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978-0-521-45656-2 - New Essays on Call It Sleep
Edited by Hana Wirth-Nesher
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The American Novel series provides students of American literature with introductory critical guides to the great works of American fiction. Each volume begins with a substantial introduction by a distinguished authority on the text, giving details of the novel's composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by a group of new essays, each specially commissioned from a leading scholar in the field, which together constitute a forum of interpretative methods and prominent contemporary ideas on the text. There are also helpful guides to further reading. Specifically designed for undergraduates, the series will be a powerful resource for anyone engaged in the critical analysis of major American novels.

Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, praised when it first appeared in the 1930s, neglected for decades, and reissued to wide acclaim in the 1960s, has been finally hailed as the finest Jewish-American novel of the first half of the century and one of the richest modernist novels to appear in America. The introduction by Hana Wirth-Nesher locates the novel in its cultural context and in terms of contemporary debates about ethnic literature, minority writing, and the problem of representativeness. Leslie Fiedler, who played an instrumental role in the book's reissuance, offers a new reading in light of the work's canonization. Mario Materassi traces the controversial history of its reception, and Ruth Wisse connects the immigration theme with the existential hero. Each of the following three essays addresses the question of modernism from a different perspective: Brian McHale focuses on Roth's modernist rather than post-modernist poetic, Karen Lawrence on the maternal and paternal powers that forge the inner life so basic to the modernist novel, and Werner Sollors on the "ethnic modernism" of second-generation immigration literature. Thus the volume sets out to consider Roth's hybrid status – as an American writer, a Jewish writer, and a European modernist.

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★ The American Novel ★

GENERAL EDITOR

Emory Elliott
 University of California, Riverside

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Series Editor's Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretations has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many works of American literature had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretative issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel's acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising, interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered works such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of The American Novel Series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical

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guides to American novels and other important texts now widely read and studied. Usually devoted to a single work, each volume begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the work's composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of American literature, and inspire new respect for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

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*Henry Roth died shortly before this volume went to press.
It is warmly dedicated to his memory.*

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