

Nobel Prizes and Politics: Literary Perspectives of WWII

Literary awards have become a point of increasing contention, but, view them as one may, the Nobel Prize in Literature is one of (if not *the*) most prestigious an author may receive. With authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Albert Camus, and Toni Morrison being but a few literary titans named as Nobel laureates, the Swedish Academy appears to have not only high standards, but strict criteria as well. This essay will look at works by Svetlana Alexievich, Günter Grass, and Winston Churchill to gauge whether contributions from these laureates not only met standards of the Nobel Prize in Literature, but did so in ways that pushed forward difficult conversations from those who experienced World War II.

Before one can determine whether the aforementioned authors met the standards of the Swedish Academy, those standards need to be clarified and examined. According to official Nobel Prize website, Alfred Nobel's 1895 will declared his estate was to annually honor prizes in five categories: chemistry, economic sciences, literature, medicine, peace, and physics. In charge of deciding on who is awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (known as a Nobel laureate) is a group of eighteen men and women who comprise the Swedish Academy. This groups of seats has been tasked with nominating the laureate since the award's inception in 1901 under the direction of Nobel's will they choose out the nominees the one deemed to have provided the, "greatest benefit on mankind in an ideal direction," (Nobel Prize in Literature). These words proved vague enough to create debates regarding interpretation showing itself through, "the history of the Literature Prize appears as a series of attempts to interpret an imprecisely worded will" (Nobel Prize in Literature). As a result of the ambiguous verbiage, the Swedish Academy operated under themed phases, changing with each acting secretary.

Each of the phases had its own focus and agenda in choosing a laureate, exemplifying, “the changing sensibility of an Academy continuously renewing itself” (Nobel Prize in Literature). From 1901-12, there was an emphasis on literature containing idealism; the World War I years valued neutrality; the 1920s appreciated style; the 1930s shifted the focus to a universal interest; the post-World War II Academy honed in on authors they considered pioneers of literature; the late 1970s to mid-1980s aimed to shine a light on scarcely-known authors who showed a mastery of their craft; and from the mid-1980s to present, there has been an emphasis on attempts to diversify and hone in on more worldly literature. There are numerous other stipulations Nobel put on one’s eligibility to receive the prize, but the focus of this will remain on the aforementioned themes and their effects on the Academy’s point of view on the works of Alexievich, Grass, and Vonnegut.

Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time” (Nobel Prize in Literature), Belarusian author Svetlana Alexievich uses her platform to tell the stories of eyewitnesses and survivors of some of the former Soviet Union’s most notable events such as the Chernobyl incident and wars. In her 2017 novel, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, Alexievich tells the stories of Soviet women veterans who fought on the front lines of World War II.

As exemplified by *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich takes an unorthodox approach in her writing by transcribing the interviews she conducted. In her reasoning for taking such an approach to her prose, Alexievich says, “I chose a genre where human voices speak for themselves... I don’t just record a dry of history of events and facts, I’m writing a history of

human feelings... I compose my books out of thousands of voices, destinies, fragments of our life and being ("Svetlana Alexievich, Belarusian Prose Writer - Home Page").

In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich shows her reader exactly what she means when she says she is writing a history of human feelings. The author breaks from the norm from standard nonfiction prose and interview styles by using the content in a fragmented, nonlinear manner grouping each entry not by speaker, but by using multiple answer from multiple interviewees on the same topic, with the topics being the center of chapters. One such example of this technique is a portion beginning on page 54 of the novel, which introduces the topics "Of Everyday Life and Essential Life". In this section, which comes without introduction by the author presumably as an attempt to be as unobtrusive as possible with her own words, women veterans of the era discuss their adjustment to everyday military when little no considerations for women were made, such as boots being five sizes too big, having to cut off long braids of hair because there was no way to clean them, and their first reactions to seeing someone dead or wounded.

One interviewee, an infantry member named Lola Akhmetova, told Alexievich about everyday life what frightened her most was, "wearing men's underpants... You're at war, you're preparing to die for the Motherland, and you're wearing men's underpants," (Alexievich 65). Nina Alexeevna Semyonova, a former radio operator, told the author a story in which she stuck her head up during her first firefight before being scolded and told she would get herself killed. Of that moment, Semyonova tells Alexievich she, "couldn't understand that: how could I be killed, If I'd only just arrived at the front? I didn't know yet how ordinary and indiscriminate

death is,” (Alexievich 67). In instances such as those previously quoted, Alexievich makes the seemingly impossible a reality: humanizing war.

Alexievich’s novel also succeeds in another feat, which is breaking the traditional mold of literary accounts of combat. In Aliaksandr Novikau’s article “Women, Wars and Militarism in Svetlana Alexievich’s Documentary Prose,” the nontraditional take on nonfiction war prose is addressed. The article touches on many different points of argument for the power of Alexievich’s approach to her writing, but perfectly defines the distinction when pointing out:

mainstream war studies usually focus on traditional actors and concepts in international relations— states, armed forces, security, military conflicts rather than on ordinary people and their experiences of war... She does not ask her interviewees about battles and heroism but about small, personal details such as feelings and private memories (318).

Svetlana Alexievich is a prime example of how the Swedish Academy correctly used its thematic focus of promoting literature of the world in a spot on manner. What further solidifies naming the author a Nobel laureate is the point of she was awarded not only as a writer of words, but as a voice for the generally voiceless. While praising the Swedish Academy’s choice in Svetlana Alexievich, one cannot forget hers is but one of many cases of awardees and cannot help but wonder if every choice made by the Academy was as poignant or if some laureates were almost chosen by force due to the constraint of theme.

German novelist Günter Grass was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1999 under the same thematic premise as Alexievich. In considering this point, Grass’ novel *The Tin Drum*

will be considered as well as his 2006 autobiography *Peeling the Onion*. For *The Tin Drum*, Grass takes his reader on a wild, imaginative ride through war and peace; life and death; happiness and sorrow— all through the eyes of a narrator who literally refused to grow up.

The issue of sanity is the topic at the surface of Oskar for Grass' readers because of two main reasons; the first being how Grass opens his novel with “granted: I'm an inmate in a mental institution; my keeper watches me, scarcely lets me out of sight, for there's a peephole in the door, and my keeper's eye is the shade of brown that can't see through blue-eyed types like me,” (Grass and Mitchell 3). Oskar lets his readers know from the start he is not only unreliable, but he has done something in which someone of authority has deemed wrong, yet feels he cannot be held fully accountable.

The reader is instantly placed in a mindset of mistrust of the narrator due to his immediate and open admission of not only being in an asylum, but also to having someone who he claims is always watching him. What further cements the reader's mistrust of Oskar is the manner in which he almost unconsciously slips between referring to him self in first and third-person points of view such as when he says “Oskar let her get right up close and then struck her an uppercut with both fists right where she'd admitted Matzerath. And when she caught my fists before I hit her a second time, I bit down hard on that same accursed spot and fell to the sofa with her...” (Grass and Mitchell 273).

Oskar's alternating between narrative point of view is less indicative of mental illness than it is of Grass' own point of view. The narrator adopts the outsider perspective of himself in order to separate his current self from his past identity. The evidence of this lies in what Grass, a

former Nazi SS member and prisoner of war, writes in his autobiography *Peeling the Onion*, “when after all my practice and despite all my misgivings I say ‘I’— meaning I when I try to recall what my state of being was sixty years ago— my I of that time may not be a complete and utter stranger, but it is lost and as distant as a distant relative,” (Grass 162).

To further the perspective of Oskar’s narration as a means of separating himself from his own past, Mary Fulbrook points out in her article “Reframing the Past: Justice, Guilt, and Consolidation in East and West Germany after Nazism” the tendency for people who feel guilt for past actions to separate the then from the now as a coping mechanism. Fulbrook points out how those involved in the Nazi party separated from their actions when she writes:

the problem with the Nazi past in postwar Germany was that many people had, by their roles and behaviors, become to varying degrees complicit in or guilty of Nazi crimes; and yet they had also, subjectively, maintained a sense of inner distance... We need therefore to discuss between people’s behaviors and how, in different contexts both at the time and later, they represented their actions to themselves and other (296).

Günter Grass was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1999, yet did not disclose himself as a former member of the SS until 2006, so one cannot help but wonder whether the Swedish Academy should consider revocation of his award. Another side of this argument removes Grass as an individual altogether and views him as nothing more than a contributor of literature. In viewing Grass objectively, an argument against his worthiness as laureate is much more difficult.

Winston Churchill, the last of the literary laureates this essay will consider, is almost more myth than man in his own right. Notorious for his steadfast determination in the face of one of the most turbulent times in England's history, Churchill as an ideal is superhero-like— an action figure come to life. His award in 1953 for his “mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values,” (Nobel Prize in Literature 1953), is a choice that is simultaneously surprising and not at all. Though the former Prime Minister is generally known more by legend than actual contribution, his literary prowess becomes apparent when studying the speeches he wrote and orated in the face of unimaginable odds.

Through his speeches, Churchill relied on words to make known his stances against the Germans and other Axis powers of World War II. Not only was he attempting to let his enemies know where he— as the voice of government— stood, he also made it a point to let those of whom he sided with know the same. To example this, one merely must consider one of Churchill's earliest speeches “A Hush Over Europe” from 1939. In this speech, Churchill verbally confronts the Nazi party for claiming encirclement but the Prime Minister calls it a tactic to take over weaker countries. He quotes to both sides of the conflict the principle of the Covenant of the League of Nations when he says, “He who attacks any, attacks all. He who attacks the weakest will find he has attacked the weakest,” (“Hush Over Europe”). In the same speech, Churchill not only makes clear his stance, but also the stance of his enemies. He confides in his listeners he is not eager to enter war, but does not shy away from it when saying, “if Herr Hitler does not make war, there will be no war. No one else is going to make war. Britain and

France are determined to shed no blood except in self-defense or in defense of their allies” (Hush Over Europe).

This stance by Churchill is one of many in numerous speeches in which he pens wartime oratory in the way prose reads. What made the Swedish Academy choose to award Churchill the distinction of literary Nobel laureate rather than the Nobel Prize of Peace was not only in how he was a writer, nor that he wrote his own speeches, but also in the prose-like delivery of his orations. Just as with Alexievich and Grass, Winston Churchill pushed forward the conversations of World War II by speaking to many different audiences with the same words.

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