

The Truth of Fiction: Literature as a Source of Insight into Social Conflict and Its Resolution

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Abstract

The study of literature, although relatively new to the field of peace and conflict studies, has proven to be a valuable way to develop our understanding of violent social conflicts and the possible methods of resolving or transforming them. Literary texts present students of human conflict and conflict resolution with an appreciation of the power of “thick” descriptions of the human experience and the problems with “thin” modes of expression. Narrative and literary works reveal the indelible marks that violence and conflict inscribe on those left in their wake. Examining conflict through literature also grants students access to the ethical and moral dilemmas that people face as they navigate complex and oppressive social systems. A graduate-level course in “Conflict and Literature” taught for the past ten years at George Mason University provides evidence of these uses and suggests the possibility of further pedagogical developments.

Keywords: literary approaches to conflict resolution, narrative theory, mass movements, social transformation, social injustice.

Scholars have been able to demonstrate that individuals make sense of experience by casting it in narrative form (Riessman, 1993: 4). Literary texts present students of human conflict and conflict resolution with an appreciation of the power of “thick” descriptions of the human experience and the problems with “thin” modes of expression. Narrative and literary works reveal the indelible marks that violence and conflict inscribe on those left in their wake.¹ Examining conflict through literature also grants students access to the ethical and moral dilemmas that people face as they navigate complex and oppressive social systems. Scholars and practitioners concerned with narrative approaches to conflict believe that social conflict is a function of the stories told as well as those that cannot be told or heard (Cobb, 2016). How might we understand the former and gain access to

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1 Violence may be direct or indirect and it can leave physical, mental and emotional scars. Galtung distinguishes between negative and positive peace, with the latter being the absence of social injustice (Galtung, 1969).

the latter? This article explores how literary insights may prove useful for theorists, practitioners and educators focused on conflict analysis and resolution.

A core premise of approaches to conflict informed by socio-narratology is that stories shape human conduct (Frank, 2010: 22). Narratives can be prescriptive and proscriptive in a manner that legitimizes or delegitimizes the past and frames the future or leaves it inchoate (Ibid.: 2, 10).² Scholars applying narratological lenses to social conflict have noted, in particular, that as conflict escalates, the narratives in circulation become increasingly simplified, to the point that they can be considered impoverished. Parties in conflict tend to engage in mutual delegitimation (attributing negative traits and intentions to others and positive traits and intentions to oneself). The determinativeness of conflict narratives reinforces certainty while precluding reflection and dialogue (Cobb, 2013: 38). At its worst, this sort of radicalized discourse supports fixed polarization, making the reform of personal (or group) attributes impossible and implying that those considered evil have to be permanently excluded from society or destroyed (Smith, 2010: 23). Conflict narratives also colonize everyday conversation in ways that can damage the moral identity of those denied the ability to speak and be heard.

Literature can be an antidote to simplification and polarization when it serves as a counterstory that resists damaging narratives while re-identifying subjects as competent members of the moral community (Nelson, 2001: xxi-xiii).³ It helps us see the consequences of moral hazards people face in conflict and their implications. The power of studying conflict through literature extends well beyond the realm of physical violence. Works detailing systemic social injustice and discrimination can offer a glimpse into a type of violence that hides in plain sight and manifests as unequal life chances.

Conflict analysis and resolution practitioners using narrative-informed approaches believe in engaging with stories that often drive parties to violence and resentment. In doing so, they use methods meant to restore narrative complexity in environments characterized by thin plotlines and binary moral frameworks (Cobb, 2013: 88).⁴ The inverse relationship between narrative complexity and conflict escalation is one reason why literature is so powerful in offering insights into a vast number of perspectives, many of which would not be perceptible otherwise. Arthur Frank argues that people can move from experience to politics only when their experience is narratable to themselves and others, and thus, made legible (Frank, 2016). The challenge of engaging conflict narratives is that over time, dominant groups tend to gain control of the narrative landscape, while those marginalized find it increasingly difficult to story their experiences and per-

- 2 Frank argues that stories inform lives in terms of what we must do; they not only report past events, they project possible futures and employ lives.
- 3 Nelson posits that individuals experience damaged moral identity when "...members of a particular social group are compelled by the forces circulating in an abusive power system to bear the morally degrading identities required by that system."
- 4 Cobb argues that escalation is inversely related to narrative complexity. The more complex the narrative, the less it closed it is, and the more access speakers have to it, the more they can alter its meaning through their participation.

spectives.⁵ When people become separated from narrative, they lose access to the production of meaning-making protest, and meaningful politics becomes impossible (Ranciere, 2006). Narrative-based approaches to resolving conflict take stories seriously by calling attention to how they shape experiences, influence mindsets and construct relationships (Winslade and Monk, 2008: 1). Dominant or hegemonic narratives are the strongest and most polarizing of all genres (Smith, 2005: 26). But works of imaginative literature can destabilize dominant narratives, granting readers access to better-formed stories (Cobb, 2013: 234-235).⁶

We understand that those who create and interpret literature do not do so for narrowly utilitarian purposes and may not appreciate having their work “ransacked” to provide insights to social analysts, peacemakers or scholars working in other fields. Indeed, there is a danger that those using literature for nonliterary purposes will perpetrate another sort of simplification by attempting to extract usable “lessons” from multifarious, ambiguous, sometimes mysterious, works. Even so, exploring the connection between imaginative literature and the world of social relationships offers analysts and activists rich rewards. For example, fiction often serves as a gateway to vicarious experiences, with others not normally present in one’s everyday life. Historian Lynn Hunt argues that literature played a vitally important role in the evolution of human rights in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as readers experienced empathy through encounters with fictitious characters found in novels (Hunt, 2007: 17).⁷ According to Hunt, “Everyone would have rights only if everyone could be seen as in some fundamental way alike. Equality was not just an abstract concept or political slogan. It had to be internalized in some fashion” (Ibid.: 27).⁸ This sort of analysis highlights the power of compelling fiction to evoke transformative encounters with others, expanding the human capacity for empathy – a necessary even if insufficient criteria for conflict resolution.

Arundhati Roy’s award-winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, is emblematic of the power of great literature to challenge, complicate and elaborate our understanding of human conflict. As intricate details fall together in seemingly reverse order, Roy brings readers along for a journey into an Indian family’s struggle to cope with an oppressive, conflict-ridden system, seen often through the eyes of a

- 5 The narrative landscape consists of a set of dominant narratives that provide context and support for a given overarching narrative. Although there are other, perhaps marginalized, stories in a given landscape, they may not surface if dominant narratives compress that which does not contribute to the dominant narrative’s coherence or closure (Cobb *et al.*, 2016).
- 6 Cobb describes better-formed stories as a way to add complexity to the thin, binary plotlines that drive conflict. Better stories are superior “...in terms of conflict resolution pragmatics if speakers can construct themselves as more complex beings, for, indeed, to be a ‘work of art’ is not to present Self as perfect, but to present the (ironic) wholeness of both positive and negative positions.”
- 7 Hunt traces the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the French Revolution and the Enlightenment.
- 8 Hunt does not make a causal argument. She writes that “...novels did not produce the changes in empathy traced here all on their own, but a closer examination of their reception does show the new learning of empathy in operation” (Hunt: 42). She also points out (at 28) that children, slaves, servants, the insane and women were not immediately viewed as capable of reason or independence to decide for themselves – both criteria for moral autonomy.

child. Roy introduces readers to characters who, as adults, tend to accept and reinforce class, gender, religious, political and caste discriminatory practices. As children, however, the same characters struggle to make sense of it all by testing boundaries and asking questions. Coming of age denies the protagonists the freedom to act, speak and question their circumstances.⁹ They quickly learn that stepping out of bounds in an oppressive system carries severe consequences in the form of social sanctions, many of which they have internalized. In terms of conflict resolution practice, then, we learn from the children in Roy's work who identify and question the deeply embedded injustices woven into the fabric of society.

Roy's novel also provides insights into the consequences of systemic violence on individuals, families and societies. Like each member of her extended family, the chief protagonist, Rahel, gets buffeted about by a system that strictly designates the sacred and the profane in the form of "...laws that lay down who should be loved and how" (Roy, 2008: 31). Adherence to prevailing conceptions of that which is "good, right, and desirable" in this violent and unjust system harms every character who spends her days longing for something or someone she will never have. In a sense, each individual gets stuck inside "...narratives they did not make (by themselves) and cannot control, which, in turn renders them victims of their own stories" (Cobb, 2013: 47). Systemic violence induces deep and abiding sorrow, which robs the characters of their ability to give and receive mercy and compassion.¹⁰ This complex story also allows readers to bear witness to the human consequences of colonialism, capitalism, imperialism and environmental degradation. As we get to know Roy's characters and politics in all their complexity, we see how "...societal oppression adversely affects the entire society, the oppressors and oppressed alike, by dehumanizing them and giving certain groups advantages at the expense of others" (Hansen: 406).¹¹ Roy's work makes us dramatically aware of our complicity in structural violence, as well as the devastating consequences of getting trapped in conflictual narratives.

Literary works can also destabilize dominant or master narratives when the subject matter reveals stories that are seldom told or heard (Nelson, 2001: 6).¹² In this sense, literature is a source of "disruptive" thinking and ideas. When purposefully and artistically crafted, literature stimulates the moral imagination and functions as counter narrative "...launched at the logic, coherence, and closure of a dominant narrative as a means to upend it" (Cobb, 2013: 46). Stories told from marginalized perspectives often "thicken" (Geertz, 1973) thin narratives, adding complexity and context (Cobb, 2013: 46). Perhaps the classic example of this type of counter narrative is Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (originally

9 The character of Estha simply stops speaking after a series of tragedies unfold.

10 The exception to this condition is perhaps Rahel's relationships with her brother Estha. They are the only two who appear able to provide any sense of comfort to one another, and in doing so, violate the prevailing rules, norms and laws.

11 Even though Roy's characters lose access to the production of meaning, Roy retains access to protest and politics by writing and telling the story as a form of contestation.

12 Nelson defines dominant or master narratives as, "...the stories found lying about in our culture...consisting of stock plots and readily recognizable character types, repositories of common norms...exercise[ing] a certain authority over our moral imagination."

published in 1884), a story about the antebellum American South, told from the perspective of a poor white child and an escaped slave, which exposes dominant narratives of race, slavery, social respectability and family honor to scathing reconsideration (Twain, 2003).¹³ As another example, children's book author Ezra Jack Keats received negative criticism for featuring a black child in his book, *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962). Keats, who is white and who faced anti-Semitism in his life, argued that he put black characters in his books because "they're there." He said that they have "always been there, but we've never seen them – we need to see them" (Neary, 2016). Conflict analysis and resolution practitioners often try to develop better-formed stories by examining, and sometimes challenging, the dominant narratives found in textbooks in order to plant the seeds of a more peaceful future.

Another illustration of the power of literature to undermine and complexify conflictual narratives is provided by well-developed stories about the Western intervention in Vietnam. A thin narrative of the war might simply elaborate the prevailing images, positioning and identities associated with various combatants. United States military forces and diplomats were initially pictured as the "good guys" who got bogged down in a quagmire while fighting the communist North Vietnamese Army, while the Viet Cong (National Liberation Front) fighters were "bad guys" who did not fight honourably, often hiding among the people. (The North Vietnamese were considered outside interlopers, funded and manipulated by the Soviets and Chinese.) The casual American reference to the country of "Vietnam" as a war in common parlance is indicative of the master narrative's presence and power. It was not until the late 1990s that American academics took a serious interest in peace activists who had previously been "ignored or delegitimized," including antiwar veterans (Hunt: 1).¹⁴ Historian David Cortright calls veteran resistance the most remarkable and least known dimension of the antiwar movement (Cortright: 164-165).¹⁵ Literary works, some predating U.S. involvement in the Southeast Asian conflict, add additional complexity to the Vietnam War's legacy.

Two fictional accounts of Western involvement in Vietnam tell stories that are as refreshing as they are relevant: Graham Greene's classic novel, *The Quiet American*, and Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Sympathizer*. Amazingly, Greene's prescient work was published in 1955, well before U.S. Secretary of Defense McNamara and the so-called Whiz Kids attempted to apply business principles to the decidedly human affair that is war. Beyond the predictive quality of the book, Greene provides an unforgettable portrait of American naïveté, misguided idealism and ruthlessness through his character Pyle, the overconfident Harvard graduate-turned-CIA officer who is complicit in making an increasingly violent situation much worse. Another hallmark of exceptional fic-

13 In 1935, Ernest Hemingway said of the book, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*."

14 Hunt argues that this effort to explore "neglected constituencies" shifted the spotlight away from the dominant narratives of the 1960s to uncover a complicated period in U.S. history.

15 Cortright found survey data that one in every four enlisted soldiers participated in some form of dissident activity. See William Rae *et al.* (1972: 25).

tion shines through as Greene's love triangle, made up of the British journalist (and narrator) Fowler, the American Pyle and Phuong, a Vietnamese woman, serves to symbolize the conflict and tensions unleashed during the European colonization of Vietnam and the subsequent Cold War-era U.S. military intervention. Perhaps purposefully, the object of Fowler and Pyle's desire, Phuong, never voices her wants or needs. She just tries to remain standing, surviving unpredictable changes as powerful forces shift the ground beneath her.

The more recent debut novel, *The Sympathizer*, brilliantly grants the reader access to a Vietnamese perspective of the same war, something sorely missing in American culture and folklore dominated by simplistic narratives and images that obscure more than they reveal. For example, sociologist Jerry Lembcke critiques one of the most oft-produced images of the Vietnam-era, "...that of a woman spitting on a uniformed veteran just off the plane" as a case of false representation, given that most peace activists viewed veterans as natural allies rather than enemies, and played an important role in organizing and assisting them (Lembcke, 1998). By contrast, Nguyen's Vietnamese narrator announces from the beginning of the novel that he is a man with "two faces," a double agent who arrived in Los Angeles after the fall of Saigon.¹⁶ Through a variety of twists and turns, he ironically participates in the filming of a Vietnam War movie, which unwittingly elaborates the very master narrative the book was written to destabilize. In an interview with News Public Radio, Nguyen argues that such movies, even when purportedly antiwar, "...cast Americans as the central subjects of history." He recalls being traumatized by Vietnam War movies as a child, along with other American children of Vietnamese descent who watched their countrymen being slaughtered as American audiences cheered.¹⁷

The complexity of Nguyen's characters, as well as his own multidimensional identity, shed light on misguided assumptions about the war. His work presents readers with perspectives that many will not have stopped to consider, such as that of a Vietnamese child or a nonspeaking movie "extra" struggling to make sense of the war through films such as *Rambo* and *Apocalypse Now*.¹⁸ Furthermore, Nguyen's nuanced approach to his community's narrative may provide what Sara Cobb describes as an "...opportunity to claim lived experience which has been denied and in doing so, materializes subjectivity in order to be constituted as a speaking subjects."¹⁹ Great literature provides dramatically different ways to see seemingly familiar situations. Equally important, it can expose our complic-

16 Perhaps what gives the book part of its power is the fact that Nguyen fled with his family as a refugee in 1975 to the United States and experienced the Vietnam War narrative growing up between two worlds, like his characters.

17 "A dark, funny – and Vietnamese – look at the Vietnam War, *All Things Considered*, 11 April 2015, available at: <www.npr.org/2015/04/11/398728517/a-dark-funny-and-vietnamese-look-at-the-vietnam-war> (accessed 7 February 2017).

18 Nguyen also infuses his work with dark humour, noting that the Vietnam War was the first time losers wrote the history.

19 Cobb argues that in the evolution of conflict narratives, those silenced are delegitimized, and their experiences denied and cancelled; their subjectivity never materializes and they can never constitute themselves as a speaking subject (Cobb, 2013: 95).

ity in circulating deeply flawed, one-sided stories in such a way as to make ourselves feel better about our history, our people and our community, often at the expense of others. Stories such as Graham Greene's and Viet Thanh Nguyen's show us how violence, once unleashed, can disable our capacity to deliberate and to engage in meaningful conversations. Literary fiction also offers a pathway to explore culturally distinct others in their real complexity, effectively challenging conflictual master narratives and those who benefit from these stories' elaboration.

Those engaged in conflict analysis and resolution are just beginning to discover the practical applications to their field of literary analysis. For example, scholar and practitioner Samantha Hardy has developed an innovative approach using genre analysis. Her method of engagement includes analysis of the dominant narrative genre(s) in circulation. She suggests that the elements that make certain stories *melodramatic* exacerbate conflict and undermine its resolution. Melodrama, Hardy argues, conceals narrative complexity and renders the representation of people and their character one-dimensional. Melodramatic stories focus on what people *do*, not *why* they do it. Their narrow focus on individual situations draws our attention away from the systemic aspects of violent systems. The classic melodrama features a passive "heroine" character who anxiously awaits dream justice while remaining dependent upon active and heroic (mostly male) others. The solution to challenges raised in melodrama are simple: wait for a saviour who will restore the status quo. Hardy proposes tragedy as a more constructive genre for conflict resolution, given tragedy's complexity and its emphasis on the capacity for learning through self-reflection (Hardy, 2008: 247). Her approach suggests the usefulness and possible transformative power of rethinking the narrative genre driving conflict.

One illustration of the uses of literature to develop a deeper understanding of conflict and the possibilities of its resolution is a landmark course in Conflict and Literature that has been offered to graduate students at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution of George Mason University (S-CAR) on a regular basis since 2007. To our knowledge, this was the first such course offered by a graduate programme in the field of peace and conflict studies. Possibly because of the tendency of many scholars to define scholarly credibility in purely social-scientific terms, it remains a relatively rare offering in current conflict studies programmes, although courses using literature to shed light on social conflicts have become part of the curricula in many departments of English, comparative literature, anthropology and culture studies.

The materials studied in Conflict and Literature represent several types of imaginative literature, principally novels, but also including short stories, plays, films, "creative" works of nonfiction and poetry. In Fall 2016, the three-credit graduate seminar began with the study of a poem (W.B. Yeats' "Easter 1916"), then proceeded to consider short stories by Herman Melville ("Billy Budd, Sailor") and Franz Kafka ("In The Penal Colony" and "The Hunger Artist"), and continued

with readings of Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*; Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*; James Baldwin's memoir, *Notes of a Native Son*; and two more recent novels mentioned earlier in this article: *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen. In addition, participating students read selections from Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (2008), viewed and discussed a film (Philip Noyce's 2002 production of Graham Greene's novel, *The Quiet American*) and wrote and presented their own short stories based on social conflicts with which they were familiar.²⁰

The purposes of the course, as stated in the syllabus, are these:

- To study how to read/interpret written and oral texts (including oral statements)
- To learn some of what imaginative literature (mainly, but not exclusively, novels) can teach us about the causes, motives, dynamics and possibilities of resolving violent social conflicts
- In particular, to deepen our understanding of the human dimensions of conflicts involving mass movements for social transformation
- To practice interpreting a range of imaginative works and genres, including novels, short stories, plays, poetry, memoirs and films
- To practice creating imaginative works of our own.

Each of these purposes deserves a brief commentary.

Interpretation of texts. In a sense, this focus, even more than the goal of developing specific knowledge about the causes or dynamics of conflict, is primary. Ordinarily, the study of research methodologies in conflict studies (as in other "social studies") is divided into quantitative and qualitative realms, with qualitative methods focused largely on the tools needed to conduct surveys and analyze survey data, to do ethnographic research, to design psychological tests, and the like. The interpretation of texts, if considered at all, is generally associated with more specialized disciplines, such as literary, legal or religious studies. Yet, it seems clear, hermeneutical skills are essential to the development of competent conflict analysts and conflict resolution theory and practice. Without them, how can one understand in depth the competing narratives of parties in conflict? How can one "hear" the complex subtexts present in statements about the conflict's history and nature, the characters of the parties, their aims and desires, or what will be required to achieve resolution and reconciliation? Moreover, in addition to these generic skills, the analyst/practitioner needs to understand the specific interpretative problems associated with conflicts related to religious, legal, political or even literary texts.²¹ The goal, of course, is to understand textual issues in

20 Relevant portions of the course syllabus containing citations for the works mentioned here are attached as an Appendix to this article.

21 For an example of a social dispute involving a literary text, see the PBS documentary, "Born To Trouble: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" (produced by WGBH Educational Foundation as part of PBS "Culture Shock" series, 2000). See also Rawls (2011).

their socio-economic, cultural, psychological and political contexts, but this can hardly be done without a grasp of the “leeways” of interpretation.²²

Understanding conflicts. As we know, human conflicts and the possibilities (or impossibility) of their resolution provide the raw material for virtually all works of imaginative literature. Selectivity, therefore, is required to provide pedagogical coherence to the study of conflict and literature. One strategy, adopted earlier in the development of the George Mason course, was to select readings focusing on a particular type or context of conflict. Early themes included colonialism and anti-colonial struggles; revolutionary movements; terrorism and counterterrorism; and racial, gender- or class-based conflicts. This sort of theme setting had the advantage of permitting comparisons between diverse authors (and different genres) dealing with the same general topic. In considering colonialism, for example, students could compare the critical but conflicted view of the colonial enterprise expressed by E.M. Forster’s narrator in *A Passage to India* (1924) with George Orwell’s more acerbic but still Eurocentric treatment of the same subject in *Burmese Days* (1934), and both of these with the “native” perspectives represented by works such as Gillo Pontecorvo’s film, “The Battle of Algiers” (1966) and Chinua Achebe’s modern classic, *Things Fall Apart* (1996). In time, however, this method of classification came to seem unduly artificial and limiting. Instead, the seminar focused on more general themes reflecting questions of current concern to students of conflict – for example, the nexus between individual motivation and social action, and the relationships between historical memory, collective violence and reconciliation.²³

A brief example: from the eras of Miguel de Cervantes and Jane Austen to our own, narratives by accomplished writers have thrown new light on the connections between personal development and intergroup struggles. For this reason alone, literature is worth studying as a source of understanding of conflict. If one compares most scholarly approaches to terrorist motivation, for example, with Andre Malraux’s portrait of the terrorist Ch’en Ta Erh in his novel of the Chinese Revolution, *Man’s Fate* (1933), one begins to appreciate the unique power of great literature to integrate the realms of personality and politics. By making the tortured Ch’en a product of a Christian education, giving him speeches in which he vows to “multiply the martyrs” and make a religion of terrorism, and illustrating the role of faith in apparently secular struggles, Malraux displays insights that have become even clearer in our own age (Malraux, 1990).²⁴ The fact that these interconnections are often expressed metaphorically, as in the Fowler/Pyle/Huong “love triangle” discussed earlier in connection with Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, does not make them any less revealing (Ibid.: 9-10). On the contrary, thanks to Greene, one sees how Pyle’s thoughtless, romantic idealism and

22 As Marc Gopin has pointed out, the fact that clerical officials and scholars of the Abrahamic religions share many common understandings regarding the interpretation of sacred texts opens the door to dialogue among them. See his *Between Eden and Armageddon: The future of world religions, violence, and peacemaking* (2002).

23 Other focal questions are suggested by several of the final paper topics assigned in this course. For a list of these topics, see Appendix A, *infra*.

24 For a similarly enlightening treatment of Russian terrorism, see Albert Camus (1964).

Tom Sawyer-ish lust for adventure gestate a brutal neocolonial war, while Fowler's selfless love for Phuong compels him, finally, to abandon his former attitude of disenchanting neutrality and to dirty his hands in violent conflict.

In the George Mason course, some contextual coherence was provided by the selection of readings concerned with *mass movements for social transformation*. The critical factor, however, was the use of diverse political and aesthetic perspectives to create the "distance" referred to earlier in this article as an aid to reconsideration of dominant narrative dualities and stereotypes. A key product of such reconsideration is *complexification*: the process, well described by Sara Cobb, in which the simplified, intense dualities typical of conflict narratives are replaced by a more nuanced, multifarious discourse (Cobb, 2013).

Consider, for example, the image of the violent revolutionary actor. In the case of conscious, organized mass movements such as the (abortive) Irish rebellion of 1916, is one to consider the violent rebel a hero or a monster? The answer, in a poem such as Yeats' "Easter 1916," is both ... and more than either. In a manner that modern readers still find unsettling, the poem both immortalizes the Irish rebels, who will be remembered "wherever green is worn," and throws a tragic light on their fanaticism ("too much sacrifice can make a stone of the heart"). According to the poet, the revolutionary's single-mindedness is unnatural:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.

But, then again, so is the process (akin to creating a work of art) by which living human beings become historical icons and inspirers of nationalism.

And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Poetry, one may think, is particularly well suited to replace partisan dualism with disturbing ambiguities such as "a terrible beauty." But novels can have a similar impact. Complexification also results when one reconsiders the conventional duality between a totalitarian system such as Gilead, the male supremacist dictatorship described by Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and freedom-loving resisters such as Atwood's flawed but courageous heroine, Offred. *The Handmaid's Tale* does not abandon or reverse the oppressor/oppressed duality; on the

contrary, it makes the power asymmetry more horrifying by directly sexualizing it. But Atwood complicates the picture by revealing, first, that the overthrow of the old Enlightenment-based order was abetted by women's craving for personal security and "protection," and, second, that structurally violent systems such as Gilead are inherently unstable because of their inability to satisfy the basic human needs of even the elite. Oppressors such as Offred's "Commander" become inveterate rule-breakers, undermining their own system's legitimacy, because of the acute dissatisfaction engendered by the absence of spontaneous human relationships. Without denying the reality of oppression, *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals the limitations of coercive power as a method of regime-maintenance and of liberation.

Gilead is a terrorist state, to be sure, combining the top-down capital punishment of rebels with ghastly rituals unleashing the repressed violence of the (female) mob on alleged dissenters. But it is also a *discursive* order sustained by habitual linguistic performances instantiating attitudes and practices of female subservience. Names such as "Offred" (Of Fred) and "Ofglen" (Of Glen) replace the handmaids' original feminine names. Exchanged ritual phrases (e.g., "Praise be!", "Blessed by the fruit!" "May it open!") are both a defense against state terror and a method of constituting the oppressive order. George Orwell's 1984 also associated a particular form of discourse (which Orwell called "Newspeak") with a totalitarian order, but Newspeak was an artificial, state-imposed jargon of limited utility, while the religious language of *The Handmaid's Tale*, with its popular and traditional resonances, suffuses the society. Liberation, from Atwood's perspective, must therefore involve a rebirth of de-ritualized language: a discursive revolution in which people cease collaborating with the system linguistically and recover their "names."

A range of imaginative works and genres. The diversity of genres and sub-genres represented in the readings has the additional advantage of focusing attention on the potential limitations as well as strengths of literary frameworks for understanding conflict. The intimate, indeed, inseparable relationship between form and content means that narrative forms and conventions will have a powerful role to play in shaping and limiting authorial insights.²⁵ Suppose, for example, that the author's prime subject of concern is social transformation, a large-scale, often lengthy process implicating the attitudes and actions of large numbers of people. How can this sort of theme be accommodated within the framework of the novel, which customarily features a relatively small number of featured characters? More difficult still, how can it be handled by the writer of a short story or a filmmaker? The first pedagogical task implied by such questions is to help students become aware of the relevant artistic forms and their power to shape perceptions. The second is to study how authors attempt to use them to best advantage and overcome their limitations, or else, allow themselves to be mastered by them.

25 In *The content of the form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), Hayden White argues convincingly that historical writing as well as imaginative literature are characterized by the same narrative challenges.

Franz Kafka's short story, "In the Penal Colony," provides an intriguing example of the challenges of literary form – in this case, the allegory. The story dramatizes a social transformation in which an *ancien regime* of criminal justice – a nightmare of mechanized torture infused by religious values – is decaying, very likely to be replaced by a more modern, rational, allegedly humane order. Kafka personifies these developments by creating an allegory centring on four generically named characters. The Officer, an authoritative figure, is in charge of a machine that executes prisoners by inscribing a judicial sentence in their flesh (their "sentence" thus becomes a literal – and lethal – sentence). The Condemned is an unresisting prisoner strapped into the machine. A functionary known as the Soldier operates the mechanism, and a cosmopolitan outsider called the Explorer (or Traveller, or Researcher, depending upon the translation) furnishes the story's primary point of view. Two further characters remain offstage: the old Commandant, who created this system, and the new Commandant, who is said to disapprove of it and to advocate modernizing reforms.

The allegorical form, in general, is not easy to manage. Using characters as symbols frequently turns them into nonhuman abstractions, just as the plot can seem little more than a reflection of predetermined philosophical or moral positions. Kafka's protagonists, however, retain their human complexity and internal contradictions, characteristics essential to the story's unexpected plot twists and complex, contradictory "messages." Personal transformations exemplify and comment on social transformations. The Officer, apparently a sadistic perpetrator of mechanized torture, later stands revealed as a faith-driven martyr to the collapsing system. The Condemned, once liberated from imminent death, soon exhibits the former detachment and mechanical fixation of the Officer. The Explorer, a time-traveller, as it were, from a more humane and modern age, refuses to help the Officer retain the old system, but turns his back on its victims as well, heartlessly forcing them to remain imprisoned on the island. And even the machine (which one may also consider a "character") turns out to have a mind of its own. These unexpected but deeply logical turns of plot and character throw a troubling new light on the original situation, the decay of the medieval system of justice and the birth of the modern state. Is the modern system better, as we like to think? Is it worse? Or are these two cultures incommensurable? Despite the undoubted viciousness of the old system, a sense of loss pervades the narrative, and the reader is left, without closure, to puzzle out the answer for herself.²⁶

Create imaginative works of our own. As the George Mason course developed, perhaps the greatest surprise was to discover that the creative writing assignment, originally conceived of as an optional activity for interested students, would come to be viewed by virtually all of them as the capstone experience of the

26 In a similar way, students quickly grasped the apparent contradiction between the Hollywood-inspired "star system" in film and Gillo Pontecorvo's attempt to dramatize the Algerian Revolution in "The Battle of Algiers" (1966). Pontecorvo's response was to film the story in the style of a grainy documentary, to use actors who had been revolutionary activists in Algiers, and to intercut their scenes with voiceover announcements by the National Liberation Front and crowd scenes featuring close-ups of recognizable individuals, who thus became "semi-stars," rather than "extras."

seminar. The theory motivating the assignment was the notion that telling a conflict story themselves (a narrative that might be based either on personal experience or a combination of scholarship and imagination), students would come to understand the sort of narrative choices made both by artists and by others attempting to describe a conflict, including the conflicting parties, reporters aiming for objectivity and would-be conflict resolvers.

For example: how should the story begin? Who (if anyone) should be saddled with responsibility for picking the fight? Which contextual factors or underlying causes should be deemed relevant, and how should their relevance be demonstrated? How would the action develop after the conflict became overt, and how would it reveal the motives and characters of the interested parties? Which issues in dispute would turn out to be of critical importance and which extraneous? How would the conflict and its characters evolve – and what possible endings could the story have? Was a happy ending possible, or was conflict resolution a utopian fantasy?

Student interest in the activity grew to the point that, as part of the last two iterations of the course, students organized their own workshops to work together on their papers. This afforded them opportunities to consider other artistic choices previously discussed in connection with the course readings. What should the narrator's voice sound like? What perspective or point of view should govern the presentation? What images and verbal devices would make readers feel the way the writer wanted them to feel? The papers themselves turned out to be far more interesting and creatively written than expected, in some cases, reaching close to publishable quality. To some extent, this may have reflected the students' extensive exposure to well-constructed dramatic works: good films, plays and television series as well as the course materials themselves. But there were other reasons as well, having to do with the students' backgrounds and the limitations of prevailing social science paradigms in conflict studies.

In evaluating the seminar after its conclusion, students commented extensively on how revealing, inspiring, and, for some, therapeutic they found the role of the creative artist to be. Some students hailed from conflict-ridden backgrounds – socio-economic and geographical zones of extreme insecurity or dysfunctional families or communities. Others had other reasons for enrolling in a programme of peace and conflict studies. In either case, the usual methods of studying social problems by detaching one's own history and predilections from the "data" left students without opportunities to relate their personal experiences and subjectivities to the materials being studied. A great many, according to their comments, found it refreshing (a "relief" was how one student put it) to cross the boundary between recording and interpreting other people's stories and creating their own. The relief, one might speculate, comes, in part, from discovering that the great divide between the realms of personal subjectivity and scientific objectivity is a myth, that one cannot talk coherently or usefully about conflict without telling stories, and that one's own narratives can be compared with and linked to other people's stories in such a way as to generate intersubjective understanding. Or, more simply, it may just be the result of offering an academic stamp of appro-

val to a natural human activity – telling stories – that serious students outside the arts are seldom encouraged to practice.

Literature clearly offers more than the usual academic insights into conflict. Well-developed stories provide an opportunity for self-reflection at a safe distance from “real” conflicts and permit students to see dynamic systems in operation from a variety of perspectives. Studying conflict through literature highlights how the deeply personal aspects of human life shape and are shaped by the prevailing social and political context. For these reasons, literary works have much to contribute to our thinking about conflict analysis and resolution. Using a narrative lens, scholars and practitioners can develop creative ways to take stories seriously, especially those based in civil society, a perspective often excluded from elite-level discourse. Seeing conflict from traditionally marginalized perspectives adds complexity to the simplistic narratives circulating in a conflict environment. Focusing on better-formed stories requires attention to the meanings behind the narratives of those in conflict, something uncommon in interventions involving hegemonic powers or coalitions of state-based actors. Narrative approaches may also avoid the tendency of some practitioners to attempt to mitigate conflicts by imposing a false sense of symmetry among parties where it does not exist. There is value in seeing conflict through the eyes of others because literary works grant us access to the implications of the legacy of power and abuse and that, while fictional, take flight from very real situations. This approach also gives us important clues about how we might begin to understand conflict in all its complexity before we go about trying to resolve it.

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