My Top 10 Prose, Verse, and Quote

by Kenneth Francis (June 2020)



Life? or Theatre?, Charlotte Salomon

You know you're reading or listening to great prose, verse or lyrics when they connect with your mind and emotions. Good writing should stir the emotions and make you reflect in a profound way, feel sad, or joyful. You should learn something new from it or it should confirm your thoughts on existential matters of the soul. Great writing should be void of cliché, hyperbole, multiple adjectives, redundant words and maudlin sentimentality. It may even give you goose bumps! Sadly, such writings, like all great works of art (paintings, cinema, theatre, music), are rare in the early decades of the 21st century. In the Bible, St John wrote the most profound sentence of all time: "In the beginning was the Word". In its original Greek, the Word is Logos: Language, Reason, Beauty, Truth, Love, and ultimately, God (Christ is the Logos incarnate). Many of these words related to Logos are infused in the works of some of the greatest writers in history, from Shakespeare to Solzhenitsyn. I've written before how odd it is that the enormous volume of highly artistic works—from movies, drama, literature, poetry to music—are invariably bleak but give us immense joy. One wonders are we better off living in a fallen world after all, as a perfect one without strife would lack in artistic excellence. But does a world with immense suffering justify moments of optimism through the transient pleasures of the arts, despite their dark themes? After all, one can't have Shakespeare's work without the sufferings of his characters. Below I've selected extracts from 10 works from these distinguished writers. They are all equal in their own right, and not in historical chronological order, beginning with William Shakespeare (1564-1616):

Number One: *Macbeth* (first performed in 1606): A play about a king's kinsman who murders the king to gain power but is

riddled with guilt after the ghastly deed. In the following soliloquy, he reflects on what he's done and a life without meaning:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,

To the last syllable of recorded time;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing."

Number Two: *Demons* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881)

Demons (1871), is the perfect caveat to the above soliloquy. Like the Bard, Dostoyevsky was a master of the Psychology of Man. The evil, cruel motives of his characters can be seen today, not just in Communist countries, but in the halls and corridors of the public square and institutions. 2nd Corinthians 4:4 tell us: "Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't

understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God." Dostoyevsky would later understand this message more than most of his fellow Russians.

As a young atheist, Dostoevsky was accused of reading aloud at public events and distributing rebellious anti-Tsar/serfdom literature by Vissarion Belinsky, a literary critic who opposed theocratic views. For these offenses, Dostoevsky was arrested, convicted and condemned to death in 1849, a sentence later commuted to 4 years' incarceration in s Siberian gulag. In his book, *Notes from the Underground*, he wrote some of the most horrifying pages of all literature. It was in the gulag that he first learned how evil men could be: Sadistic, bloodthirsty guards who beat some prisoners to within an inch of their lives. He described the prison:

> *In summer, intolerable closeness; in winter, unendurable cold. All the floors were rotten. Filth on the floors an inch thick; one could slip and fall . . . We were packed like herrings in a barrel . . . There was no room to turn around. From dusk to dawn it was impossible not to behave like pigs . . . Fleas, lice, and black beetles by the bushel.*

In minus 30 degrees, Dostoevsky had his hands and feet locked in chains before being finally released. He was only allowed to read his New Testament Bible. His health was cursed with seizures, haemorrhoids, fevers and trembling, as he shared a tiny bathroom with 200 prisoners and at night lay in a dark, prison cell crowded with chained inmates, while covered by a small sheepskin blanket with his frozen feet exposed. In the centre of the cell was a little stove that couldn't even melt the thick ice on the window. Dostoevsky would eventually give

himself to Christ, his Saviour. But he also wrote of the meaninglessness in a world without God.

Demons, which is an allegory, is set in Russia during the 1860s; a time of fear of the potential consequences of political, social moral decay and nihilism. A town is subjected to the chaos of 'demonic' forces during an attempted revolution. One of the main characters, the atheist Alexei Nilych Kirillov, is a suicidal revolutionary.

In *Demons*, Dostoevsky wrote:

> *"Listen," Kirillov stopped, gazing before him with fixed, ecstatic eyes. "Listen to a big idea: There was one day on earth, and in the middle of the earth stood three crosses. One on a cross believed so much that he said to another: 'This day you will be with me in paradise.' The day ended, they both died, went, and did not find either paradise or resurrection. What had been said would not prove true. Listen: this man was the highest on all the earth, he constituted what it was to live for. Without this man the whole planet with everything on it is—madness only. There has not been one like Him before or since, not ever, even to the point of miracle. This is the miracle, that there has not been and never will be such a one. And if so, if the laws of nature did not pity even This One, did not pity even their own miracle, but made Him, too, live amidst a lie and die for a lie, then the whole planet is a lie, and stands upon a lie and a stupid mockery. Then the very laws of the planet are a lie and a devil's vaudeville. Why live then, answer me, if you're a man."*

Number Three: *God Sees the Truth, But Waits,* published in 1872 by Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910).

This short story by Tolstoy has a pathos in its denouement that's profoundly heart-wrenching. And what's remarkable about this story is the author's use of plain language to achieve such poignant effects. First published in 1872, it is the parable of a man sent to a Siberian prison for a murder he did not commit.

A heavy drinker but passive, Ivan Dmitrich Aksionov is a popular merchant who lives in the town of Vladmir in Russia. One day he goes on a business trip, despite his wife pleading with him not to go because she had a nightmare about him in which his hair quickly turned grey. However, Aksionov ignores his wife and goes on the trip. On the journey, he meets another man called Makar Semyonich, and both men travel together, checking into an inn for a few drinks and later staying overnight.

The next morning, Aksionov awakes to find Semyonich, who was in a separate room, left the Inn. As Aksionov leaves the inn and walks down the road, he is approached by some policemen. They explain that a merchant was just murdered and robbed and then they search Aksionov's bag where they find a bloody knife. Aksionov pleads with them saying he is not the murderer but he is sentenced to jail in Siberia.

When his wife visits him after some time in prison, she notices his hair is turned grey. After some 26 years in jail,

Aksionov is a broken man and resigned to his fate. One day some new prisoners, one of them being Makar Semyonich, are transferred to the prison.

After overhearing several conversations, Aksionov is convinced that Makar Semyonich is the man who committed the murder for which he was blamed. Aksionov notices that Semyonich is digging a hole and trying to escape from prison but he says nothing of the deed, as the guards would no doubt flog Makar Semyonich to a pulp and extend his sentence. As the story concludes, we see Aksionov in his cell during the night while Semyonich enters the cell.

Extract:

> *Semyonich to Aksionov: "It was I who killed the merchant and hid the knife among your things. I meant to kill you too, but I heard a noise outside, so I hid the knife in your bag and escaped out of the window."*

> *Aksionov was silent, and did not know what to say. Makar Semyonich slid off the bed-shelf and knelt upon the ground. "Ivan Dmitrich," said he, "forgive me! For the love of God, forgive me! I will confess that it was I who killed the merchant, and you will be released and can go to your home."*

> *"It is easy for you to talk," said Aksionov, "but I have suffered for you these twenty-six years. Where could I go to now? . . . My wife is dead, and my children have*

forgotten me. I have nowhere to go . . . “

Makar Semyonich did not rise, but beat his head on the floor. “Ivan Dmitrich, forgive me!” he cried. “When they flogged me with the knot it was not so hard to bear as it is to see you now . . . yet you had pity on me, and did not tell. For Christ’s sake forgive me, wretch that I am!” And he began to sob.

When Aksionov heard him sobbing he, too, began to weep. “God will forgive you!” said he. “Maybe I am a hundred times worse than you.” And at these words his heart grew light, and the longing for home left him. He no longer had any desire to leave the prison, but only hoped for his last hour to come.

In spite of what Aksionov had said, Makar Semyonich confessed his guilt. But when the order for his release came, Aksionov was already dead.

Number Four: The Tell-Tale Heart, published 1842, by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

Poe was one of America’s greatest short-story writers. His works are associated with images of madness, death and the macabre. In the classic short story, *Tell-Tale Heart*, the killer lives with an old man. Poe never mentions the sex of the protagonist, but there is something quite masculine about

this character. Assuming he's male, he could be either a lodger or carer for the old man, but it's doubtful that he's his son, as he doesn't refer to the old man as 'father' or 'pop' but 'old man'. First published in January 1842 in the *Boston 'Pioneer,* the dramatic monologue begins with a narrator talking about nerves, madness, Heaven and Hell:

> *True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story. It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever*

Number Five: *On the Suffering of the World,* by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860): essay written between 1788-1860.

In the blood-soaked jungles and plains of the animal kingdom, thousands upon thousands of carnivorous beasts are tearing each other to pieces alive in a world of perpetual screaming,

according to the German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, who was more realist than pessimist about the suffering in the world. He viewed the hellish bloodbath of grotesque survival in the Wild as: “The agony of the devoured animal is always far greater than the pleasure of the devourer.” However, I believed humans suffered more, due to their consciousness and intellect. He wasn’t religious, but he had high regard for Christianity, especially Catholicism. He was also struck by the ethos of the Old Testament and the Fall of Man, by which worldly human suffering is inevitable. He said the only thing that reconciled him to the Old Testament was the Story of the Fall, despite it being “clothed in allegory”; and that our existence resembles nothing so much as the consequence of a misdeed, punishment for a forbidden desire. In his essay *On the Suffering of the World*, he writes:

Extract:

> *As a reliable compass for orientating yourself in life nothing is more useful than to accustom yourself to regarding this world as a place of atonement, a sort of penal colony. When you have done this you will order your expectations of life according to the nature of things and no longer regard the calamities, sufferings, torments and miseries of life as something irregular and not to be expected but will find them entirely in order, well knowing that each of us is here being punished for his existence and each in his own particular way. This outlook will enable us to view the so-called imperfections of the majority of men, i.e., their moral and intellectual shortcomings and the facial appearance resulting therefrom, without surprise and certainly without indignation . . .*

Number Six: *Ghosts*, by Patrick Pearse, aka Padraic H. Pearse (1879-1916)

Pearse was one of the brave rebels of the Irish Easter 1916 Rising. He gave his life and died for Ireland, as he walked while whistling to his execution by the British Army forces. I chose him because he, and his prose, personified Ireland spiritually. Had he looked into a crystal ball and seen the Ireland of today, he would've seen a country in spiritual and economic ruins. And to think Pearse thought things were bad back in his day over 100 years ago?

Extract *from Ghosts* (Published December 1915)

> *There has been nothing more terrible in Irish history than the failure of the last generation. Other generations have failed in Ireland, but they have failed nobly; or, failing ignobly, some man among them has redeemed them from infamy by the splendour of his protest. But the failure of the last generation has been mean and shameful, and no man has arisen from it to say or do a splendid thing in virtue of which it shall be forgiven. The whole episode is squalid. It will remain the one sickening chapter in a story which, gallant or sorrowful, has everywhere else some exaltation of pride.'Is mairg do ghní go holc agus bhíos bocht ina dhiaidh,' says the Irish proverb. 'Woe to him that doeth evil and is poor after it.' The men who have led Ireland for twenty-five years have done evil, and they are bankrupt. They are bankrupt in policy, bankrupt in credit, bankrupt now even . . .* They have made the same mistake that a man would make if he were to forget that he has an

> immortal soul. They have not recognised in their people the image and likeness of God. Hence, the nation to them is not all holy . . .

Number Seven: Quote, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008)

On the occasion of his acceptance, in London on May 10, 1983, of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

Extract:

> *Over a half century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of old people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened." Since then I have spent well-nigh 50 years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened."*

Number Eight: *The Dead*, published 1914, by James Joyce

(1882-1941)

I’m not a great admirer of Joyce’s writings, but one story by him that stirs my imagination is The Dead, especially the closing lines. The short story comes from the book, Dubliners, published in 1914. It is regarded as one of the greatest short stories in the English language. The protagonist, a teacher called Gabriel Conroy who, with his wife Gretta, arrives late to a party on a winter’s night in Dublin city, Ireland. During dinner, Gabriel begins a speech he has prepared, praising traditional Irish hospitality, observing that “we are living in a sceptical . . . thought-tormented age,” and referring to Aunt Kate, Aunt Julia and Mary Jane as the three graces.

The speech ends with a toast and a singalong. While preparing to leave the party, Gabriel finds his wife, looking sad and confused, standing at the top of the stairs. From another room, a dinner guest called Bartell D’Arcy, is singing ‘The Lass of Aughrim’. Gabriel and Gretta leave the party and head to the hotel where they are staying.

As they arrive at the hotel, Gretta seems distant and melancholic. When Gabriel asks her what is wrong, she tells him she is thinking about that song, ‘The Lass of Aughrim.’ She says it reminds her of a man named Michael Furey, who had courted her many years ago. He used to sing that song for her and he died of an illness aged seventeen. As Gretta falls asleep, Gabriel is saddened and hurt that Gretta felt this way about another man. He becomes sad and reflects upon the countless dead in living people’s lives, and observes that everyone he knows, himself included, will also die and be nothing more than a memory. As the story is ending, we are told that his eyes moved to the chair over which she had

thrown some of her clothes. As she lay in bed, he wondered at his riot of emotions of an hour before. From what had it proceeded? From his aunt’s supper, from his own foolish speech, from the wine and dancing, the merry-making when saying good-night in the hall, the pleasure of the walk along the river in the snow.

> *He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.*

Number Nine: *Day of the Locust*, published in 1939 by Nathanael West (1903-1940)

Set in 1930s Hollywood during the Great Depression, this is a story about a group of misfits who meet in search of the American Dream. But it’s more a parable of finding the abyss of a sewer pipe stuffed with outcasts and frauds, where the grotesque behaviour of the masses is satirically laid bare.

Extract:

> *Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, war. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing*.

Number Ten: Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967):

Stoney Grey Soil

In this bitter-sweet poem, Irishman Kavanagh laments a youthful, romantic life he never had due to the struggle and poverty of his Irish aesthetically bland, peasantry farm life in Monaghan. Based during the 1930/'40s, the poem portrays Kavanagh as a victim, who's metaphorically betrayed by the soil that deceived him and burgled his youth. Where other poets would romanticize the rural idyllic life of Ireland, Kavanagh's words paint a different picture, warts and all, on the reality of first-hand experience; let's just say it was personal.

However, in the final three stanzas, there is a sense he also has a fondness for the land, thus the nostalgia of memory and looking back in warm sadness; a kind of mourning, if you will. Where fellow Irish poet W.B. Yeats wrote about mysticism from his ivory tower, Kavanagh wrote about the hardships of rural life on top of steaming dunghills. Both poets were arguably two of the best scribes of the 20th century verse. Here is an extract from the poem:

O stony grey soil of Monaghan

The laugh from my love you thieved;

You took the gay child of my passion

And gave me your clod-conceived.

You clogged the feet of my boyhood

And I believed that my stumble

Had the poise and stride of Apollo

And his voice my thick tongued mumble . . .

There are more great writers I could have added to this list above but the ones I've selected are my favourites. Great writing holds a special place in most people's hearts and minds. Recently, a TV host made a comment about himself and how he was 'maths-phobic' because he was so bad at calculating numbers; many other people would claim a similar weakness with not a shred of embarrassment. But you will very rarely, if ever, hear them say they are dreadful at writing. This is because writing is an expression of the self: one's mind, thoughts and expressions. And no one wants to admit to being

an uncreative, syntactically challenged self. Meanwhile, long live great writing.

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