

## Is it fair to say that literature is another name for language which has no practical use?

Italo Calvino offers twin definitions of classic literature's practical effects: '[a] classic is a work which relegates the noise of the present to a background hum', and 'a work which persists as a background noise, even when a present that is totally incompatible with it holds sway'<sup>1</sup>. The tools of literature help us face our challenges, whether personal or societal; they are inherent in the texts, no matter the period, and provide a constant instructive 'hum'. The freedom to think for oneself and make decisions from experience is something drawn from literature, due to its unique emotional effects; in 1841, crowds thronged the docks of New York, awaiting the ships that carried the next instalment of Dickens' novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* and with it the fate of its protagonist, Little Nell. When Nell's death was confirmed, "whole crowds convulsed into tears"<sup>2</sup>. This psychological phenomenon was used by Nicholas Humphrey to illustrate the cognitive effects of fictional experience in his 1986 book *The Inner Eye*. Not only does the nature of literature make it more pervasive, but it has eternal relevance to a reader's preoccupations: in challenges to regimes of thought in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, literature works as a practical vehicle for freedom of expression. As this essay will demonstrate, the nature of literature as a detached medium, one that is fictional and appeals to its audiences on a more psychological level than overt politics, allows it to have a greater and more uncontested impact on progressions of thought, and therefore has a number of practical uses, such as propaganda during World War II and the Cold War.

Brian Aldiss calls Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* the first science fiction novel; its kickstarting of a wide-ranging field of scientific horror stories is testament to its ongoing relevance.<sup>3</sup> Its original

---

<sup>1</sup> Calvino, Italo. *Why Read the Classics?*. United States: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Glatt, Carra. "When Found, Make a Note of: Tracing the Source of a Dickensian Legend." *Nineteenth Century Studies* 28 (2014): 57–71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/ninecentstud.28.2014.0057>.

<sup>3</sup> Aldiss, Brian Wilson. *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. United Kingdom: Corgi, 1975.

title, 'The Modern Prometheus', recalls the ancient myth of the Greek demi-god who gave humanity the gift of fire, suffering awful consequences at the hands of Zeus. Here, Frankenstein attempts to take over God's role as creator of life, and suffers the consequences. Adam's exclamation to God in *Paradise Lost*, "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould Me man?", is the epigraph of its 1818 edition, exemplifying the religious warning in Shelley's work that playing God can be destructive. Released at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, it represented people's uncertainties of what this new age might bring, addressing issues of free will and a warning against the progressions of science and technology. Given the current climate surrounding near-human technologies, the existing science fiction literature still holds pedagogic value; both *Frankenstein* and the genre as a whole strengthen our understanding of the pursuits of humanity, as well as their risks.

H.G. Wells' 1897 novel *The War of the Worlds* is one of the earliest novels to address ideas of conflict with outer space; it reflected the contemporary geopolitical tensions around the British Empire, particularly the colonisation of the Aboriginal Tasmanians. Some argue that Wells was encouraging his readers to question the morality of imperialism itself, and the free will deserved by those colonised by European empires<sup>4</sup>. In his first chapter, Wells writes:

"And before we judge them [the Martians] too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought...upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?"<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Ball, Philip (18 July 2018). "What the War of the Worlds means now". *New Statesman*.

<sup>5</sup> Wells, H. G.. *The War of the Worlds*. United States: Lerner Publishing Group, 2017.

These views from a prominent social critic, if they had been expressed in a solely political manner through normal discourse, would have sparked more controversy and political division. Instead, they were communicated through the detached form of a novel, one extremely successful among both readers and critics<sup>6</sup>; this allows Wells to both convey his message in a more secure way, and connect with his audience on a more emotional level, by placing the reader in the shoes of the oppressed: literature can defamiliarise the injustices around us by positioning the reader as the victim. Through this means, Wells devoted his literary talents to the development of his progressive vision on a global scale. Society as a whole has difficulty in processing rapid transformations; this is where literature can help us. For example, artificial intelligence will inevitably revolutionise the workplace, leading to ethical questions about human purpose as we step into unfamiliar territory; it is literature's place to test and try out different forms of experience.

When considering the possible uses of literature in political and social contexts, it is vital to recognise the negative effects of manipulations of its influence: Grimm's Fairy Tales were praised by Adolf Hitler so strongly during World War II that the Allies warned against them, due to Hitler's presentation of the tales as praising racial purity and seeking racially pure marriage partners, such as Cinderella's rejection of her stepmother and marriage to the prince<sup>7</sup>. As Yuval Noah Harari said, "Any large-scale human cooperation — whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe — is rooted in common myths that exist only in people's collective imagination"<sup>8</sup>; the fact that literature was used so effectively as propaganda displays its ability to control, influence and shape political thought, but often the use of literature

---

<sup>6</sup> Beck, Peter J. (2016). *The War of the Worlds: From H. G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg and Beyond*. Bloomsbury Publishing

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas, Lynn H.. *Cruel World: The Children of Europe in the Nazi Web*. United Kingdom: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011

<sup>8</sup> Harari, Yuval N.. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. United Kingdom: HarperCollins, 2015

as propaganda can be manipulative and disastrous. Similarly, in *1984*, Orwell expresses the persecution of individual thinking through his protagonist's struggles in a totalitarian state modelled on Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia; the powerful satire was itself explicitly used by Western nations as anti-Soviet propaganda during the Cold War. Here, Orwell warns his audience of the dangers of control, communism and persecution of thought, introducing into the English lexicon phrases such as 'the Thought Police', 'doublethink' and 'Newspeak'<sup>9</sup>, displaying the novel's transformative impact.

Meanwhile, in the United States in 1953, Arthur Miller published *The Crucible*; a dramatised retelling of the Salem witch trials of Massachusetts in 1692, *The Crucible* describes the story of a group of girls led by Abigail Williams. When they accuse others in their town of witchcraft to conceal their own actions, a trial and investigation into the alleged crimes ensues. Miller wrote the play as a metaphor and criticism of McCarthyism, a policy enforced in the United States in the late 1940s and 50s as part of the Red Scare; under it, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) ruthlessly persecuted those accused of being communists, including Miller himself, who was convicted in 1956<sup>10</sup>. The policy was portrayed by Miller as corrupt and unjustified:

PARRIS This is a clear attack upon the court!

HALE Is every defence an attack upon the court? Can no one - ?

HARRIS All innocent and Christian people are happy for the courts in Salem! These people are gloomy for it.<sup>11</sup>

Parris' insistence that their testimony is an 'attack upon the court' reflects the way that the HUAC pressured those who testified before it, as well as the government's sheer determination

---

<sup>9</sup> Senn, Samantha. "All Propaganda Is Dangerous, but Some Are More Dangerous than Others: George Orwell and the Use of Literature as Propaganda." *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 3 (2015): 149–61.

<sup>10</sup> <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller-case.html>

<sup>11</sup> Miller, Arthur. *The Crucible*. N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012.

to root out ‘un-American’ communists. The form of literature as a medium of communication of political opinions in itself questions the nature of free speech; it was used, as shown here, as a tool for both propaganda for the government and of rebellion.

In recent years, literature has been a practical tool at the forefront of the battle for freedom of expression, particularly in August 2022 when author Salman Rushdie was the victim of an attack in New York. This recalled how his controversial work *The Satanic Verses* resulted in the issuing of a fatwa in 1989, a religious decree calling for Rushdie’s execution, with catastrophic geopolitical effects. As well as sparking a debate among Western intellectuals about freedom of speech, the attack put a spotlight on literature as a form of communication itself<sup>12</sup>; to paraphrase Margaret Atwood, words are by nature ambiguous, especially across different languages. Our attitudes towards politics, religion and the human condition are shaped by the literature and movements that preceded us, the principles and lessons of which are separated from political protest and rebellion by an intellectual and realist divide, whether consciously wielded by leaders and governments or not. Literature is, therefore, not at all another name for language with no practical use – however, it is easily manipulated, both as a tool for propaganda and rebellion. Whether it is our freedom of speech or the technological revolution, only by tuning in to Calvino’s ‘background hum’ can we make sense of our ever-changing world.

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/aug/15/salman-rushdie-free-speech-tyranny-satanic-verses>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aldiss, Brian Wilson. *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. United Kingdom: Corgi, 1975.

Ball, Philip (18 July 2018). "What the War of the Worlds means now". *New Statesman*.

Beck, Peter J. (2016). *The War of the Worlds: From H. G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg and Beyond*. Bloomsbury Publishing

Calvino, Italo. *Why Read the Classics?*. United States: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014.

Glatt, Carra. "When Found, Make a Note of: Tracing the Source of a Dickensian Legend." *Nineteenth Century Studies* 28 (2014): 57–71.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/ninecentstud.28.2014.0057>.

Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. United Kingdom: Random House, 2014.

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller-case.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/aug/15/salman-rushdie-free-speech-tyranny-satanic-verses>

Miller, Arthur. *The Crucible*. N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012.

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Senn, Samantha. "All Propaganda Is Dangerous, but Some Are More Dangerous than Others: George Orwell and the Use of Literature as Propaganda." *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 3 (2015): 149–61.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein (Modern English Translation)*. N.p.: Independently Published, 2019.

*The Age of Enlightenment: The Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, New American Library, 1956. Out of print. Second edition (2017) available online only.

*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Costa Rica: Inter-American Institute for Human Rights, 1999.

Wells, H. G.. *The War of the Worlds*. United States: Lerner Publishing Group, 2017.