show this disconnection of these characters. In conclusion, not only the painters but also the authors of the period could not stay impotent to the destructive and negative effects of the war and reflected them to their works.

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