

Literature and Human Rights

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When Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* in 1953 he set his play in colonial Salem, Massachusetts, a community torn apart by accusations of witchcraft. At first the witch hunts targeted only the weakest members of the community, but soon those who defended the weak and those who questioned the witch hunts were accused and condemned to death as well. *The Crucible* gives us a portrait of a community in the grip of terror, a community that uses religion and the law to violate its own citizens' human rights. Of course, Miller wasn't really writing about what happened in Salem in 1692. Audiences in the 1950s quickly saw *The Crucible* as a metaphor for the anti-communist witch hunts that terrorized the United States after World War II. Miller knew he could not write directly about the anti-communist witch hunts without being accused of being a communist himself (he was anyway), so he chose to set his story in colonial America. In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller created an enduring metaphor, a cautionary tale, of what can happen to a community when it gives in to fear and hysteria and violates the basic human rights of its own citizens for "the greater good."

The link between the literary arts and human rights is profound, touching almost every epoch and society on earth. The ancient Greek writer, Euripides, wrote *The Trojan Women* (415 B.C.) as a response to the Athenian invasion and slaughter of the people on the island of Melos during the Peloponnesian War. Using the Trojan War as his metaphorical vehicle, Euripides presented on stage the suffering of a mother who must

watch as her young son is murdered by the Greeks and she and her daughters are sold into slavery. Euripides was not the only Athenian who questioned his city's interminable war with Sparta on stage.

Aristophanes' comedy, *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.), was a very direct protest against the Peloponnesian War. In the play, an Athenian woman, Lysistrata, organizes the women of Greece to go on a sex strike until the men stop fighting. They seize the Acropolis in Athens, which also housed the Athenian treasury. Denied sex and money for their war, the men are soon brought to their knees and peace declared.

Lysistrata has since become an icon of protest literature. In the 1960s it was often produced as a protest against the Vietnam War. After the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003, *Lysistrata* was produced on over 400 college campuses in the U.S. as a protest. Though written over 2,400 years ago, *Lysistrata* continues to bring audiences together in the shared belief that we can end the madness of war.

Other authors throughout the ages have created enduring works of political protest. Jonathan Swift satirized British colonial policies that decimated his native Ireland. Widespread starvation led Swift to write his satire, *A Modest Proposal* (1729), in which he proposed that the Irish eat their children, a measure that would alleviate both starvation and overpopulation. *A Modest Proposal* follows in a long tradition of pamphleteers and lampooners in using grotesque satire to make its point.

In the U.S., Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery activism and writing led to the serialized publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) in *The Liberator*, an abolitionist newspaper. The novel became an instant success, selling over 300,000 copies in the first year. Today, the novel is considered overly sentimental and patronizingly racist in parts,

but in the 1850s it electrified the country. Harriet Beecher Stowe is widely credited with having raised popular sentiment against slavery in the northern U.S., and having kept England from siding with the South in the Civil War.

In the twentieth century, African American writers such as Ralph Ellison, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Walker, August Wilson and others have further explored the continuing legacy of racism in American society. Their stories have given voice to those who had no voice. Their stories chronicle the rise of a people from slavery, through the Jim Crow era, into the modern era of a dream that can no longer be deferred. Their work reminds us that even in the most oppressive environments the will to find justice, one's rightful place in the world, is innate in human nature.

A few years ago I met a German stage director who had lived and worked in East Germany when it was under the control of the communists. The Stasi, or secret police, routinely arrested and jailed artists and writers. Work that was considered remotely critical of the government was brutally suppressed. So how does one work or even survive in such an oppressive environment, I asked. You produce the classics, he told me. A production of *Macbeth* took on a whole new meaning behind the Iron Curtain, he said. *Macbeth* becomes a metaphor for the brutal and corrupt communist government. *Macbeth*'s schemes and murders are those of the government's secret police. His countrymen abandon *Macbeth* and eventually revolt against him, a sentiment shared by most East Germans about their own government. Everyone knew what was going on, the director told me. The actors on stage, the audience, everyone knew and understood the subtext, everyone, except the Stasi. To the police it was just a production of a 400-year-old play. How could it harm them? To the audience and performers, it was a shared

experience, a shared hope that one day their oppressors would suffer the same fate as the doomed Macbeth. And they were right.

George Orwell warned us in his novel, *1984*, that totalitarian governments could erase human rights and individual identity. What he could not foresee in the dark days of the 1940s was the enduring resilience of the human will to express itself and be free.

Throughout the ages, our literature has chronicled our journey from barbarism to civilization. It reminds us of where we have been and where we need to go. Our stories break down barriers to understanding and empathy. Literature is indeed a window into the soul of humanity.