

A Cheap Psychoanalysis of Major 20th Century Authors

I. Introduction

Whenever anyone makes any type of art, no matter what form it takes, it is always a form of self-expression. This means you may be under the impression that *Lord of The Rings* was about a hobbit trying to destroy an evil ring to prevent the dark lord from rising again. However the whole story is really about World War I. Everything about a story rises out of the primordial soup that is the author's psyche. If you really want to understand the reason things are the way they are in this person's made up world, then it makes sense to understand their personal history and what makes them tick. Once we do this then we can understand why they chose their subject matter, how their personal particularities helped them find their voice, and what they chose to say with it. This essay will try to shed a little light on seven major 20th Century authors.

The fact is that no matter how ethereal, abysmal, or unique... The material in every novel all comes from the same place: the author. No matter what the material, it could be the most fantastic fiction or the most mundane and boring political commentary, everyone sticks to writing about what they know. For instance, if I was writing something, my main character would probably be some tough brawler with a rapier wit, a love for beautiful exotic women, and an all-around bad attitude. In essence my reader would be assuming I was telling them an epic tale, but in reality I would only be telling them about myself. This would still be true for the setting, events, and other characters in my work. They would all be little pieces of my life thrown together to make a great collage that is my book. The same is true for every author or artist throughout history. These artists go through their lives collecting little fragments of experience and sensation, which they eventually use to build their art and craft their distinctive voice. If you show me someone that cannot create great art I will show you someone who has led a boring and uneventful life. For example, Edger Allan Poe's life was filled with tragedy, anxiety, and death. So too was his art. It would be impossible for Poe to create a world void of tragedy and horror because his reality was steeped in it. The stories might not be literal autobiography but there is always something of the author's imagination, emotions, and experience in every work of art. So the same remains true for the books we will examine. We will look into the minds of a select group of authors 20th century authors. We will examine a combination of their past and the unique things they have said in their works. We will do this in an attempt to understand the authors and their messages more clearly.

II. Nawal el Saadawi

The first author I am going to psychoanalyze is Nawal el Saadawi. The first and most defining aspect about her is the fact that she is a hardcore Egyptian Feminist. Nawal El Saadawi was born in 1931 in Kafr Tahla, a small village outside of Cairo. Dr. El Saadawi was raised in a large household with eight brothers and sisters. An important background fact about her and possibly a very dramatically traumatizing fact about her is that she was "circumcised" at the age of six. "Circumcised" is a nice way of saying that El Saadawi's genitals were mutilated by the rituals of a backward, oppressive, and chauvinistic religion and state. In fact a 2007 survey of 1,000 married women in Egypt, of whom more than 90% were circumcised, found that almost 70% of circumcised women experienced some sort of sexual dysfunction. However, most of them did not associate circumcision with what they

were experiencing. Marital disharmony and socio-economic pressures were blamed instead. El Saadawi would later address this issue in 1977 when she published her most famous work, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which covered a host of topics relative to Arab women, such as aggression against female children and female genital mutilation, prostitution, sexual relationships, marriage, and divorce and Islamic fundamentalism.

A strange fact remains that El Saadawi's family allowed her to be educated, which is considered to be progressive. In spite of the odds being stacked against her and being the victim of no small amount of sexual bias, she managed to work her way into the University of Cairo and she graduated in 1955 with a degree in psychiatry. After going through all of those struggles El Saadawi practiced psychiatry and eventually rose to become Egypt's Director of Public Health (an extremely unlikely position for a woman). During her professional rise to prominence she would meet the love of her life, Sherif Hetata. The two of them obviously shared the same love of leftist political doctrine. In addition, she probably was attracted to the fact that Hetata had done a staggering 13 years of hard prison time for fighting "The Man" and being a political dissident.

It was around this time that El Saadawi started to write and unsurprisingly her work centered on the struggles of Arab women, their sexuality, and their legal status. Obviously, this didn't go over too well with the with the Islam-O- Fascists at large in the Egyptian government, and the bigots at large around the world, so her works were banned in Egypt. After years of championing human rights in the Arab world El Saadawi said one too many bad things about the Sadat administration and was thrown in prison. However, even a prison hell hole was not enough to silence her and she continued to speak out and organize women while in the slammer, writing on toilet paper with an eyebrow pencil. She was eventually released from her incarceration. However, a slew of death threats combined with an opportunity as a professor here in the United States would eventually lead her to relocate.

These life experiences would ultimately drive her to write *God Dies by the Nile*. The novella primarily revolves around the day-to-day suffering of peasants in a small village in Egypt. In the foreword of the novella El Saadawi describes the exact memory from her past which led her to write novella.

"I was six or seven years of age when I heard about a poor girl who had drowned herself in the Nile – she had been working in the house of the village mayor. My grandmother whispered something that I didn't understand in my mother's ear. At the age of 10 I heard about another girl who fled during the night. She was a servant in the same house, 14 years old and pregnant. Nobody accused the mayor, except a young peasant who had been planning to marry the girl. He was shot in the fields and no-one was captured. In a dream, I saw the mayor in prison accused of raping servant girls and robbing the women of their harvest. When I told my grandmother, she said it impossible, that the mayor was a God and no one could punish him. She said that the mayor exploited the peasants to serve the King's interest, and the King exploited the mayor and the peasants to serve the interests of the British army in the Suez Canal."- *God Dies by the Nile Foreword*

While El Saadawi uses imagery masterfully throughout the novella, her depictions of male characters and their motivations and psyche are rather shallow. This is done for a definite purpose. Her male characters as well as female characters are archetypes. Their motivations are supposed be

explicit and blatant. The goal of this was to assure that the reader walks away from the work with the intended message. In addition, the core of the novella is about feminism and Islam. The work does an outstanding job of depicting the hypocrisy of the local Islamic government in the town of Kafr El Teen, which victimizes and brutalizes its women. The characters are definitely depicted in absolutes. Furthermore, the way the novel portrays men has a definite feminist slant. For example, either the men in the village were drunk on their own power and would abuse it in any way they could, or they were weak dumb cowards who were incapable of even realizing their unjust treatment, much less stopping it.

Another major theme of the novella is sexual depravity and abuse, which was so prevalent in *God Dies by the Nile* that it would lead one to think that sexual misconduct was a part of the day-to-day life of every person in Egypt. Absolutely no one was safe from rape in *God Dies by the Nile*. Regardless of whether they were young, old, boy, girl, a member of a family, an animal, or even a lifeless corpse, somebody would be looking to rape them. In fact, the one and only thing that will protect anyone from some kind of sexual assault was power. Since the women, little boys, little girls, animals, and corpses had no power, they were targets for rape. This is an extremely important glimpse into the author's psyche. The idea is that the only thing that can protect any person from being victimized is power. I believe this is one of the over-arching themes that define El Saadawi as a person and as an author. She recognizes that power has a corrupting effect on individuals. However, conversely perhaps corruption is not indicative of power. Perhaps corruption is a characteristic of those who seek power, especially those who seek it. Especially for the sole purpose of obtaining power for the sake of exercising more control over the lives of those that surround them.

III. Orhan Pamuk

Orhan Pamuk the author of *Snow*, which won a Nobel Prize in literature, is oddly enough a far less complicated man than you would think. Almost all his works have a vein of exchanging identities or the main character coming to a reconciliation of tradition and modernity. With but a cursory glimpse into his background we can figure out why this is. Orhan Pamuk was born June 7, 1952 in Istanbul into a prosperous, secular middle-class family. His father was an engineer and so were his paternal uncle and grandfather. It was this grandfather who founded the family's fortune. Pamuk graduated from Robert College. He studied architecture at Istanbul Technical University and journalism at Istanbul University. Even though the bulk of his education took place in Turkey, for a period of three years he went to the heart of Western civilization and culture--New York City. He spent the years from 1985-1988 in the United States where he was a visiting researcher at Columbia University in New York and for a short period attached to the University of Iowa. Orhan Pamuk did not choose to settle in America, because he currently resides in Istanbul although he teaches at Columbia at least once a year. He has said that growing up he experienced a shift from a traditional Ottoman family environment to a more Western-oriented lifestyle. This is a very important statement because it is the idea of a crisis followed by a reconciliation of identity, which seems to echo through his all his work.

Snow is a story is set in the 1990s near Turkey's eastern border in the town of Kars, once a border city between the Ottoman and Russian empires. The protagonist, a writer who has been living in exile in Frankfurt travels to Kars to discover himself and his country. Along the way he meets a slightly bizarre cast of characters, each one representing and stating their stance and their grievances about the Turkey of modern day. It is important to note that each one of the characters is indeed a metaphor for a particular faction within the Geo-political arena. For instance, you have the character of Blue who is made to represent a young militant Islamist, or Sunay the Fascist head of the military who leads a military operation within Kars. Pamuk uses these characters as a form of political commentary. In her New York Times book review of *Snow*, Margaret Atwood said, "Not only an engrossing feat of

tale-spinning, but essential reading for our times. [Pamuk is] narrating his country into being.” Pamuk guides the action and gives us various insights into characters using skilled and meticulous dialogue. For example, here is a passage from *Snow* in which Ka and Sunay have an exchange.

“Get this into your head too,” said Sunay. “Those religious high school boys you saw in the cells today have your face permanently etched into their memories. They’ll throw bombs at anyone and anything; they don’t care as long as they are heard. And furthermore, since you read a poem during the performance, they’ll assume you were in on the plot. No one who’s even slightly westernized can breathe free in this country unless they have a secular army protecting them, and no one needs this protection more than intellectuals who think they’re better than everyone else and look down on other people. If it weren’t for the army, the fanatics would be turning their rusty knives on the lot of them and their painted women and chopping them all into little pieces. But what do these upstarts do in return, they cling to their little European ways and turn up their affected little noses at the very soldiers who guarantee their freedom. When we go the way of Iran, do you really think anyone is going to remember how a porridge-hearted liberal like you shed a few tears for the boys from the religious high school? When that day comes, they’ll kill you just for being a little westernized, for being frightened and forgetting the Arabic words of a simple prayer, even wearing a tie or that coat of yours.” – *Snow*, page 218

This particular passage occurs midway through the novel because in essence Sunay is elucidating on the harsh realities of the state, which is under siege by political Islam. This particular monologue has many levels. On one hand you have the obvious view of the fascist in Sunay who believes that the state is supreme. However, you cannot believe that Sunay started out as a fascist. This is aptly demonstrated by his past as a liberal, actor, and all-around nonconformist who was expelled from the military academy in his final year for sneaking off to perform. Sunay in his formative years was very much like Ka. Time and circumstance have slowly turned Sunay into a fascist. For instance, Sunay says, “When we go the way of Iran,” he is of course referring to the Islamic Revolution which took place in Iran in the late 70s. What a lot of people do not know is that during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran was crazy for westernization. This didn’t sit well with radical Islamist factions within the state, so they eventually followed the likes of Ayatollah Khomeini into the Islamic revolution that overthrew the state and set up a new government dominated by Islamic practices. This led to an orgy of bloodshed in which the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia in Iran had three choices. One, flee as a political refugee to whatever country would take you. Two, renounce the west and your heathen ways and convert to an oppressive form of radical Islam. Three, get murdered in the street by a band of filthy religious zealots. Obviously, none of these choices are very appealing.

So what we have here is Sunay speaking to Ka, but also addressing a reflection of his former self as well as weak hearted liberals as a whole. This passage has a lot to do with class-ism also because many people who are well educated often cling to lofty ideals that do not stand up to the vicissitudes of reality. This can be related to a variety of debates that basically boil down to freedom vs. security. Ka might weep for these religious high school boys now, but what will he do when these boys grow up to be the men that break down his door to murder his family? You can see how Pamuk uses his characters and their dialogue to engage in complex political and philosophical debates. This gives the reader keen insight into Turkish culture and the fact that it has for decades been experiencing an

identity crisis.

IV. Leslie Marmon Silko

Leslie Marmon Silko grew up as an outsider ostracized from the community of Native Americans. She is a mix of Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and white ancestry. It is this fact about her that would grow to define her life. Silko revealed that living in Laguna society as a mixed blood from a prominent family caused her a lot of pain. She ran into the same problems many mixed children do in that she had a foot in both worlds, but was not accepted by the full blooded members of either. It seems that because her father was not around she clung to her Native American heritage as a form of identity as well as rebellion. As she puts it: "I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna." Native Americans are not known for their grand libraries, so almost all of their history is passed down through word of mouth in the form of tale, myths, and legends. Young Silko devoured these tales through her grandmother Lily and Aunt Susie, and these women had a lasting impact on her. In 1969 she received a bachelor's degree in English from the University of New Mexico. She later taught creative writing and a course in oral tradition for the English department at the university. While she attended college she would write her first story *The Man to Send Rain Clouds* and would be awarded the National Endowment for the Humanities Discovery Grant.

Perhaps her greatest flaw as an author is that Silko is a literary one trick pony. Everything she seems to write always leads back to Native Americans. A prime example is *Gardens in the Dunes*. Here is the book's description provided by Google scholar.

"A sweeping, multifaceted tale of a young Native American pulled between the cherished traditions of a heritage on the brink of extinction and an encroaching white culture, *Gardens in the Dunes* is the powerful story of one woman's quest to reconcile two worlds that are diametrically opposed. At the center of this struggle is Indigo, who is ripped from her tribe, the Sand Lizard people, by white soldiers who destroy her home and family. Placed in a government school to learn the ways of a white child, Indigo is rescued by the kind-hearted Hattie and her worldly husband, Edward, who undertake to transform this complex, spirited girl into a "proper" young lady. Bit by bit, and through a wondrous journey that spans the European continent, traipses through the jungles of Brazil, and returns to the rich desert of Southwest America, Indigo bridges the gap between the two forces in her life and teaches her adoptive parents as much as, if not more than, she learns from them."

Now that of course sounds vaguely similar to Silko's life. In addition, Silko was forced to attend a catholic school. Without a doubt *Gardens in the Dunes* must have been an extremely personal novel for Silko. She grounds most of her work in descriptions of nature, personifying rocks, flowers, trees, and wind to create analogies and symbolism for her stories. Humans are not at the top of her hierarchy. This is defiantly a product of her Native American upbringing. There is a certain reverence for nature in all her work. One can tell from her prose that humans are infuriatingly separate from nature, yet distinctly a part of it at the same time. In addition, she tends to use a lot of anthropomorphism when describing things like rocks, wind, flowers, or inanimate objects. So, there remains something very evocative about her writing that very few authors can capture.

However, the idea of crisis of identity remains central in *Gardens in the Dunes* as well as a note

of defiance and even hatred for things that are considered “white man's culture.” Leading up to this particular passage Indigo was excited because she was fantasizing about racing the fat pony across the countryside. However, these fantasies are ultimately unfulfilled because the pony does not necessarily cooperate, and Indigo subsequently loses control of the fat pony injuring her leg. A great deal about the emotional dynamics between three major characters in the novel can be gleaned from this passage. In the following passages the reader can see by Hattie's strong emotional reaction to Indigo's perceived distress, “Indigo! Are you all right?” Hattie called out as she dismounted and went to Indigo's side.” and “Are you hurt?” Hattie looked anxiously at Indigo's face; and she could see the child's discomfort.”(*Gardens in the Dunes, page 175*). Hattie genuinely cares about Indigo and is desperately trying to fit into motherly role. However, Indigo does not share Hattie's strong emotional connection. In contrast, Indigo closes up and becomes emotionally unavailable, she does not take comfort from Hattie's actions. Because she is too busy internally chiding herself. Hattie wrongly assumes that Indigo is crying from the pain of her physical injury, what she fails to realize is that Indigo is going through a moment of inner extreme emotional turmoil.

Indigo did not reply; she felt nothing as sharply as the hurt feelings, sadness at the fat ponies betrayal of her daydreams about flying along on horseback. Should have known better. Grandma Fleet used to warn her about approaching unfamiliar dogs or mules because sometimes mistreated animals attack without warning. It would have been better to take days or even weeks to make friends with the fat pony before she tried to ride him. (*Gardens in the Dunes, page 176*).

It seems to me that Indigo is mad at herself because she seems to have momentarily forgotten the lessons taught to her in her old life by her beloved Grandma Fleet. There is no way Hattie could possibly understand this, because there is no way she could fathom the dislocation and loneliness that Indigo undoubtedly feels.

Throughout the novel Indigo struggles to reconcile two drastically different worldviews, those of her old life among the Native Americans and the ideas of her new life among with Hattie and Edward. In addition, in contrast to Hattie's extremely maternal and emotional reaction to Indigo's distress, Edward appears to have a clinical and almost emotionally disconnected reaction.

Edward rode up just then and led their horses behind his horse while they walked home. He was feeling rather discouraged about the success of the visit so far. He didn't blame the child. She was a welcome diversion from the thoughts crossing and recrossing his mind. So much depended on the success of this trip abroad; he could feel the anxiety stirred his chest. He longed to be gone from the Scottish gardener and the Welsh pony, to be under way to Bristol, to be one ocean closer to the citron trees in the dry hills of Corsica. (*Gardens in the Dunes, page 176*).

This is an atypical reaction of Edward throughout the novel who normally seeks to understand nature through scientific theory and dissection, rather than the more natural and soulful approach that Indigo is used to. In the end Indigo seems to sum up her thoughts about her caretakers. “Edward might know a great deal about plants and Hattie might know a great deal about books, but they didn't know much about ponies” (*Gardens in the Dunes, page 176*). This passage indicates that Indigo understands and appreciates the merits of her two guardians. However, she still prefers and identifies with the ideals and thought processes that she still possesses from her old life. This can also be true

for Silko has embraced some of what is considered modern American culture. However, in her heart of hearts she will always resent it.

V. Primo Levi

Primo Levi is the author of *Survival in Auschwitz*. He went through the most hellish conditions the human mind can imagine. Primo was captured by the Nazis and was a prisoner in Auschwitz for ten months. Lucky for Primo he was captured towards the end of the war and several factors came into play that would increase his chances of survival. Firstly, he was captured close to the end of the war. Secondly, he was a chemist so this dropped him into a skilled labor category. Thirdly, because he was in this skilled labor category he worked in a lab which offered him a reprieve from the daily grind of the slave labor force. Fourthly, because it was close to the end of the war and the Germans were losing and in desperate need of labor, they were not as aggressive with their extermination operations.

Primo never escaped from Auschwitz. The Russians were advancing rapidly from the east and the Germans abandoned the death camp to save their own skins. Auschwitz was basically hell on earth. Primo is an expert at poetic prose, grand metaphors, and similes to bring the death camp to life. *Survival in Auschwitz* is a study in attrition. The slow methodical way the Germans ground down these people was both horrifying and endlessly fascinating. From the moment the Jews arrived at the death camp there was a system in place to dehumanize them and start the long process of breaking them down. For instance, when they first arrived at the camp their shoes were taken from them as well as their clothes. After this they were forced into a barber shop and shaved. This had a dehumanizing effect on their appearance in addition to rendering them in a form sexless. This process of stripping away the trappings of their humanity had the desired effect of making them easier to brutalize. Then they were given awkward and ineffectual shoes that did nothing to protect their feet from the ravages of their day to day slave labor. It also forced them to walk in a short of shambling stride.

Picture if you will a pale, shaven, and emaciated creature that does not walk like a man, but shambles. He or she is so broken down mentally, physically, and spiritually that he cannot even raise a hand against or actively hate his tormentors. Some of the most powerful passages in the book deal with this dynamic of complete and utter ruin of the human spirit. The division and dissembling of humanity by the Nazis was cold, clinical, and above all utterly ruthless. However, the process in which the Nazis exterminated the Jews held an undeniably genius in its simplicity. For instance, to assure that the prisoners could never unite, deviation and a strange form of classism was introduced within the prison. This was largely unnecessary because the environment of the camp was so effective that dis-unification operations were largely unnecessary.

At the foot of the gallows, the SS watch us pass with indifferent eyes: their work is finished, and well finished. The Russians can come now: there are no longer any strong men among us, the last one is now hanging above our heads, and as for the others, a few halters had been enough. The Russians can come now: they will only find us, the slaves, the worn-out, worthy of the unarmed death which awaits us.

To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it has not been easy, nor quick, but the Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile under your gaze; from our side you have nothing more to fear; not

acts of violence, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgment.

Alberto and I went back to the hut, and could not look each other in the face. That man must have been tough, he must have been made of another metal than us if this condition of ours, which has broken us, could not bend him. -*Survival in Auschwitz* page 150

Throughout the novel, Primo paints a picture of people so utterly beaten that they are no longer recognizable as human. The scenes that Primo lays out in the book, no person could have gone through without lasting physiological damage. The reader glimpses the scenes of Primo's trauma through the writing. In the above passage you can feel Primo's guilt and shame at his inability to resist the Nazis. He often talks about the inertia that seems to drag the human psyche into oblivion. Day in and day out doing backbreaking manual labor to exhaustion the entire time dealing with malnutrition would affect any man similarly. Primo also spoke about how different prisoners carved out niches for themselves to ensure their survival. Some prisoners even thrived in this environment seeming as if they were ill-suited for normal society, but there in the death camp they seemed to flourish. Theft was also an acceptable practice in the day-to-day lives of the prisoners in Auschwitz. Another interesting aspect of the camps was that all around normal moral code seemed to be suspended indefinitely. You did whatever you had to do to survive, and it seemed as if no one, not even your victims held it against you. In time it seemed as if the ones who could survive and thrive had worked out the system to where they cannibalized their own people; the newcomers to camp suffered the most, because there was the sense that they would not be there for very long, so no one bothered with them except to use them in any way they could.

I am unaware if there is any published psychoanalysis of Primo in existence. Some of his other books discussed how he was able to re-adapt to the outside world. However, these were all done from the first-person perspective of Primo himself. It is unclear if he would be completely honest or even aware of any lasting psychological damage his experience in Auschwitz left him with. I am sure beyond a doubt that Primo had some sort of post-traumatic stress syndrome or survivor's guilt. This is probably how he could recall the minute details feelings at he wrote them in *Survival in Auschwitz*. One factor still remains surprising is that Primo is a man of science. He is a chemist. One would think that his writing would be typical of a man of science, a cold and calculated listing of the facts, but his writing is anything but that. Indeed very few writers in the world can give their work such depth and melancholy. His prose is powerful and extremely evocative, which is strange when you think that Primo did not have any sort of writing experience prior to Auschwitz.

VI. Upton Sinclair

At first glance, Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* reads a lot like *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. However with a less slanted narrative. Right from the start I was impressed with the rich, naturalistic detail of Sinclair's prose. In addition, for a novel that was published in 1927, the content is still extremely relevant. The dynamic that exists between James Arnold Ross the self-made oil millionaire and James Arnold "Bunny" Ross, the protagonist, who is his only son, and Paul Watkins the free thinker with whom Bunny has an endless fascination tell a complete story from various perspectives. Sinclair did a great job of emphasizing the social stratification of the time. For instance, he often uses the term "aristocracy" to describe the members of Bunny's more affluent social class. The reader can see that there is an extremely vivid contrast between the rich and poor, the laborers and the management. We can also see that Bunny is existing in a moral no-man's land between these two factions. He is trapped between love and loyalty for the two men he most admires in his life, Paul and his father. Over the

course of the book Bunny eventually becomes a socialist and tries to champion social reform. Eventually this effort leads to tragedy and Bunny does not spark the sort of social revolution he was hoping for.

Upton Sinclair had an alcoholic father who moved the family to New York City in 1888. Although his own family was extremely poor, he spent periods of time living with his wealthy grandparents. He later argued that witnessing these extremes turned him into a socialist. You can see the link between Upton and Bunny in the novel here very distinctly. For instance, Bunny came from an extremely affluent family. However, he left as often as he could to spend time with Paul's much more impoverished family. Indeed, Paul's family became something of a fascination for the main character, Bunny. Paul was a working man from humble stock, he was not wealthy, nor had the goal to be wealthy. This challenged many notions that capitalism is based on. For instance, capitalism teaches that the best, brightest, and most talented individuals rise to the top of society and acquire wealth. Firstly, Paul existed in stark contrast to everything that Bunny had been taught about the poor. A perfect example is the fact that Paul was not after dad's money. This came as a complete shock to Bunny, because it seemed like everyone, everywhere always wanted money. Secondly, Paul was an extremely intelligent individual. He seemed to have a thirst for knowledge, particularly in the field of science. This of course beguiled his social standing within society. Lastly, Paul did not seem to be a man consumed with materialism. Instead, he was at war with an entrenched power structure; and concerned with a social revolution and combating the source of social inequality that in his view was greed and capitalism.

Verily, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the feelings of the disinherited. Bunny found Rachel quite altered from the drab, hard-working girl he had known. She belonged to that oriental type which can pick fruit in the sun for several weeks without worrying about complexions; she had sunset in her cheeks and sunrise in her spirit, and for the first time it occurred to Bunny that she was quite an interesting-looking girl. She told about their adventures, which seemed to him extraordinarily romantic. Most people, when they indulged in day dreaming, would picture themselves as the son and heir of a great oil magnate, with millions of dollars pouring in on them, and a sport car to drive, and steel widows and other sirens to make love to them. But Bunny's idea of a fairy-story was to go off with a bunch of youngsters in a rattle-trap old Ford that broke down every now and then, and camp out in a tent that the wind blew away, and get a job picking fruit alongside of Mexicans and Japanese and Hindoos, and send home a post-office order for ten or twelve dollars every week! - *Oi!*, Page 318

You can see that this was an extremely personal novel for Upton Sinclair, because he seemed to pour so much of his life experience into this novel. Sinclair was not a man who wrote for the sake of arts, or for money, he was a man who used literature as a weapon. In every aspect, even until his twilight years, he was a social crusader who viewed socialism as a sort of industrial democracy. He came from a poor family in New York so he knew the plight of the poor as well as any person out there. In fact, he paid his way through college by writing stories. He knew what it was like to suffer under a cruel and uncaring master. He had seen his fellow man be exploited by the rich. He had heard the way they detested the working man and loathed to give him anything. I think he saw the work force as a system set up to keep men in perpetual poverty. Sinclair saw the stark contrast in which the different social and economic classes lived. He saw and heard all this and felt in his heart that this was

wrong, which is extremely impressive considering that after he wrote *The Jungle* he was basically financially set.

So this leads me to my next point about Sinclair and it is that he was a man of deep convictions. He reached a high level of success relatively early on in his career. *The Jungle* sky rocketed him into fame and he achieved renown as an extremely talented author. Make no mistake about it. After *The Jungle* Sinclair was rock-star famous for the times. In fact, after President Theodore Roosevelt read *The Jungle* he was so outraged he ordered an investigation of the meat-packing industry. He also met Sinclair and told him that while he disapproved of the way the book preached socialism he agreed that "radical action must be taken to do away with the efforts of arrogant and selfish greed on the part of the capitalist". Without a doubt not since *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had a novel had such a huge impact on society. This had extremely far reaching effects on society not least of which was a surge of interest in investigative journalism. It also empowered Sinclair in a very unique way he saw with his own eyes that his novels could affect social change. Sinclair was a man deeply convicted to an ideal that he fought for his whole life and nothing could really change that.

VII. Alan Lightman

Alan Lightman is remarkably intelligent. He makes people with PhD's look like a gang of bush league intellectual amateurs. What is even more impressive is the way Lightman can communicate complex scientific ideals and theories through literature. It is no understatement to say that the man has the soul of a poet. It is the hallmark of an exceptionally intelligent and talented person to take a complex idea or theory and not just communicate it to anyone, but to communicate it in a way that is beautiful. Very few brilliant scientific minds have this gift. All too often brilliant people fall into the trap of jargon. They think that if you throw around big words that sound impressive then they must be impressing people with their intellect. However, if their goal is to inform their audience or convey a message they have utterly failed. Do not seek to impress me with the way you write something, impress me with what you write. Another great example of this is Neil deGrasse Tyson who is an astrophysicist with the American Museum of Natural History, director of the world-famous Hayden Planetarium, a monthly columnist for *Natural History*, and an award-winning author. Perhaps because Astrophysicists have to use their imaginations so much in theoretical work, they do tend to make exceptional authors.

The main question in this case is what psychologically makes Alan Lightman such an exceptional scientist and author. In a nutshell it is his background; in particular his parents. Lightman was born in Memphis Tennessee in 1948. His dad Richard Lightman, owned a movie theater, and his mom Jeanne Garretson, was a dance teacher and volunteer Braille typist. From an early age, he was entranced by both science and the arts. A love of these things was fuel injected into him during his formative years by the people closest to him. However, his genius level math talents could not be denied and he went on to have an exceptionally amazing academic career. Lightman received a AB degree in physics from Princeton University in 1970 and his PhD in theoretical physics from the California Institute of Technology in 1974. After that he went on to become a Professor at MIT. It was then that he actually started to merge his impressive scientific intellect with his love of the arts. His break out novel was *Einstein's Dreams*, which mainly revolved around a fictional collage of stories dreamed by Albert Einstein in 1905 when he worked in a patent office in Switzerland. This brings us to Lightman's latest novel, *Mr g*. I believe this novel is Lightman's attempt to bring science and spirituality together.

Mr g is the story of creation as told by God. At first the only two beings that live in the void

with Mr g are Aunt Penelope and Uncle Deva. Mr g proceeds to create time, space, and matter. Then come stars, planets, animate matter, consciousness, and finally, intelligent beings with moral dilemmas. Mr g is omnipotent but not omniscient and in his own way is a loveable bungler, which gives the character a certain charm and humanity. However, Mr g's creation of the universe has unforeseen consequences, one of which is the creation of evil personified by a character named Belhor. Belhor is the intellectual equal of Mr g. Belhor demands an explanation for the inexplicable, requests that the newly created intelligent creatures not be subject to rational laws, and maintains the necessity of evil. In essence, this is Lightman's way of creating a fictional debate between God and the Devil and also of addressing great question of existence. The following is the first meaningful conversation the two characters have in the novel.

"I would think that you are more fluent with the rational. It has its appeal. But the irrational permits a greater excess of... Shall we say, *power*. If that is your aim, of course. At the moment, you would seem to have no need to exercise your power."

"I prefer to use only the scope and magnitude of power that is required for each situation," I said. "But I have unlimited power, if necessary."

"I would very much enjoy seeing a demonstration of that sometime." The stranger moved closer. "But the target of power is more interesting than its quantity. In that regard tell me: would you say the end always justifies the means? or, in attempting to achieve your aims, do you draw the line at some degree of sacrifice and cost, beyond which would not go?"

"I cannot consider this question in general terms."

"Ah, you do not believe in absolute principles. We will get along better than I thought. Your response implies that in some situations you would be willing to accept any price in order to achieve your end, in others not. Depending on the situation. Yes. That is an important thing to know about one's self." -*Mr g*, pages 25-26

This is basically Belhor establishing that there are few if any absolutes in the universe. There remains wiggle room in every situation. Lightman understands this as an astrophysicist, because while there maybe three laws that govern the universe in Mr g's world there are many more laws that can be bent or broken completely. However, throughout the novel Belhor is completely unconcerned with "inanimate matter", what seems to interest him more is "animate matter" or put more complexly living creatures.

"Have you ever wondered," he said, "whether it is possible to imagine everything that will ever exist, or whether some things live beyond your ability to imagine them?" I nodded, "in the set of all possibilities being infinite, as it is," he continued, "if there is even a fraction of possibilities we cannot imagine, then there is an infinite number of possibilities we cannot imagine. So, even with infinite power, we might be surprised by what transpires in the future. Would you agree?" The tall stranger turned towards me again, cocked himself at an angle, and looked at me with an odd expression.

"Yes."

"These universes you've created," he said, and gestured at the quivering

spheres and ellipsoids flying about. Many of them will end in tragedy. Or I should say, that animate matter you filled them with, the intelligent beings, will twist and suffer and meet unhappy ends.” He smiled.

“I’ve no intention of that happening,” I said. “I would not allow that to happen.”

“I am sorry if what I’ve said disturbs you.”

“I command you into nonexistence,” I said.

“I’m afraid you cannot do that.”- *Mr g*, pages 26-27

The above text is an extremely important passage from the book, because if we analyze Lightman's vision of God, it can reveal many things about him. Firstly, while God may have intended to create all of existence and the universe, the creation of evil was an unintended consequence of his actions. Secondly, since God did not intend to create suffering in his universe it means that he is inherently good. Lastly, since this is the first confrontation between good and evil in existence, it merely proves that evil cannot exist without good, light without darkness, life without death. Furthermore, since there are few absolutes in the universe it begs the question of whether the concept of both good and evil is a nebulous term that is in constant flux. Mr g himself stated, “ I cannot answer the question in general terms.” This means the concept of absolutes is completely dependent on circumstance involved in each particular situation. This has been debated by multiple philosophers throughout history. It is at this point that Mr g realizes that the creation of space and time has had unforeseeable consequences. Which, inherently proves Belhor's point that Mr g may be omnipotent but he is not omniscient. Belhor demands explanations for the unexplainable, and requests that the newly created intelligent creatures not be subject to rational laws, and maintains the necessity of evil. As Mr g watches his favorite universe grow into maturity he begins to understand how the act of creation can change the Creator. Throughout the novel Lightman endeavors to combined science, theology, and moral philosophy. He uses the marriage of these three schools of thought, which are often times at odds with each other, to craft explanations that would make sense to anyone regardless of which school thought they adhere to. He uses this technique to eventually explain the greatest question of all “what happens to us after we die?”

“And she died at that moment, there were 3,147,740,103,497,276,498,750,208,327 atoms in her body. Of her total mass 63.7 percent was oxygen, 21.0 percent carbon, 10.1 percent hydrogen, 2.6 percent nitrogen, 1.4 percent calcium, 1.1 percent phosphorus, plus a smattering of the ninety-odd other chemical elements created and starts.

In the cremation, water evaporated. Her carbon and nitrogen combined with oxygen to make gaseous carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide, which floated skyward and mingled with the air. Most of her calcium and phosphorus baked into a reddish brown residue and scattered in soil and in wind.

Released from their temporary confinement, her atoms slowly spread out diffused through the atmosphere. In sixty days' time, they could be found in every handful of air on the planet. In one hundred days, some of her atoms, the vaporous water, had condensed into liquid and returned to the surface as rain, to be drunk and ingested by animals and plants. Some of her atoms were absorbed by light utilizing organisms and transformed into tissues and tubules and leaves. Some were breathed in by oxygen creatures, incorporated into organs and bone.

Pregnant women ate animals and plants made of her atoms. A year later, babies contained some of her atoms. Not that her atoms had identification labels. But they were certainly *her* atoms, there is no doubt about that. I knew which ones. I could count them. Here, and here, and here.

Several years after her death, millions of children contained some other atoms. And their children would contain some of her atoms as well. Their minds contained part of her mind.

Will these millions of children, for generations upon future generations, know that some of their atoms cycled through this woman? It is not likely. Will they feel what she felt in her life, will their memories have flickering strokes of her memories, will they recall the moment long ago when she stood by the window, guilt ridden and confused, and watched as the tadr bird circled the cistern? No, it is not possible. Will they have some faint sense of her glimpse of the void? No, it is not possible. It is not possible. But I will let them have their own brief glimpse of the Void, just at the moment they pass from living to dead, from animate to inanimate, from consciousness to that which has no consciousness for a moment, they will understand infinity.” - *Mr g*, pages 201-203

This is by far one of the most beautiful passages ever written. It is also extremely personal look into Lightman's mind. This is a marriage of scientific facts and various spiritual beliefs. This passage is in essence a mirror of the author, who is himself a marriage between science and the arts. Most people believe that the two fields are completely at odds with each other. However, Lightman's work is an example of how the two seemingly incompatible fields, can come together to create something which is more complete, transcendently beautiful, and comprehensive than the sum of its parts.

VIII. Joseph Conrad

Joseph Conrad was an extremely interesting character if a very tragic one. Conrad did not live a very normal life. Joseph Conrad was born Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski on December 3, 1857 to father Apollo Korzeniowski and mother Ewa (nee Bobrowska) in Berdyczow, in Ukranian, which was a province of Poland at the time. It is no exaggeration to say Conrad's childhood was a very rough one. His father was thrown in jail for his revolutionary political leanings and his mother died from tuberculosis when Conrad was eight. It would only be a few short years later when his father would be stuck down by tuberculosis as well. It was at the tender age of 12 that Conrad was left alone in the world an orphan. Obviously when both a child's parents are taken from them at a young age it leaves a huge emotional scar. Nadine M. Melhem, Ph.D., of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine found that Children who lose their parents at a young age are much more likely to develop PTSD or other psychiatric disorders. They suffer from an increased chance of symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, suicidal behavior and complicated grief. This study holds a lot of water because as a young adult it was reported from Conrad's uncle that he attempted suicide after setbacks with his status as a seaman among the French, and losing his money in a failed smuggling expedition, along with foolish gambling. His orphan upbringing has been widely considered the reason why most of his stories have a pervasive sense of gloom and dread about them. It is an overarching theme that everyone always meets an inescapable bad end in Conrad's stories. Even though it is known that Conrad detested religion he did embrace the theme of predestination in his works.

After his parents died Conrad went to live with his uncle who was considered to be a hardcore traditional conservative. Conrad's father may have been a revolutionary, but his uncle was a conformist.

While Conrad was with his uncle the man did his best to instill traditional values into him of conservatism and strict social discipline until he grew into manhood and decided to seek adventure and fortune as a seaman. At the age of seventeen Conrad left Poland for Marseilles to become a seaman. Apparently Conrad went through a bit of a rough time with working with the French because it was during these years he attempted to kill himself. However, his fortunes would turn four years later when in 1878 he decided to join the British Merchant Service. For many social reasons Conrad was a better fit with the British than with the French. The reason for this being that his new found fellow sailors had a strong foundation in values such as fidelity and solidarity, a strict class divisions were an integral part of the environment, and a system of established traditions was introduced. Finally, there was a structured environment that would give Conrad a sense of family and belonging. It was during his time working with the British that he would get the inspirational for the *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad was in Belgian Congo from 1890-1894 and like a soldier going off to war what he saw and experienced would forever change him. What Conrad saw were the horrors perpetrated on the natives of the Congo by the King Leopold II. The most truly horrifying thing about the *Heart of Darkness* was that almost all the events in the book were based on actual events. Leopold was openly frustrated with inheriting the throne of such a small country, and doing so at a time in history when European kings were rapidly losing power to elected parliaments. He had long wanted a colonial empire. Through skillful Machiavellian political and military maneuvers he went about acquiring the Congo. During the time that Conrad was in the Congo Leopold had used his armies of men equipped with repeating rifles, cannons, and machine guns to go forth subjugate the native population. This was a fairly easy task because the soldiers with their modern weapons were fighting natives armed with mere spears and antiquated black powder muskets. In addition, the natives were split up into factions and tribes who were used to fighting only each other. They were no match for King Leopold's 19,000 man army. Leopold wasted no time in exploiting the labor force. From the start the regime was founded on forced labor. Hundreds of thousands of Africans were put to work as porters to carry the white man's goods, as cutters of the wood needed to fire steamboat boilers, and as laborers of all kinds. In the early years the main commodity Leopold sought was ivory. These were the scenes depicted in *Heart of Darkness*.

His experiences in the Congo haunted him and left him with a disdain for the realities of colonialism. In the beginning of the novel Marlow describes the ancient practice of imperialism and what it must have been like for the common man who was forced to create an empire.

I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago— the other day.... Light came out of this River since — you say nights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the Flicker — may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feeling of a commander of a fine — what d'ye call 'em? — trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls in a hurry; but in charge of one of these craft the legionaries — a wonderful lot of handyman they must've been, to — used to build, apparently by the hundred, in a month or two, if we may believe what we read. Imagine him here — the very end of the world, a sea the color of lead, a sky the color of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as concertina — and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages — precious little to eat fit for civilized man, nothing but the Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine

here, no going ashore. Here and there military camp lost in the wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay -- cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death -- death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here oh, yes -- he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through his time, perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness. And perhaps he was cheered by keeping his eye on a chance of promotion to the fleet at Ravenna by-and-by, if he had good friends in Rome and survive the awful climate. Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga -- perhaps too much dice, you know -- coming out here in the train of some prefect, or tax-gatherer, or trader or even, to amend his fortunes. Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed around him -- all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either to such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination -- you know, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate.

He paused.

"Mind," he began again, lifting one arm from elbow, the Palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European cloths and without a lotus flower -- "Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. It saves us is efficiency -- the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; there administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force -- nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grab what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just a robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind -- as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means that taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses and others, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What remedies it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not sentimental pretense but an idea, and an unselfish belief in the idea -- something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer sacrifice to...." -*Heart of Darkness, page 4*

The Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad does an epic job of setting a mood of darkness, violence, and insanity. The author imbues the ecology of the Congo River and jungle with a sense of seeping evil and malevolence throughout the work. I was particularly taken by what took place in beginning of the story: The main character points out the differences and similarities between Rome's expansion into England and British colonialism. He sees the major difference between Rome and Britain's conquests of the world as starkly different. In Marlow's mind Rome expanded into territories and basically raped them for everything they were worth. In contrast, he acknowledges that England plunders its territories' new colonies, but its saving grace is the idea that it is bringing civilization to the savages.

On the topic of the novel's portrayal of the exploitation of indigenous African peoples is the way the novel sheds light into racism and slave labor. There is a huge similarity in the way Conrad describes the treatments of Africa's indigenous people in much the same way as Primo Levi describes the treatment of Jews in his book *Survival in Auschwitz*. The fact that the British were pushing their labor force so relentlessly in the novel is horrifying. They were quite literally working these men to death, using them as a resource until they were ground down into nothing. Conrad seems to use a hybrid mixture of prose, metaphors, and similes to achieve his literary ends. In addition, he has a tendency to use anthropomorphic language to describe almost anything in his novels.

Heart of Darkness is an extremely beautiful and poetic work, which has withstood the test of time, and inspired many other great literary works, movies, and video games. The story revolves around an English man's journey into the heart of Africa via a steamship on the Amazon River. There are many themes that are involved in the novel British colonialism, the duality of human nature, eco-literature, racism, sexism, and ultimately what can happen to us when we are removed from the rules imposed on us by civilization. The tone of the book is extremely dark. Joseph Conrad uses a cornucopia of rhetorical devices heavy with literary prose, metaphor, and simile. He uses all of these to expertly transport the reader to the Dark Continent.

“I am not disclosing any trade secrets. In fact, the manager said afterwards that Mr Kurtz's methods had ruined the district. I have no opinion on that point, but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him -- some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency in himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last -- only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception until he took counsel with this great solitude -- and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core...” -*Heart of Darkness, page 53*

I chose this particular passage because it is at this moment that the main character Marlow begins to comprehend precisely how the environment has changed Kurtz. Almost from the first time Marlow reaches the first outpost he has been regaled with talk of the mysterious Kurtz. As a result, Marlow has become fixated on meeting this man. Kurtz is a figure who apparently brings in more ivory than every other agent put together, of course how he does this is a complete mystery. It is only when Marlow's steamship arrives at Kurtz's outpost that he realizes that Kurtz has gone insane. The evidence of Kurtz's insanity are ubiquitous throughout the outpost, from the way the natives worship him as a god to the severed heads displayed on pikes outside his home the evidence is indisputable that he has lost his humanity. Kurtz has used a mixture of charisma, mysticism, and terror tactics to subjugate all in the region.

In essence Kurtz has gone native. Marlow's party is shocked, appalled, and even awed by what this clearly insane man has accomplished. At the beginning Kurtz's methods although extremely effective for him, left the region ruined for the company. Marlow explains how he and the party cannot

understand the methods employed in the region. When he sees the severed heads of men proudly displayed on pikes they cannot understand the method behind the madness. In addition Marlow determines that these displays are evidence of Kurtz's inability to control his primal and savage impulses. Marlow determines that Kurtz did not realize how far he had fallen until the very end of his life. Also explained is the erosion of Kurtz's humanity. He had come to this place where he was completely cut off from the laws placed on him by society. The results were that, cut off from the rules of society and placed in a savage environment, even a man as virtuous and intellectual as Kurtz slowly became a Savage. He had stared too long into the darkness and eventually he was consumed by it. *Heart of Darkness* remains one of the greatest novels ever written.

IX Gao Xingjian *Soul Mountain*

Gao was born on January 4, 1940, in Gangzhou, a town in the Jiangxi province of eastern China. In interviews he claims he can remember running from invading Japanese forces. As well as details from the massive civil war in which Mao Zedong and his Communist forces rose to power. From his own accounts his parents were westernized, and more or less supported his educational and artistic aspirations.

Has he aged eventually Gao would go off to study at various People's Republic learning institutions, which would eventually lead him to study at Beijing Foreign Language Institute. He earned a degree in French literature from the same institution in 1962. After earning his degree he started working as a translator for the state at the sanctioned Chinese Writers Association and journal *China Reconstructs*. However, all wouldn't continue to go well for Gao was in for a huge surprise in the form of being sent off to a "rehabilitation" program. Basically what happened was during Mao's "Cultural Revolution" the communists had to figure out a way to get the country's intelligentsia out of the way, so they wouldn't stir up the peasants with their educated ways. So they came up with this bright idea to ship members of the country's intelligentsia off to these forced labor "farms." This served the dual purposes of getting the more educated members of Chinese society out of the city, and away from essential areas of operation. They did this because they were afraid of the educated members of Chinese society speaking out and stirring up trouble. Secondly, it sent a clear message to the members of the country's intelligentsia that any of them could be taken, so they better fall into line. In addition, during the rise of Communism in China it became fashionable for the government or small crowds of angry people to "Suicide" political dissidents. Being "suicides" or "harmonized" is still a tool employed by the Chinese government to this day. The Chinese government has a long and storied career of covering up all sorts of conflicts, problems, and clashes through coercion. So it was in the midst of all of this that Gao was sent to one of these farms for "reeducation." Gao mentions the farms briefly in *Soul Mountain* in chapter 8.

"In my lifetime," he continues, "I have barely escaped with my life a few times but not from the claws of wild animals. Once I was captured by bandits who demanded one gold bar as ransom, thinking I was the offspring of some wealthy family. They had no way of knowing I was a poor student in the mountains doing research and that even the watch I was wearing have been borrowed from a friend. The next time was during a Japanese air raid. A bomb fell onto the house I was living in. It smashed the roof and sent tiles flying everywhere but it didn't explode. Another time was later on when an accusation was brought against me and I was labeled a rightist and sent to prison farm. Those were difficult times, there

was nothing to eat, my body bloated up with beri-beri and I almost died. Young man, nature is not frightening, it's people who are frightening! You just need to get to know nature and it will become friendly. This creature known as man is of course highly intelligent, he's capable of manufacturing almost anything from reverse to test tube babies and yet he destroys two to three species every day. This is the absurdity of man." *Soul Mountain*, page – 49

You can clearly see in this passage how Gao takes the keystone experiences from his life and seamlessly weaves them into his tales. *Soul Mountain* is basically filled to the brim with Gao's personal experiences and thoughts. There was nothing more that shaped Gao's life than that fact that he grew up in country with an oppressive government, which seemed on its face not to value his skills, and with a government, which sought to silence his voice. A hostility towards intellectuals was a distinct characteristic of Mao's " Cultural Revolution." In fact, in Mao Zedong even gave a speech about literature in his headquarters in Yanan. The speech basically boiled down to a thinly veiled threat to the intellectuals of China "Books cannot walk," he said. "Reading them is a great deal simpler than for a cook to prepare a meal, far easier for him than to slaughter a pig. He has to catch the pig. The pig can run. He slaughters him. The pig squeals. A book placed on a desk cannot run, neither can it squeal." This small fragment of Mao had all the hall marks of his anti-intellectual pro-manual labor reign of terror. Where more emphasis was placed on the glory of labor than of the thinking involved in intellectual pursuits.

The stigma of being an artist or intellectual was such that Gao's own wife even turned on him. During the Cultural Revolution, ashamed of his socially dangerous status as an intellectual, she reported the political nature of his writings to the authorities. This forced Gao to burn all his early works to avoid arrest. Unsurprisingly, shortly thereafter their marriage ended. It was only in 1979 that he was finally allowed to travel outside the country. Finally far from the Communists' ever watchful eye and censorship he started publishing his works and traveling to exotic locations within France and Italy.

After gaining some exposure as a talented writer abroad he returned to China and started writing a few successful plays. He was able to do this mostly because things had started to calm down a little in china during that late 1970's and 1980's. So Gao was able to get away with a little more than he had in the past. However, his plays were still widely controversial and eventually Gao started to take a lot of heat for his work. In 1986 *L'autre rive/The Other Shore* was banned and since then none of his plays have been performed in China. In order to avoid harassment he undertook a ten-month walking-tour of the forest and mountain regions of Sichuan Province, tracing the course of the Yangzi River from its source to the coast. It was during this time that the seeds from *Soul Mountain* started to germinate.

In 1987 he left China and settled down a year later in Paris as a political refugee. After the massacre on the Square of Heavenly Peace in 1989 he left the Chinese Communist Party. After publication of *La fuite/Fugitives*, which takes place against the background of this massacre, he was declared *persona non grata* by the regime and his works were officially banned.

A key concept in Physiology states that at a certain age (around 20) we start telling ourselves stories about yourself. This is called "Personal Myth building." The term "personal myth" was first introduced into the psychotherapeutic literature by Ernst Kris in 1956 to describe certain elusive dimensions of the human personality that he felt psychoanalysts need to consider if their attempts to bring about change were to be effective and lasting. Many people in their 20's and going on till the end

of their lives tell themselves stories about their own quests, journeys, and trials to make sense of life. In essence, the search for identity is story whether you choose to call them Personal Myths, Life scripts, or self-narratives. The stories are not logical and linear strings of autobiographical facts, rather selected memories with magnified turning points, a trauma or triumph, for example. These myths help form a person's identity and this identity will help them follow a path through life. Have you ever heard the phrase "Know who you are" or "You better stand for something or you'll fall for anything." These are perfect examples of the necessity to form an identity. Adolescents don't yet know who they are, but a young adult having to choose a career, sex partner, religion, political affiliations, and social life needs to believe that they know who they are. So he starts to make up a story line with himself as the hero. This is exactly what Gao was doing in *Soul Mountain*. People place a lot of stock into the fact that Gao split himself up into I, He, She, You, but I don't find this tactic to be as deep as people attempt to make it seem. What I was more interested in was Gao personal myth building about himself than anything else.

In the summer of 1982, Gao Xingjian had already started working on his prodigious novel *La Montagne de l'Âme/Soul Mountain*, in which - by means of an odyssey in time and space through the Chinese countryside - he enacts an individual's search for roots, inner peace and liberty. This is supplemented by the more autobiographical *Le Livre d'un homme seul/One Man's Bible*.

He's here collecting specimens of Cold Arrow Bamboo, the food of the giant panda. I go with him into a clump of Cold Arrow Bamboos which are the height of a man, but there isn't a single live bamboo plant to be found. He says it takes a full sixty years for the Cold Arrow Bamboo to go through the cycle of flowering, seeding dying and for the seeds to sprout, grow, and flower. According to the Buddhist teachings on transmigration this would be exactly one *kalpa*. "Man follows earth, earth follow sky, sky follows the way, the way follows nature," he proclaims loudly. "Don't commit actions which go against the basic character of nature, don't commit acts which should not be committed." "Then what scientific value is there in saving the giant panda?" I ask. "It's symbolic, it's a sort of reassurance - people need to deceive themselves. Where preoccupied with saving a species which no longer has the capacity for survival and yet on the other hand we are charging ahead and destroying the very environment for survival of the human species itself. Look at the Min River you came along on your way in here, the forest on both sides has been stripped bare. The Min River has turned into a Black muddy River but the Yangtze is much worse yet they are going to block off the river and construct a dam in the Three Gorges! Of course it's romantic to indulge in wild fantasy but the place lies on a geological fault and has many documented records of landslides throughout its history. Needless to say blocking off the river and putting up a dam will destroy the entire ecology of the Yangtze River basin but if it leads to earthquakes the population of hundreds of millions living in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze will become fish and turtles! Of course no - one will listen to an old man like me, but when people assault nature like this nature inevitably takes revenge!" *Soul Mountain*

Communist Revolution is a term used to describe the events that culminated in the overthrow of the Nationalist regime and the establishment of the People's Republic of China by the Chinese Communist party in 1949. This event had extraordinarily long reaching implications within Chinese culture. Those caught up within the fever of revolution quickly realized, after the dust settled, they had merely exchanged one dictatorship for another. Years of middling economic progression and growing discontent with the communist government led to a sort of unspoken deal between the ruling communist government and the people. The communist government would give the people a form of capitalism. However they would still have to remain silent, obedient, and pull the party line. So it is with this in mind that China set out to revitalize its economy. Since China was not yet a power player on the world stage it set forth to exploit the only two natural resources that it had in abundance. These were of course the natural resources in its territory, and the abundance of its human population.

The best way to think about the growth strategy employed by the Chinese throughout recent history has been metaphorically similar to that of Walmart. China's as well as Walmart's motto being come here and buy our stuff it's the cheapest out there. Unsurprisingly for a global economy hungry for cheaper raw materials as well as cheaper labor this was a recipe for success. It has long been a known fact that the Chinese economy has been on a steady march of progression. Many companies throughout the world including America have made fortunes off the cheap raw materials China has to offer. As well as increasing profits through transferring their manufacturing base to China, where there exists none of the safeguards, common to worker populations of other modern industrialized countries. While these strategies have been a boon to the Chinese economy, it has had other more unsettling consequences. China's strategy of cannibalizing both its environment as well as its human population has laid the groundwork for catastrophe. It is a known fact that the air around Beijing China has been among the most toxic world. In addition, multiple news outlets have reported a unimaginable jump in the number of suicides taking place among China's factory workers. For instance, in a society devoid of laws and regulations which protect the common worker from exploitation, such as an eight hour workday, minimum wage, and workplace safety protocols. Many of these factory workers are ground down to nothing or they're literally driven to suicide. It should also be noted that any attempts to organize labor in the form of union's or coalitions to barter for better treatment of the working class are suppressed with extreme prejudice. One cannot help but see the irony in the fact that the Communists were supposed to be a workers' party, and yet they became crueler and more effective taskmasters than any the people had ever seen.

One of the recurring themes in the novel *Soul Mountain* is the teachings of Buddhism. Communism is a form of government which is ideally devoid of religion. This results in the suppression of many religious institutions. The suppression of traditional religious institutions results in people who go through life without any answers to life's great mysteries and questions. Furthermore these people may become like Gao Xingjian and seek answers in China's ancient traditions. The above passage is steeped in the traditions and teachings of Buddhism. The exchange between "I" and "He" is extremely similar to that of a Tibetan monk and a Pilgrim. The above passage details a list of the consequences which result in the non-acknowledgment of the four Noble truths and not following the eightfold path. We see from the text that the forests have been decimated and the rivers polluted. The people of China are living in a way that is not remotely in harmony with nature or their environment. The people are caught up in grasping for power, which in turn causes an untold amount of suffering. Even with the forests being treated so carelessly Gao gives the reader an overwhelming sense of nature in this book. The imagery employed by the author seems moist, wet and endlessly green. The reader truly gets the sense that he is on a journey through an ancient Chinese forest, almost going back through time itself to a time when man was more primitive, yet more in harmony with nature. Gao's

novel at its very heart is actually quite simple to understand: it's all about myth building and creating personal Identity.

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