

## *Melting-Pot Modernism* by Sarah Wilson

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Micaela Maffei (University of Glasgow)

Sarah Wilson's first book considers the writings of four twentieth-century American writers: Henry James, James Weldon Johnson, Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein. Wilson's research interests include American studies, literature and cultural history; the book embraces these fields. The writing she analyses here is examined with specific reference to the way the works formally acknowledge, or respond to, what she terms 'melting-pot thinking': a reaction to the waves of immigration that fragmented notions of identity in America around the start of the twentieth century. The enormous number of people newly arrived in America created an environment in which understandings of nationality, selfhood and group identification became multiple, and transformed the way one could see oneself and the way one was perceived by others. The metaphorical melting pot was a space where identity became fluid, and characteristics or behaviours were shed or adopted by choice. It also described an atmosphere of exchange, where various individuals and groups contributed what some viewed as cultural 'gifts' to a communal society. Of course, not everybody saw such an environment as a positive thing. The suggestion that identity had become unfixed and could be shaped by the individual out of a variety of newly-presented

possibilities was unnerving for some; these new, 'fluid conceptions of self and expression' (p.93) were not unproblematic.

The book begins with an introductory chapter in which Wilson describes the historical and social context of the works she goes on to discuss in detail. She cites other artists who used other forms (notably, Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting-Pot*, a work that she often returns to) to describe the atmosphere of change and malleability which the four authors she focuses on each responded to. Drawing us in by beginning with a description of other expressions of the historical context allows Wilson to integrate her work within a body of writing, both historical and contemporary. She explains the social context essential to understanding the effect of the authorial choices made by James, Johnson, Cather and Stein, as well as persuasively argues her position that the forms of the texts themselves are not only worthy of closer examination, but, in combination with their themes and their focus on individual experience and new ways of handling time and narration, mark them as modernist texts. While these four authors are in no way under-represented in studies of modernist writing, the connections Wilson makes between their writing and the notion of the melting pot as an experience and space feel fresh.

Chapter two focuses on James's writings in response to his journey to America after an absence of many years spent living in Europe (this historical context is similar to Gertrude Stein's, who also spent her adult life in Europe). The chapter considers James as a writer significantly older than the other three, and one who was responding artistically and personally to a changed land, a home fundamentally altered from what he remembered. He returns to

America with the sensation of being both insider and outsider, resident and observer, native and visitor, and noting this double perspective begins Wilson's exploration of multiplicity of identity. James's reflective writing of his return is illuminating because he can easily compare what he sees with his remembered past, evoking the sensation of a memory of a place and person that remain sharp in the mind but can never be fully encountered again. Wilson describes James grappling with the enormous changes he notes in his native New York. These changes are physical, social (through the presence of a new diversity of individuals and groups) and ideological (through the altered means of understanding and articulating belonging and identity). Wilson charts the way his formal expression of these changes, traced primarily through *The American Scene*, highlights how the text presents itself through a multiplicity of voices, both as a recording and the evidence of a (human) recorder. The text performs the theme of multiplicity as much as it takes this theme as its focus.

The third chapter, focusing on James Weldon Johnson, emphasises Johnson's search for advancement in the ways African-Americans specifically saw and expressed their own identity, troubling the notion that a melting pot enabled all contributors to interact on equal terms. Wilson is primarily engaged with power relationships and imbalances here. She spends a good deal of time on Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which focuses on issues of multiplicity on a number of levels. The narrator's changing identity is most obvious when he navigates the barrier between white and black, eventually choosing to 'pass' as a white man, thus muting his black ancestry. Here Wilson demonstrates ways in which the

ideals of cultural exchange and positive imagery were far from accurate in some understandings of multiple identity and social co-existence.

Wilson identifies Johnson's later works as especially tilting towards a focus on African-Americans, in response to the idea that some participants in the melting pot were historically dominant over others, and that a process of rebalancing was desired. She argues that, although the eventual goal, or hope, of such a focus was eventual equal exchange, Johnson's writing nonetheless approaches questions of racial difference and power imbalances with a deliberate and clear emphasis on one group. This chapter most clearly demonstrates the way these social changes were often fraught with confusion, chaos and menace. By focusing on *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Wilson is also able to incorporate discussion of Johnson's formal choice of structuring his text as a faux autobiography – in some ways a response to the surge of actual autobiographies and memoirs that were evidence of the new focus on consciously constructed individual identity.

The fourth chapter draws on Willa Cather's novels *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* to look more closely at themes of memory, the past and recollection. Wilson identifies Cather's novels as 'engaging with a variety of conceptions of the very nature of the past' (p.129). This opens up multiple stories and versions of the past even more extensively, so that the past becomes different for each person, but different pasts also emerge for each individual over time. Interesting contrasts emerge between the versions of the past that immigrants brought with them to a new country, conceptions of an

American past before immigration grew so rapidly and the way people/characters view such different former lives.

The final chapter builds on the previous articulations and illustrations of multiplicity in a discussion of Gertrude Stein's work. With reference to *The Making of Americans*, *Three Lives* and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Wilson draws out Stein's use of the figure of the individual in melting-pot narratives. She traces the complications and difficulties faced by individuals, who are themselves melting-pot 'inhabitants', in connecting and relating to each other. Like her analysis of James's personal writing about a new, melting-pot America, Wilson reflects on Stein's responses to her speaking tour of America, which happened following the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and which forms much of the story of its follow-up book, *Everybody's Autobiography*. This parallel provides a sense of closure and almost bookends the text, as well as providing a sense of continuity by offering comparison between James's writing from the first years of the twentieth century, and Stein's, written in that century's fourth decade.

There are a few reasons why this book would be somewhat unsuitable for early undergraduates, and certainly for a casual reader. Some familiarity with the many works discussed enables clearer understanding of Wilson's arguments, so a grounding in the subject is required. Wilson's prose is often quite dense, and so the book requires patience and occasional re-reading. However, those with an academic interest in American literature, American studies or cultural studies, among other related fields, will find an intriguing text that draws on a great breadth of sources. As a 'critical beginning, an offering of new

[...] information' (p.200), the book provokes many questions and invites further discussion.

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