

Literature and Life

by Michael Curtis



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On August 11, 2021 a 21 year old former student in Leicester who possessed 70,000 white supremacist “repellent” documents on combat, homemade weapons, and bomb making instructions was convicted of possessing information useful for an act of terror, a conviction which usually means a prison sentence of 15 years. The student, Ben John, is an avowed neo-Nazi, a member of the Lincolnshire Fascist Underground, a member of the extreme right wing online, an opponent of gay people, and immigrants. The Judge, Timothy Spencer Q.C., in Leicester Criminal Court held that his crime was probably an act of teenage folly and an isolated incident and that he had not caused harm. He sentenced John to a suspended two-year prison term. More unusual, the Judge ordered John to give up researching right wing material, and sentenced him to reading the classics, advising him to start with Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and then Hardy and Trollope. John is required to return to court every four months to be tested on his reading.

To sentence a young neo-Nazi to go home to read British classics, instead of sentencing him to prison, is surprising and highly controversial. But the larger question, more difficult to answer, is whether the reading of high culture will change the mind of the offender, and reduce or eliminate the prejudice of his or her life. Does exposure to high culture, to great literature, enrich us , provide guiding principles of life and change one’s perspective?

Clearly the hope of Judge Spencer is that this neo-Nazi by

reading great literature will become an adjusted better person, more open minded and free of dogma or prejudice. The general argument by all advocates of a liberal education is founded on the conception that character and behavior are shaped by the educational process. This hope is based on the view that reading good literature, the classics, can change our thinking, mores, and beliefs, that it enriches one, and broadens one's knowledge and perspective. The hope is that reading good literature will encourage tolerance and reduce conflict, violence and crime, and will provide guiding principles of life as individuals learn about new experiences and gain more information. As a result, an individual will become a better person with a strong sense of humanist values and ethics.

Perhaps the most striking affirmation of this perspective comes from a statement usually attributed to C.S. Lewis, Irish writer and lay theologian whose writings are full of Christian themes. The statement reads that "literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides, and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become." Literature portrays the different facets of life, but although the border between fact and fiction is evident, sometimes the reader is so immersed that a character is believed to have an existence beyond the fiction. Yet, the issue remains: do fictional characters provide society with the guiding principles of life?

Even considering that generalizations about the impact of literature should be treated with caution since empirical investigations differ, at least three essential problems remain: first, does good literature change the way we think, or indeed can one derive ideas from literature about how one should live in a more desirable social way; second, what exact statements or principles do the classics convey; a third is that the authors of the significant works may be

unattractive, unappealing figures.

Let us look at the three works mentioned by Judge Stephen. It is a truth universally acknowledged that the 1813 Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a much loved book with its fascinating portraits of manners, marriage, class, and money in early 19th British society. It a romantic tale of the changing relationship of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, each exhibiting pride and prejudice at different times. It is also a subtle satire involving feelings and behavior of the characters, the effect of hasty judgments, incompetent if well-meaning parents, importance of both environment and heritage. What exactly is the delinquent Mr. John to take from the story to change him?

Or take the 1859 work, *A Tale of Two Cities*, a far, far better thing that Charles Dickens had ever written, a complex story, a historical novel dealing with the storming of the Bastille 50 years after it happened, a work with comic aspects but primarily one of death, resurrection, and transformation on both a personal and social level. How will Mr. John consider the issues in the book of good and evil, symbols of light and darkness, the danger of mob mentality and violence, the reign of terror, and a hard drinking cynic, Sydney Carlton, who gives up his life to save another.

And Shakespeare's 1601 play *Twelfth Night* presents a puzzle for Mr. John as it does for contemporary society. It is a comedy with humor and pathos, class struggle and social standing, but it is primarily focused on issues of uncertainty of gender and problem of identity. "Conceal me what I am, and be my aid, for such disguise as haply shall become the form of my intent."

It is a play of characters taking on new identities, lying, and disguising reality, one of sexual fluidity, homoerotic relationships and allusions, cross dressing heroine, transvestites, and gender confusion.

Going beyond Judge Spencer's suggestions into other books of high culture, similar problems will arise for Mr. John. What to make of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and its protagonist Jean Valjean whose 19 years in prison had turned him into a hardened criminal but who transformed himself into a successful social and peaceful being, struggling to lead a good life.

Or of Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, adventure novel, main theme of which is the story of imprisonment and revenge. Edmond Dantes, Count of Monte Cristo, originally a kind and innocent young man who is falsely accused and sent to prison where he becomes bitter and vengeful, consumed by hatred towards those who harmed him. And what will the neo-Nazi Mr. John make of Jewish characters, Fagin in *Oliver Twist* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The last problem for Mr. John is that some of the writers are not admirable people, not always tolerant or progressive. They include, among many more, Evelyn Waugh, Ezra Pound, fascist supporter, W.B. Yeats, supporter of eugenics, D.H. Lawrence who gave three cheers for the inventors of poison in previous generations. More recently, Philip Larkin and Philip Roth can be considered.

Philip Larkin, poet, novelist, librarian, whose centenary occurs in 2022, produced a small body of work, about 100 pages of poetry, as well as reviews of jazz music. He worked as a librarian his whole life, mostly at the University of Hull for 30 years. But, as shown in recent biographical studies of him, the picture is disillusioning. In his private correspondence Larkin was self-assertive, foul mouthed, made unpleasant racist remarks. This is surprising in view of his praise for black jazz musicians. He was a bigot not only about racial minorities, immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean, but also the working class, women in general, and leftist groups. In all an objectionable character, guilty of callous infidelities as well as a racist.

Philip Roth died in 2018, aged 85, a highly successful writer whose works took on or revealed his autobiographical character, American, Jewish, obsessed with sex. Roth did not live only for art. He was a hustler, a self-promoter, who spent considerable time networking and back scratching in order to win literary awards including a Pulitzer prize. One of his wives, the actress Claire Bloom, accused him of cruel behavior, of misogyny and being a control freak.

Dear Reader. Were you affected in any way, in your ideas or your character by your reading in high culture?