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Sadie Pendaz
Grand Valley State University

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Images of African Americans in Contemporary American Novels: 
A Sociological Study

Sadie Pendaz  
McNair Scholar

Donald Williams, Ph.D.  
Faculty Mentor

ABSTRACT
In this study we examined nine novels from three time periods: the 1930s, the 1960s and the 1990s. We looked at two best-selling novels and one novel by an African American from each time period. We examined how African Americans were portrayed in these novels. From the content analysis of the novel, A Time to Kill, we developed eight themes with which to examine the other nine novels. Then we undertook a content analysis of each of the nine novels individually. Lastly, we looked at the interrelationships between the nine novels over the three time periods by breaking them down across our eight established themes. We also compared them based upon who authored the novels, the “mainstream” best-selling novels versus the African American novels.

Introduction
Every author is inescapably immersed within a specific social and historical framework. As an individual, both physically and socially, an author is specific, but also exists within the forms of his/her time and place (Williams, 1997: 193). Authorship is a trade of creativity. However what each author endeavors to creatively produce is submerged in the forms of his/her time and place; it is produced and developed within the author's social structural context.

Sociology and literature are both intimately concerned with human social environments. Literature focuses on human adaptation and desire to change the social world (Swingewood, 1972: 12). Traditional sociologists of literature have utilized literature as a source for secondary historical analysis (Lowenthal, 1961: 143). Literature and sociology complement each other in formulating a more complete and comprehensive understanding of history and historical social climate. A study of literature over time will “indeed reflect changing mores and historical events” (Hackett, 1975: 109). A sociological study of literature hopes to narrow the bridge between the fictional world and the social world (Long, 1985: 17). With this backdrop, it follows that the sociology of literature can only enhance and broaden the sociological/historical construction of the time period or periods being studied.

In this paper, the focus is on American novels. The novel as a literary form gained its initial prominence in Victorian England. The novels, often written in serial form, were highly connected to their audiences. One must imagine these serial novels as something similar to today's tabloid journalism, though not quite as trashy. The economic success of such novels was highly dependent upon the whims of the readers. The content of such novels was therefore subject to a much higher degree of persuasion from readers. Since
the novels were in serial form, they were ever developing works. Readers had great influence on plot and character development. Audiences were composed primarily of the bourgeois middle class (Laurenson, 1972: 144). The novel's initial appeal was slow moving in the United States where a small and scattered literate reading public existed. Other factors contributing to the slow momentum in the development of the novel were poor transportation, absence of copyright laws and little or no patronage for authors. Publishers rarely ran the risk of financially supporting a publication venture; rather, the author him/herself fronted the money with the publisher serving solely as a distributor. These circumstances created the perfect conditions for journalism and magazine literature to dominate in the United States. However by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, propagated by the literature of authors such as Edgar Allen Poe and Herman Melville, literary activity in the form of the novel, found itself expanding in the United States (Laurenson, 1972: 161–2).

In contemporary America the novel has become “the major literary genre of industrial society” (Swingewood, 1972: 12). During the early twentieth century, American novels succumbed to mass production and mass culture. Contrary to popular belief, disconnected from the serial form of novel writing, mass production resulted in greater heterogeneity in authorship. This was further propelled by the introduction of cheap, one-volume novels (Laurenson, 1972: 144). Mass culture and mass production enhanced the phenomenon of the bestseller. Mass culture and the resultant availability and marketing of best-selling novels are embedded in a social and institutional context that requires attention (Long, 1985: 18). In this study we have selected best-selling novels as our focus for two reasons. The first is that, like all literature, best sellers should be taken as reflections of society and can be used as secondary analytical tools of history. The novels should therefore reflect certain historical events. Second, since the novels are “best sellers” it could be assumed that many people actually read them and therefore were inadvertently or directly affected by their content.

These best-selling novels are then products of the mass culture and mass production previously mentioned. Bernice Slote labels literature as “both a reflection and a force...literature embodies the writer's evaluation of his world, or illuminates its possibilities” (1964: vi). The argument being presented here is that an author simply cannot escape his/her societal influence. The societal “reflection” Slote cites is the focus of this study. By using best-selling literature, more accurate insights on the social climate of the time periods can be gained. There are two reasons why best-selling literature would seem to reflect with great lucidity the social climate of the time periods that the literature came from. First, best-selling literature, being mass produced and distributed, was and still is highly read by the public. Second, best-selling novels often represent “types” and styles of the time periods they are written in. For example, the 1930s (one of the time periods selected for study in this project) was the origin and initial breeding ground for the popularity of historical novels (Hackett, 1975: 113–4). The receptivity of readers enables novels of “type” or “formula” to become successful. A strong tendency during particular time periods for a specific “type” would undoubtedly indicate something about the social/historical environment of that time period. Similarly, the content of the novels from particular time periods reflects something about the social/historical climate of those time periods.

Two prior studies on similar topics have been an invaluable help in this project. The first is Elizabeth Long's The American Dream and the Popular Novel. The second is Ruth Miller Elson's Myths and Mores in American Best Sellers 1865-1965. Long asserts the benefits of examining the interrelationships between culture and novels over time. She argues that a study over time periods helps to draw conclusions that changes in best-selling literature correspond to changes in attitudes, beliefs and perceptions within the audience for those novels (1985: 19). In Elson's study she examines interrelationships over a one hundred-year time span in American history. In this study we have adapted this view. Our study is conducted over a sixty year time span, specifically utilizing three decades, the 1930s, 1960s and 1990s, from that span. Our hope is that by conducting the study over time we will be able to draw conclusions on what course the content of the novels is following. We hope to observe whether or not the novel contents are reflective of the historical circumstances and whether or not certain historical markers are reflected in the works.

In this paper, the aim is to examine the best-selling literature of three time periods: the 1930s, the 1960s and the 1990s to see if that literature reflects social/historical shifts over those time periods. To accomplish this aim, portrayals of African Americans in best-selling American novels from the three time periods have been examined. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s is the mid-marker and reflects the major historical/social shift. We have selected a time before the Civil Rights movement, during and after to observe whether “expected” shifts will be reflected in the novels of those times.

**Methods Used For Novel Selection**

The time periods of the 1930s, the 1960s and the 1990s were selected for several reasons. First, it was desired that
the time periods selected have equivalent time intervals between them. This aim was accomplished here with the time intervals of thirty years between each of the selected time periods. During the 1930s, the 1960s and the 1990s, the means of production and distribution of best-selling novels was fairly congruent. Essentially each of the best seller lists for these three time periods was compiled in the same manner (Hackett, 1975: 109). The readership and authorship of the mainstream novels during these three time periods remained fairly homogeneous. We must grant that authorship has changed in the novels authored by African Americans, yet this development can only enhance our analysis when we compare the best sellers authored by whites to those authored by blacks.

The 1930s offered several other historical factors that would seem to be reflected in literary works of the time period. The theories of Marxism and American Social Realism became fairly popular with large segments of the American population. Though these social ideals were often put to the wrong use, they nevertheless freed writers to expand socially and politically in their writings (Hart, 1963: 249–50; Laurenson, 1972: 163). Historical fiction was very popular during the 1930s. It became one of the “types” of best-selling literature spoken of earlier. Often, during the 1930s, the fiction was based in the Civil War/Reconstruction setting which allowed for ample material for analysis on portrayals of African Americans.

The 1960s fit nicely into the thirty year interval requirement but also offered much historically. The Civil Rights movement began in the mid-late 1950s but really gained its prominence in the 1960s. The climax of the Civil Rights movement came in 1964 with the Civil Rights Act. We have selected the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s as our benchmark historical marker in this study. The social climate of the 1960s was very tense, especially in reference to African Americans and race relations. The Civil Rights movement created much tension between races but also created more tolerance and understanding within American society for blacks, women and other minorities.

The 1990s were selected because, first, they fit into the thirty year interval. They were also selected because they are the present time period and conclusions about our present time and the changes over time are more viable if the most recent time periods are included. For the 1990s time period, we actually looked at novels from 1985–1997.

To begin selecting the novels, we first determined to read three novels from each time period. We decided to select two novels from each time period from the best seller lists and one novel from each time period by a popular African American author to examine comparisons between black and white authors. We also decided to look at only hardcover fiction novels.

The best-selling novels were selected using best-seller lists from two sources. For the 1960s and the 1990s we used the Bowker Annuals. The best-selling novel lists from the Bowker Annuals employ the lists from Publisher’s Weekly magazine. For the 1930s, we looked at Alice Payne Hackett’s 70 Years of Best Sellers. Hackett also used the Publisher’s Weekly magazine to compile her lists of bestsellers. The primary source for all the lists were from Publisher’s Weekly magazine and were therefore uniform.

For each decade we examined the top ten best-selling novels listed for every year. Information was gathered for as many novels as possible, which was about sixty-five to seventy-five percent of the total number of novels on the lists. To help eliminate bias and narrow down the selection, we decided that the novels would deal with one or both of two individual themes: Slavery and Reconstruction as one theme and for the second the novels had to deal with a court case or crime. For each time period we wanted each of the novels to deal with at least one of the themes. Once all the novels of these themes were selected from each time period it was simply a matter of randomly selecting two novels from each time period from the smaller samples.

To select the novels by African American authors we looked at two sources: 1). Good Reading: A Guide For Serious Readers, which had an extensive section on African American authors, and 2). America As Story: Historical Fiction for Middle School and Secondary Schools, which had a section for advanced readers on Civil War and Reconstruction novels. From there it was just a matter of eliminating novels that were not within the scope of selected themes and time periods. After this process we used random selection for the one book which was selected from each time period.

List of Novels Selected:

1930s: Gone With the Wind
by Margaret Mitchell
—Slavery theme

So Red the Rose
by Stark Young
—Slavery theme

Native Son
by Richard Wright
(African American)
—Court theme

1960s: To Kill a Mockingbird
by Harper Lee
—Court theme

The Confessions of Nat Turner
by William Styron
—Slavery/Court theme
Method Used For Novel Analysis
To formulate a method to analyze each individual novel we began by conducting what we labeled a “trial run.” In choosing the novel for this trial run we decided to use selection criteria that were similar to the criteria established for the original sampling of nine novels. We wanted it to be a best seller falling under one of our two selected themes. The novel which was selected for this trial run was John Grisham’s A Time to Kill, which fell under the court/crime theme. In reading this novel we did a detailed and intensive content analysis, recording every relevant detail to this study. From material gathered from this analysis, and with the help of Ruth Miller Elson’s criteria for her analysis of African American portrayals in her study, Myths and Mores in American Best Sellers 1865–1965 (1985: 103–13), we fleshed out several themes to look at in the nine novels of our study. There were eight total themes:

1. white institutions save the day;
2. importance of black institutions and black separation from white institutions;
3. violence—black on black, white on black, black on white and white on white;
4. leadership positions of blacks and whites;
5. historical factors and their place in the novels, including everything from the Ku Klux Klan to the Civil Rights Movement and Georgia Reconstruction;
6. language and dialect;
7. labels—how are the blacks in the novels labeled by themselves and others; for example, words such as “nigger” and “darky;”
8. capitalization of the names of races—many early authors did not capitalize the word “Negro.”

Results and Discussion
Our analysis is based upon the eight themes developed from our trial run, A Time to Kill. These themes were applied individually to each of our nine test novels. For each theme we have listed the general trends and illuminated these generalizations by listing specific examples from individual novels. At the end of each discussion of the individual themes, the specific differences between the mainstream, best-selling authors and the African American authors have been noted.

Theme 1: White Institutions Save the Day:
This theme is evident in the trial run novel, A Time to Kill. It appears when one of the main characters, Carl Lee, is able to be acquitted of the murder of two white men. This in itself is a drastic change from the novels of earlier time periods. However, what is still presented is that the white lawyer, Jake Brigance, is the one to move in and “save” Carl Lee from his uncertain fate. Even at the end of the novel the acquittal is finalized only because one juror asks the rest of the jury to envision the little raped girl, Carl Lee’s, as a little white girl with blond hair and blue eyes. The overall theme is that while blacks may have come a long way, it is still the omnipotent white community that has enabled them and continues to help them succeed. The mainstream novels from the 1930s both deal with slavery and Reconstruction. They place the African American as totally dependent upon the white community and happy to be so. The domestic servants in the two historical novels Gone With the Wind and So Red the Rose are presented as “the stereotypical mammy who loves and controls the white family” (Elson, 1985: 110). Field hands are rarely seen in these novels. When they are presented, they are shown as savages and animals. The blacks are often described as either being “friendly” (Young, 1934: 39), or “stupid” (Mitchell, 1936: 34). There are examples and references of these sorts throughout the two novels. Overall the blacks are seen in these novels as child-like and completely dependent upon whites for their survival. The whites speak with horrified apprehension when many newly emancipated blacks are elected to government positions. Gone With the Wind’s author Margaret Mitchell describes Georgia’s government during Reconstruction as a “darky legislature” and “darky government” (Mitchell, 1936: 750).

While the novels of the 1960s and 1990s shift away from the theme of black dependence on whites, they still emphasize white institutions as a prime source of help for many blacks. With each advance through the 1960s and then the 1990s, we see the blacks having more independence from white institutions. This is true even of the 1990s historical novel, Scarlett. Though author Alexandra Ripley tries to emulate the style of Mitchell, as well as the setting of the novel, she still allows her black characters more freedom. Some
blacks in the novel attempt to extort higher wages from Rhett Butler, they hold Emancipation Celebrations, and overall are seen in many more roles and scenarios independent from the white community. In *Gone With the Wind* the “independent” blacks were depicted as utterly unable to succeed in any functions separated from the white elite; Scarlett’s author clings to many former stereotypes while also allowing her blacks to achieve some success independent of whites.

Another example that is similar to our trial run novel is Harper Lee’s (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like Jake Brigance’s role in *A Time to Kill*, Atticus Finch defends a black man on trial. There are, however, many differences in circumstances between the two novels. In *To Kill a Mockingbird* the reader is led to believe that the black man being defended is not guilty of his accused crimes. In *A Time to Kill* the reader knows that Carl Lee is guilty. In Lee’s novel the only possible hope that Tom Robinson, the black man on trial, has, to be “saved” is from Atticus, his white lawyer. Both Atticus and Tom realize that their society more than likely will not allow Tom to go free, yet Atticus, as a white lawyer, brings some hope to the situation. Even between these two novels we can see a shift. In Lee’s 1960 novel Tom is not guilty, yet we realize that because he is accused he has no real hope. This contrasts with Grisham’s 1989 novel where Carl Lee is freed with the assistance of his white lawyer. Though his lawyer is white and jumps to his rescue, the acquittal would not have been possible without some shift in thought between the differing societies of the 1960s and the 1990s. So while we observe positive shifts in ideology during the three time periods, there is still, in the 1990s, some dependence upon white institutions and the assistance of whites.

African American author Richard Wright emphasizes the need to pull away from this dependence on white institutions. His novel *Native Son* is just as much a call for blacks to pull away as it is for whites to allow them to pull away. The other two novels by African Americans, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, show their characters living during Reconstruction. While the presence of white institutions is heavily felt and almost unavoidable in both novels, the black characters attempt to live their lives as separately as possible from dependence upon the white community.

**Theme 2: Importance of Black Institutions and Black Separation From White Institutions:**

For this section we have not focused on two sociologically important institutions: the family and the church. The novels themselves deal very little with these institutions. Instead, we have focused on institutions such as the NAACP. We have also focused upon the development and attempt to develop established groups both politically and socially in the overall black community.

Black institutions and organizations have established themselves with much prominence and power in *A Time to Kill*. For this theme, we looked at how the relative importance of black institutions develops and changes through the three time periods.

In the 1930s, all three novels, including Wright’s *Native Son*, place the average black person in a subservient position to whites (although *Native Son* does mention the existence of the NAACP). In the best sellers, as mentioned in the explanation of the previous theme, the emphasis is on black characters as slaves and almost entirely dependent upon whites for survival.

In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, Wright’s main character, also feels the overwhelming dominance of the white community. Bigger says that whites “own the world” (Wright, 1940: 23). Wright goes on to demonstrate that this total white dominance and lack of black organization ultimately leads to disaster for his main character. Bigger really has no possibility for success. Bigger’s inner struggle, as a result of the lack of pride and community for blacks, is ultimately more powerful than the outer struggle and opposition presented by whites. Deep down Bigger resents the fact that most of his fellow blacks are afraid and intimidated by the power and overall authority of the white population. This resentment and his own personal fear of whites at length destroys Bigger. Bigger is forced to retaliate in the most violent and merciless way: he murders a rich white woman. Wright presents his solution to the problems of many average black men, like Bigger Thomas, through the form of organizations, specifically the Communist Party. Wright was a communist at the time that he wrote this novel. The party believed in equality for all citizens, black and white, and worked actively to promote these ideals. Although the Communist Party was not a black institution, we see blacks struggle to find a rightful place among institutions.

In the 1960s best-selling novels we see more movement away from total dependence upon whites. However, this movement is limited and there has been relatively little empowerment for black institutions. In Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* there is still a strong inclination toward and dependence upon the white power structure and the white lawyer, Atticus. William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is interesting because he bases his fiction on an actual confession derived from the real Nat Turner after the Turner’s Rebellion, which was a slave uprising in 1831 in Southampton, Virginia. Styron himself labels this novel “less an ‘historical novel’ in conventional terms than a meditation on history” (Styron, 1967: 7). In this novel, Nat Turner develops his own sort of black institution despite the fact that
the overpowering institution is the oppressive force of slavery. Turner develops an almost cult-like following and domination of those who follow his religious guidance. The empowerment of Turner's solitary black institution penetrating the puissant institution of slavery is a further step in the development of the relative importance of black institutions.

In the popular 1990s novels an emphasis on the importance of black institutions was noted. In both of Grisham's novels black institutions appear with force and prominence. Mainly in the form of the NAACP, but also in Grisham's The Pelican Brief we see an array of black institutions including strong black leadership and religious organizations (Grisham, 1992: 2-4). Something interesting in these two novels is that along with the increase in importance granted to the black institutions comes a resistance through white institutions such as the Ku Klux Klan and other Aryan groups that resist black independence. In the 1991 novel Scarlett, while the setting is Reconstruction South, Ripley stresses the importance of black institutions. The prime example from her novel comes when the black workers hold an organized strike for higher wages at Rhett's plantation yard (Ripley, 1991: 257-62).

In the African American novels Jubilee and Beloved the settings are either slavery or Reconstruction. The main characters of both novels struggle to establish lives separate from the white multitudes. In Jubilee the character Randall Ware, a free black, attempts to establish himself in the newly formulating Post-Civil War black legislature. He is met with the same sort of resistance, only much stronger, as the black institutions of the 1990s best-selling novels. He is attacked and beaten by the Ku Klux Klan with the threat that more will follow if he persists in his activities. The African American authors face the reality of their times while also attempting to convey with as much force as possible their desire to free blacks from the dependence upon white institutions.

**Theme 3: Violence (Black on Black, White on Black, Black on White and White on White):**

The violence theme is complex, having four distinct elements. In the trial run novel we notice that violence is a prominent element with respect to racial interaction. The main action in A Time to Kill is violence. There is white on black violence with the initial rape of the young black girl by the two white men. Other white on black violence continues throughout the novel with the Klan actions against many key people involved in the trial. A supplementary element to the white violence in A Time to Kill is that white violators act out against anybody, black or white, associated with aiding in the black cause during the trial. Black on white violence is another outstanding component of A Time to Kill. Carl Lee Hailey, the main black character in A Time to Kill, seeks revenge by killing the two white men who raped his daughter. This is the type of action that would not have been acceptable in the earlier novels, particularly those from the 1930s.

In the mainstream novels from the 1930s the only violence given any attention is that of black against white. For instance, in Gone With the Wind the possibility of violence is only shown in a negative light when it comes from blacks and is directed at whites, especially women. When Scarlett is attacked by a black man it is viewed as the noble and appropriate course of action to send in the Klan to take care of the situation. This ultimately leads to the death of Scarlett's husband who, as a member of the Klan, helps in the attempt to kill her attacker. The violence perpetrated by the Klan is viewed in Gone With the Wind as not only a necessity but also as nobility.

Through the three time periods emphasis moves away from the extremes of Gone With the Wind and So Red the Rose. In these 1930s popular novels black violence against whites is shown to be completely unacceptable, while white violence against blacks is viewed as not only acceptable but often essential. In the 1960s popular novels we see the struggle for acceptance of black on white violence when it is necessary and a move away from acceptance of white on black violence. In the 1990s, especially in A Time to Kill, we begin to see a complete acceptance of necessary black on white violence and an intolerance for unnecessary white on black violence.

Incorporation of black author Richard Wright's novel Native Son will help us track some significant changes in the acceptance of black on white violence through to the 1990s. In this novel Wright's main character, Bigger Thomas, is guilty of murdering a white woman and his black girlfriend. In conventional terms both murders were unnecessary. If the reader looks beyond the conventionality of the reasoning, one can see some deeper, almost innate reasoning, the same sort of reasoning for Turner's Rebellion in The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967). The societies that both Thomas and Turner live in create so much instability in their lives and so much inner turmoil that they are driven to the extremes of violence to solve their problems. This is almost the same situation that exists for Carl Lee Hailey in Grisham's A Time to Kill.

In each of these three novels the main black characters see no way out of their positions but to use "unnecessary" violence against whites. The way they finally pay for their crimes demonstrates the fundamental shift in ideologies from the 1930s to the 1990s. In the 1930s, Bigger Thomas has no chance to be acquitted of his crimes. Thomas is given no choice in who defends him,
something which Hailey has much more control over. In the 1960s novels To Kill a Mockingbird and The Confessions of Nat Turner the main characters are put on trial for their crimes. In Styron's novel we know that Turner is guilty. We also know that Turner's Rebellion was a historical event. Turner, like Thomas, ultimately has no hope at being spared from death; however, the white author presents Turner to the audience as being undeserving of death. Harper Lee presents her black character Tom Robinson as being innocent of the crimes of which he is accused. In this novel there is some possibility for acquittal, however remote. Even the most remote chance for acquittal was non-existent in the 1940 novel Native Son. In To Kill a Mockingbird Robinson loses faith in the possibility that he will be set free and determines to take his own chances. Angry whites shoot him for trying to escape from jail. Those responsible for Robinson's death are not held accountable because the death was "necessary." The advancement in this novel comes with the presentation the author chooses. Harper Lee presents these circumstances as wrong and in need of change. Her character Atticus says to his son, "As you grow older, you'll see white men cheat black men every day of your life . . . wherever a white man does that to a black man, . . . that white man is trash" (Lee, 1961: 220).

Finally, in the 1990s we see the greatest level of acceptance of black violence. This is manifested mainly in A Time to Kill. As the title of the novel suggests, the author attempts to make the case that there exists an appropriate time to kill. Hailey is eventually acquitted of the murders. This time period (1990s) represents our observed turn around point in the interpretation of violence.

Theme 4: Leadership Positions of Blacks and Whites:
This theme develops by looking at the relative importance of leadership by both blacks and whites in A Time to Kill. In this novel, the local sheriff is a black man. The author writes that his victory, being elected the sheriff, is all the more grand because his county is seventy-four percent white. There are several other examples of blacks in "important" leadership positions in this work. The overall emphasis is still on white leaders and the black leaders are seen as having established themselves only with the endorsement of whites.

In the 1930s novels So Red the Rose and Gone With the Wind the slavery setting allows the blacks to hold practically no positions of leadership. In Gone With the Wind we see that there is a dichotomy amongst the various slaves. The position of slaves as house servants versus field hands is the only place where the blacks have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership. Simply put, the house slaves think they are better than the field hands. The house slaves of the large plantation owners also look down upon the small farm slaves and "poor white trash." In Gone With the Wind the slave character Jeems shows contempt for the slaves of poor white trash, "Huccome po' w'ite trash buy any niggers? Dey ain' never owned mo'n fo' at de mostes' " (Mitchell, 1936: 19). This is one example of many that appear in both Gone With the Wind and So Red the Rose. In African American authored Jubilee (1966), the main character, Vyry, becomes a house slave during the pre-Civil War portion of the novel. The feeling of superiority against other slaves is also apparent in this novel. Later in the novel Vyry develops a greater appreciation for all blacks.

In the 1960s and 1990s novels blacks are allowed leadership beyond the plantation. Styron's Nat Turner leads his band of black followers to the level of rebellion, Ripley's blacks hold a strike to squeeze higher wages from Rhett, and black characters in Grisham's The Pelican Brief are placed in the roles of police officers and government leaders. Again the significance is not always placed on the black leaders but on how ultimately the white community allows the blacks to become leaders.

The most interesting aspect of black leadership comes in the 1987 novel, Beloved. African American author Toni Morrison creates characters who strive to find identities within themselves as blacks. They are living in the shadows of their slave experience in Reconstruction times. Her main characters live in the northern community of Cincinnati, Ohio. They are former slaves simply attempting to establish themselves as self-sufficient free blacks. They realize the difficulty of doing this in their society. They also realize that the "educated" blacks have almost a more difficult time establishing themselves. "In addition to having to use their heads to get ahead, they had the weight of the whole race sitting there . . . White people believed that whatever their manners, under every dark skin was a jungle" (Morrison, 1987: 198). For African Americans it once seemed an almost no win situation for leadership possibilities. Even today when blacks are able to attain leadership in various situations, both in our literature and society as a whole, it is often dependent upon or in correlation with white leadership.

Theme 5: Historical Factors Evident:
In the novel A Time to Kill there are several particular historical factors whose presence would have not been possible in earlier novels. These include the timeframe of "after desegregation" (Grisham, 1989: 9), the Black Panthers (92), the NAACP (177, 231, 318, 320), Vietnam (223), and the Civil Rights movement (206–7). Our analysis of the remaining nine novels turns up similar results. Each novel from all three time periods contains specific historical references that correspond with the time and place of
the novel setting and the specific time and place during which the novel is written.

Alice Payne Hackett states, “The early years of this century were dominated by the historical novel” (1975: 109). Over half of the novels in our total study of nine are historical fiction. The historical novels stem from each of the three time periods. These six novels are the primary focus for this theme. These novels are Gone With the Wind, So Red the Rose, The Confessions of Nat Turner, Jubilee, Scarlett, and Beloved. Each of these novels deals in some way with slavery and Reconstruction. Each novel deals with basic facts about the Civil War and Reconstruction and becomes more specific in dealing with facts about the distinct region where the novel is set. For example, in So Red the Rose the setting is Natchez County in Mississippi. Author Stark Young brings in vivid detail about the county's history and political/social leadership.

Intriguing historical tidbits are also included in each novel. In each novel the hypocrisy of the North is mentioned. All but one of the six slavery related novels take place in the South, (the exception, Beloved, takes place in Cincinnati, Ohio) each mentions that many northerners, and the North itself, was hypocritical where slavery was concerned. In many of the novels this hypocrisy is demonstrated through a circumstance in which a northern character is more frightened or prejudiced against black characters than the leading white characters are. This situation occurs in both the white-authored and black-authored novels. In the black-authored novels, however, the characters are presented as realizing that all whites, northerners and southerners, cannot be trusted. Black characters do not expect to be treated with dignity and respect by any whites regardless of where they are from.

The Ku Klux Klan is mentioned in several novels including Gone With the Wind, in which the origins of the Klan are explored. In this novel the Klan is seen as a positive organization to “call upon Carpetbaggers who steal money and negroes who are uppity” (Mitchell, 1936: 553). Though Scarlett calls the name of the Ku Klux Klan “dreadful” (652), her motivation is financial security. She does not want her husband involved for fear that the Yankees may in turn hang him. Later in the novel when Scarlett is attacked by a black man, it is the Klan that “rides to her rescue” by attacking the man to redeem her. In the best-selling novels, the Klan is viewed with romanticism and even pride. In David M. Chalmers' study of the history of the Klan, he offers a more realistic picture: “The method of the Klan was violence. It threatened, exiled, flogged, mutilated, shot, stabbed and hanged. It disposed of Negroes who were not respectful, or committed crimes, or belonged to military or political organizations …” (1965: 10). African American author Margaret Walker's Jubilee supports this more realistic picture of the Klan. When free black Randall Ware refuses to sell part of his property and participates in political activities, the Klan murders his journeyman and beats him (1966: 390–2). When the Klan is mentioned in A Time to Kill, it is presented as a negative reality of the world the characters occupy. Throughout these six novels a variety of other historical events and factors are present. Emancipation Celebrations are mentioned in Scarlett. Civil War leaders make cameo appearances in So Red the Rose. There is no real shift in interpretations to be mapped through the three time periods under this theme. However, the presentation and acceptance of particular events, such as the aforementioned Ku Klux Klan example, does indicate that there has been a movement away from acceptance of events which had negative effects for blacks.

Theme 6: Language/Dialect:
In her study of myths in American best sellers Ruth Miller Elson states, “One of the more interesting pejorative uses of language is in the employment of dialect” (1985:104). She goes on to say that in most novels, even those set in the Deep South where it would be expected that both white and black characters would speak in a different dialect, only the black dialects are written. Because of this, their dialect, and ultimately they themselves, are seen as deviant in the novels.

The novels from the 1930s time period demonstrate exactly the deviation that Elson observed in her study. There is some transition over the sixty year time frame in the presentation of African American speaking patterns. In the later novels blacks are less frequently portrayed as deviant. In the mainstream best sellers from the 1930s the black characters are mainly slaves. They are presented as speaking in that stereotypical southern accented form, whereas the whites are not phonetically dialecd when they speak. One thing that these authors sometimes do to demonstrate white dialects is simply to tell the reader that the speaker had an accent after presenting the speech without employing the phonetics of dialect. In the novels from both the 1960s and the 1990s we notice that the overemphasis on phonetical spellings is much less evident or even completely absent. In cases where it does occur it is either accompanied by phonetical spellings for the white characters also, or it is much more subdued than it is in the 1930s. Examples of the more subdued versions are phrases such as "No suh/Yes suh."

A more detailed example of the transition can be seen in the comparison of the 1936 novel Gone With the Wind and the 1991 novel Scarlett. The character of Scarlett's Mammy appears in both novels. In the 1936 novel Mammy says things like: “She doan never git no
res' on her pilla fer hoppin' up at night
time nursin' niggers an po' white trash
dat could ten' to deysef' (Mitchell,
1936: 41). Contrast that with how
Ripley portrays Mammy's speech in
Scarlett: "Bury me in my fine red silk
petticoat what you gave me. See to it. I
know that Lutie got her eye on it"
(Ripley, 1991: 28). The phonetic
emphasis on deviation is much more
observable in the writings from the
1930s. However, portrayal of a deviated
speech pattern has not completely
expired by the 1990s. In Scarlett
Mammy still speaks with some deviated
dialect: "...what you gave me" (28).
Another interesting note about Gone
With the Wind is that Mammy herself
labels blacks as inferior when she details
the importance of nursing "...niggers an
po' white trash" (41). Also, in the more
current Scarlett, we still see the
subservient "no suh/sir" "yes suh/sir"
references as well as the blacks in the
novel calling whites by proper titles of
"Mister" and "Miss."

In the novels by African Americans
we notice something a little different.
They either utilize the dialect equally,
which is also something that begins to
become more obvious in all novels from
the 1960s and the 1990s as opposed to
the novels from the 1930s, or they allow
their black characters to knowingly use
the dialect when speaking to whites.
This is something that happens in
Richard Wright's novel Native Son (1940).
Bigger Thomas often feels intimidated
when speaking to white characters.
When he speaks he uses the deviant
dialect. However, when he thinks to
himself this dialect and different manner
of speaking are absent. For example,
Bigger acts and speaks the way he thinks
"white folks wanted him to be in their
presence" (Wright, 1940: 54).

Similar tendencies became evident
in the later popular novels. One example
is in white author William Styron's The
Confessions of Nat Turner (1967). In this
novel the perspective is from a black
man. Although Styron is a white author
he also employs the technique Wright
does in speaking dialect in front of
whites and yet thinking in "normal"
non-dialect manners. In Grisham's The
Pelican Brief (1992) a black police officer,
Cleve, illustrates this. Grisham writes,
"Police! answered the cop, who was
black and emphasized the po in police
just for the fun of it" (Grisham, 1992:
92). An additional point to be made is
that in all three novels, The Confessions
of Nat Turner, The Pelican Brief, and Native
Son, the characters are presented as
knowingly doing these things.

**Theme 7: Labels:**
In the trial run novel both the black
and white communities label blacks with
derogatory epithets. The greatest
example of this is the usage of the word
"nigger." In Gone With the Wind and So
Red the Rose a large variety of labels are
employed to describe the blacks. The
terms "nigger," "darky," "yellow,"
"pickaninnies," "bucks," "colored,"
and "Negro" are used frequently. The
authors also make numerous
comparisons between blacks and
animals. Most of the labels are used
primarily by whites except for the word
"nigger," which is used by both the
blacks and whites.

The word "nigger" is found
throughout the three time periods.
However, the way in which the word is
used undergoes some changes.
Additionally, many of the other words
used in the 1930s have slowly dimin-
ished in usage. In the mainstream novels
from all three time periods blacks active-
ly use the word "nigger" to describe
themselves. This seems to have become
somewhat of a badge of honor. This is
something that becomes even more
obvious in the novels by African
Americans. For example, author Toni
Morrison's characters frequently use
such terms to address each other in the
course of daily housework and events.
While they may not always be terms of
endearment, they are seen as acceptable
means of communication.

Perhaps taking a cue from African
American authors, by 1967 author
William Styron has begun to use the
same approach in this novel The
Confessions of Nat Turner. Although at the
start of Nat's life he dislikes other blacks
almost to the point of despising them,
he later wholly defends, accepts and
appreciates them. He truly despises
whites and the entire system of slavery
that he is under. He believes that all
whites have conspired to keep him and
fellow blacks under their control. In
Native Son the feeling of initial hatred of
blacks that is slowly replaced by love is
demonstrated by the main character. In
both novels we find that "sympathetic"
white women tell the main characters
that they wish to understand the black
culture more. They also express that
they do not like the word "nigger" "Nat
why do you call yourself a nigger like
that? I mean it sounds so—well, so sad
somehow. I much prefer the word
darky" (Styron, 1967: 99). While the
female, Miss Margaret, dislikes the word
"nigger" she still would have him call
himself "darky." The blacks in the
novels never address themselves as
"darkies" while they do use "nigger,"
again demonstrating that when the black
characters use the word "nigger" it can
hold unspeaked honor. Something else
happens when the two females in The
Confessions of Nat Turner and Native Son
speak this way to the black characters.
Resentment seems to deepen when the
black characters are spoken to like this.
They often feel uncomfortable in the face
of any white kindness and feel hatred and
resentment towards the source of that
discomfort, which in these cases is the
two women speaking to them. In both
novels the women eventually fall victim
to death by the black men they were
attempting to bestow kindness upon.
As the time periods move closer to the present, the use of words other than "nigger" begins to rapidly diminish. However, calling the African Americans by rude terminology such as comparing them to animals does not greatly diminish. This is evident not only in the best sellers but also in the novels by African American authors. The ethnicity of the authors has an effect on how the terminology and labels are presented to the readers. The African American authors present these negative labels with the overall tone that they are problematic. For example, in Morrison's Beloved the main character Sethe remembers with pain when her former overseer instructed a student to "put her animal characteristics on the left; her human ones on the right" (Morrison, 1987: 193). Often, the mainstream authors present the labels as though this is simply the way things are; it is almost as though these labels were part of the scenery and setting itself.

Theme 8: Capitalization of the Races:
In Elson's 1985 study on myths and mores in best sellers, she points out something interesting with respect to capitalization. She notes that many of the early authors from her sample neglected to capitalize the word "Negro" (1985: 104). In the two mainstream novels from the 1930s, Gone With the Wind and So Red the Rose, the reference to Negro is in the lower case form. The 1960s novels by mainstream authors do capitalize the word Negro. In To Kill a Mockingbird the author, Harper Lee, uses both the terms Negro and Colored. She not only capitalizes the word Negro, but she also capitalizes Colored: "...we were in the Colored balcony" (1960: 214). The 1990s novels allow for the emergence of the phrases African American and Afro-American. From the 1990s these phrasings only appear in The Pelican Brief.

While in the novels from the 1960s and the 1990s the tendency to leave the "proper" terminology for African Americans in lower case has all but vanished, there are still many other derogatory terms utilized, these were expounded upon in the "labels" section. When the authors choose to use these terms they do not present them as capitalized.

In the novels by African American authors we note the capitalization of the word "Negro" across the three time periods. Again, often the authors, like the mainstream authors, use more derogatory phrasings that are not capitalized. One thing to note is that in both Morrison's Beloved (1987) and Ripley's Scarlett (1991) the term "African American" is absent. The setting for these novels is the Reconstruction time period before that phrase was popular.

Conclusion
In each of the eight separate theme sections we gave detailed descriptions of our findings. Here we offer an overview. All themes demonstrate improvement in the way they portray African Americans over the three time periods. However, in each separate theme the advancements are not complete. Many areas still display the lack of complete equality in our current society.

In theme one, white institutions save the day, we note a shift from total dependence on white institutions in the 1930s to the 1990s to a meager form of autonomy for blacks. Still, the emphasis in the 1990s is on white institutions as a primary source in aiding blacks. We also notice African American authors struggling throughout the three time periods to escape the dominance of white institutions.

In theme two, the relative importance of black institutions, in white-authored and black-authored novels, we notice that there is a development over the time periods of the importance of black institutions. However, that development has been, and remains, in the shadow of the white community.

In theme three, violence, we notice a more dramatic shift. White violence against blacks has begun to lose support, especially when that violence is unnecessary, and black violence against whites, when considered necessary, has gained some support and approval in the 1990s.

In theme four, leadership positions of blacks and whites, our findings are similar to the findings of theme two. By the 1990s, authors allow black characters to be in positions of leadership; however, these positions are not at "the top" and are often in the shadow or with the endorsement of whites.

Theme five, historical factors in the novels, explores the various ways authors use history through the three time periods. Here we find that since the 1930s authors have begun to shy away from portraying negative events for blacks, such as the Ku Klux Klan development and actions, in a positive light. By the 1990s, authors are overall more realistic in their portrayals of events that have significance for blacks.

Theme six, language and dialect, shows that there has been movement away from black dialects being portrayed as deviant. This movement has been fairly significant, especially when looking at the example between Gone With the Wind and Scarlett. Despite the significance of this movement, there still exists within the novels some demonstration of black language portrayed as deviant; it has simply become less extensive over the time periods.

Theme seven, labels, shows a progression away from the use of negative labels in describing blacks. Many of the numerous terms we find in 1930s novels have virtually disappeared in the 1990s with the exception of the word "nigger." Also, negative comparisons of blacks to animals and savages have diminished over the time periods but have not been completely eliminated.
Theme eight, capitalization of the races, is one area where a dramatic shift has taken place. By the 1990s, the tendency to leave the designation for the black race in lower case letters has completely disappeared in our novels. We have listed the areas where improvements have and have not taken place in the portrayals of African Americans in American novels. Our focus here is not on what improvements have taken place, but on the improvements that have not come to pass. Many areas, we note, show shifts, some very dramatic shifts. However, complete equality has not been achieved in the novels we examined. The references to inequality have gotten subtler, often buried within pages and pages of text, but they are undoubtedly still there. If we take for truth the initial argument that literature is a secondary analytical tool for analyzing history, we realize that our current time period, the 1990s, does not allow for complete equality amongst the races. Institutional racism still exists. It thrives beneath the surface of society so shrewdly concealing itself that those who succumb to it, like our best-selling authors, may or may not realize they are doing so. There is no simple way to eliminate this monster; slow painstaking persistence may be the only means.
References


