

New Essay: How does Politics affect Writing, and Vice Versa?



I recently attended the 15th International Conference on the Short Story in Lisbon, where I met many interesting writers, read from my own work, and participated in a panel that discussed the question in the title. I would like to thank my fellow panelists, all wonderful people and writers: Garry Craig Powell, Sandra Jensen, Rebekah Clarkson, and Robin McLean. In this essay I will expand on some thoughts from before and during the discussion.

What is considered 'political' in fiction writing, and how far can the definition be stretched? Is it merely engagé works dealing with topics war, oppression, instability, or

injustice? Or is it also anything regarding social identity and issues like race, gender, and economic class? Likewise, creating feelings of empathy is often cited as one of the greatest roles or benefits of reading fiction: is this itself a political end, for example is belief that empathy is good or that there is such a thing as shared humanity a political belief? What about writers and readers who appear to fall short of that ideal? Is it true that reading, especially of the “great books”, is educative and character—and society—improving? I always wonder about [Stalin](#), for example—a voracious reader of literature and history, and a loving family man to boot, who was still one of modern history’s biggest monsters.

Is there a duty (or responsibility) of writers (and all artists) to take a stand against injustice or make political statements in their work? If so, does this risk the work becoming too didactic or heavy-handed, possibly subtracting from its aesthetic appeal? If not, does the writer risk accusations of withdrawal, ignorance, or cowardice, especially if they should somehow ‘know better’ based on their time and place (something akin to a writer’s version of the ‘Good German’)?

Is a writer’s attempt to avoid anything remotely related to politics itself a privilege?

Or, in times of political danger or instability (which is really all the time), is there value in creating fiction that allows the writer and her readers an escape from this reality, however brief or superficial? Is all fiction therefore escapist in some sense, or is that modifier appropriate only to popular “genre” fiction?

Regarding so-called “genre” fiction, is it possible to read mystery, romance, thriller, or fantasy novels as apolitical? It is possible, but it would be missing the point that the stories that a writer chooses to tell or not to tell is itself

a political expression. For example, the paradigmatic version of the romance is often an affirmation of the status quo, and thus on the side of the patriarchy or other oppressors.

Is it fair to say that the “best” works of fiction combine a sense of personal, individual, or particular aesthetic quality with something “bigger” than the particular story—a sense of collective, universal human solidarity, or a longing for justice, for example?

How important is the author’s identity itself in how she is read? And how important is the reader’s identity in how she interprets a work? How does this dynamic change in the case of pseudonymous or unknown writers? For example, the *Torah* is considered an archetypal text of patriarchy, but Harold Bloom reimagined it in *The Book of J* as a highly subversive and satirical work of a female courtesan in the Solomonic court.

Accordingly, how does the reader’s knowledge of (or assumptions about) a writer’s identity and biography either facilitate or preempt charges of cultural appropriation? Is such a charge only accessible to various minorities, or only against, for example, the typical Western (especially Anglo-American) white male who has long dominated our politics and cultural output? If there is some truth to this, how careful does a white male need to be when making characters and plots? Are there stories, characters, and words that can be used by one writer to great power, but used by a different writer to great insensitivity?

I have myself never been to Southeast Asia, and am ignorant of much of the literature and culture of that part of the world. As it stands, I would never even attempt to write characters or plots that involve, say, Vietnam, without the relevant knowledge and experience; to do so would be doomed to failure and rightly prompt accusations of cultural appropriation. There are many white male American writers who have written about Vietnam very powerfully and convincingly, however;

veterans Tim O'Brien (*The Things They Carried*) and Robert Olen Butler (*A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*), for example, or David Joiner (*Lotusland*), an American who lived in Vietnam for years. Even such examples must be compared with someone like Viet Thanh Nguyen (*The Sympathizer*), a Vietnamese-American writer who is obviously even more well-placed to write about his own country than the knowledgeable outsiders listed above. I think that charges of cultural appropriation can fairly easily be avoided by a sensitive writer carefully choosing only things that she can write about from experience or extensive knowledge.

Cynthia Ozick, an American writer most famous for *The Shawl*, has been primarily a writer of the Holocaust and its aftermath. She appears to refute Theodor Adorno's famous (and probably misunderstood) quote that "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric." In *Quarrel and Quandary*, there are several essays that deal directly with the issue of politics and fiction. In fact, just quoting some of her lines would be much more effective than anything I could come up with. For example:

George Orwell, in "Why I Write," asserts that "**the opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.**" There are times when one is tempted to agree with him... Yet inserting politics into literature has, as we have seen, led to the extremist (or absurdist) notion that Jane Austen, for instance, is tainted with colonialism and slave-holding because Sir Thomas Bertram in *Mansfield Park* owns plantations in eighteenth-century Antigua.

As would be supposed, she holds that not only do politics and writing mix, but it is necessary that they do so. All of the writers I heard from at the conference would readily agree. Despite this, the apolitical writer is not a mere straw man. At one point she also mentions a speech E.M. Forster gave in 1941 arguing for "Art for Art's Sake", even at a time when evil was spreading across the continent. Here is the crux of

Ozick's essay:

Art may well be the most worthy of all human enterprises; that is why it needs to be defended; and in crisis, in a barbarous time, even the artists must be visible among the defending spear-carriers. Art at its crux—certainly the “Antigone”—doesn't fastidiously separate itself from the human roil; neither should artists. I like to imagine a conversation between Forster and Isaac Babel—let us say in 1939, the year Babel was arrested and tortured, or early in 1940, when he was sentenced to death at a mock trial. History isn't only what we inherit, safe and sound and after the fact; it is also what we are ourselves obliged to endure...

There are those—human beings both like and unlike ourselves—who relish evil joy, and pursue it, and make it their cause; who despise compromise, reason, negotiation; who, in Forster's words, do evil that evil may come—and then the possibility of aesthetic order fails to answer. It stands only as a beautiful thought, **and it is not sufficient to have beautiful thoughts while the barbarians rage on.** The best ideal then becomes the worst ideal, and the worst ideal, however comely, is that there are no barbarians; or that the barbarians will be so impressed by your beautiful thoughts that they too will begin thinking beautiful thoughts; or that in actuality the barbarians are no different from you and me, with our beautiful thoughts; and that therefore loyalty belongs to the barbarians' cause as much as it belongs to our own...

The responsibility of intellectuals includes also the recognition that we cannot live above or apart from our own time and what it imposes on us; that willy-nilly we breathe inside the cage of our generation, and must perform within it. Thinkers—whether they count as public intellectuals or the more reticent and less visible sort—are obliged above all to make distinctions, particularly in an age of mindlessly spreading moral equivalence.

She mentions how Forster ends his speech with Shelley's well-known quote that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world", and notes the irony that Forster took this as a dictum from Mt. Olympus even while Panzers were running roughshod over Europe and the camps were already operating. I like the quote myself, but I would certainly not interpret it to mean that poets (or all writers) should withdraw from the world in the hope that the aesthetic beauty of their work alone is enough to improve the world. Ozick's comments above demonstrate why that will never be realistic.

Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* rejected the possibility that there was a single "aim of the writer" or "nature of literature". He compared writers who pursued private, aesthetic perfection, like Proust and Nabokov, with those seeking human liberty, like Dickens and Orwell. He says "There is no point in trying to grade these different pursuits on a single scale by setting up factitious kinds called "literature" or "art" or "writing"; nor is there any point in trying to synthesize them." In response to this, I have heard it said that even aesthetic pleasure is political. If this is true than all the admirers of *Lolita* will surely perceive the political foundation underlying that aesthetically pleasing novel, even if not overtly present in the plot.

[J.M. Coetzee](#) is a white South African who was opposed to the Apartheid regime, but chose to avoid overt politics or write about it obliquely, almost in the form of Platonic ideas. Here is his quote explaining his method:

*In times of intense ideological pressure like the present when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: **supplementarity** or **rivalry**.*

On the other hand, Nadine Gordimer, another white South African writer and life-long opponent of Apartheid, chose to

deal head-on with political issues, or to supplement history, in her works. They both won the Nobel Prize, and both showed how writing about politics can still be done in many and various ways, including supplementing it, à la Gordimer, or rivaling it, à la Coetzee.

Social reform has been a goal of certain types of literature (and art) at least since the 19th century. Dickens comes to mind as one example among many. It has always been hard to pinpoint concrete effects literature may have had on politics, beyond vaguely influencing readers to feel empathy for people unlike them. One notable exception is the much-anthologized short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The story tells of a woman oppressed and driven mad by her doctor husband's "rest cure", a real-life treatment popularized by a doctor named Weir Mitchell. After the story was published, Mitchell read it and actually retracted this psychologically destructive treatment method. Other real-world political effects came from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the muck-rakers, including Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, to name two more examples.

Could Kafka be considered a political writer? Is there a spectrum of how political a writer is, or how political certain literary themes are? For example, alienation and outsidership play a big part in Kafka's work, but is this because of his identity as a hated minority living among another group of oppressed minorities, or because he held views against the imperial and royal Hapsburg authorities? On the other hand, is there anything political that could be found in Borges' stories? He seems to stick rigorously to the theme of intellectual escapism in the form of his unique literary metaphysics. What about Chekhov, whose incredibly deft, character-driven portraits seem, on the surface, to be apolitical? Or Zweig, who tried to be apolitical in all his fiction even while he was working to build a more cultured and cosmopolitan Europe in real-life (and who killed himself in

Nazi-induced despair in 1942)? The answer is that, obviously, all these writers were/are very political.

And all art, including fiction, is political. That holds true even if the author herself denies it or tries to avoid it. We have been told to never trust the writer but to trust the work; this seems a bit of academic sophistry, but in the case of a politics-denying writer we may do well to keep it in mind. The fact is that art production can only happen when the artist is free. Freedom of speech is central to the artist just as it is for the survival of a free society. There is no escape from politics for a writer or for anybody. We are all bound to the systems of power and human behavior that surround us. To not see or to deny this only reveals one's privilege.

My own biographical information, if relevant: I was an officer in the US Army for over four years and spent two years in Afghanistan. This has obviously had a big effect on my character and political development, but in the 10 years since I have been out of the army, I have mostly had no desire to write or create fiction dealing with military themes. The exception so far is my story in *The Road Ahead*, a 2017 anthology featuring writers who are all veterans of the American wars. My other stories and the novel I'm working on were not apparently motivated by any explicit political stance and are more like historical fiction. After this panel, however, I have realized that I was rather naive and that all of my fiction and ideas are very clearly based on political realities.

Recently, like many Americans, I feel that the gravity of the political situation demands of all of us to do more. I know other American writers who have told me that they are not able to work lately because of the weight of the 24/7 news cycle. I know others who are trying to produce art or poetry specifically engaging political issues (like [gun violence](#), for example). As a white male from the global hegemonic power, who has participated personally, if incidentally, in the ongoing

state-sponsored violence, do I now have a duty to anyone other than myself, to fight for justice or against oppression? Would it be considered insensitive or even unethical of me to write only for myself? There are probably no absolute answers to any of these questions, but most of their utility comes from their very formulation and expression. In the end, there is probably no absolute duty of a writer to bring politics into their works, but it will still always be a good idea, and probably the best thing we can do.