

The Nobel Prize in Literature

—Defining a Great Book

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Abstract: The Nobel Prize is essential and highly valued in literature. However, the debate about the Nobel Prize's authority and criticism has always existed. This work provides a systematic summary of the criticism of the Nobel Prize in Literature and argues that the Nobel Prize is not authentic enough to define a "great" book from the aspect of Nationality, The Swedish Academy's Authority, and Political Influences based on Alfred Nobel's Will and Interpretation From The Swedish Academy. By analyzing the Nobel Prize's authority, this paper provides critical thinking for well-known institutions and Prizes for literature writings regarding the works themselves. It leads to further research on defining a "great" book.

Keywords: Nobel Prize Literature, Swedish Academy, Book

1. Introduction

The Nobel Prize in Literature was established in 1901. Since then, the Nobel Prize had a significant influence on literature. Even today, many people find their book recommendations from the Nobel Prize winners. With its worldwide fame, the Nobel Prize in literature became a standard to measure whether a book or an author is excellent enough. However, more and more skeptical views about the Nobel Prize in literature arose, and many of them were focused on specific authors or works, arguing that some authors were not qualified to win the prizes compared to other nominees. This work collected some of the opinions engaging in this debate about the Nobel Prize in Literature under the topic of whether it is qualified to define a "great" book in three aspects based on the founder of the Nobel Prize, Alfred Nobel's standards of the prize winners.

2. Alfred Nobel's Will and Interpretation From The Swedish Academy

In Alfred Nobel's will, the devotion of his fund to literature is based on this standard: "one part to the person who, in the field of literature, produced the most outstanding work in an idealistic direction"[1], and the winner should be considered by "the Academy in Stockholm"[1], which was specified as the Swedish Academy. In addition, Nobel also mentioned, "no consideration be given to nationality, but that the prize be awarded to the worthiest person, whether or not they are Scandinavian"[1]. After the Swedish Academy was appointed, there was a debate to accept this mission or not "for fear that the obligation would detract from the Academy's proper concerns and turn it into a cosmopolitan tribunal of literature"[2]. However, the Academy accepted this mission, as if it did not accept the mission, "it

failed to ‘acquire an influential position in world literature’”[2]. This mission won’t make the focus of the Academy foreign as “proper knowledge of the best in the literature of other countries was necessary for an Academy that had to judge the literature of its own country”[2]. This response from the Swedish Academy shows the purpose of this debate is to keep the Academy’s focus narrowed down to native literature instead of global literature, even after being responsible for the Nobel Prize.

After accepting this task, the Swedish Academy had difficulty interpreting Nobel’s words as “an idealistic direction.” The understanding of this “idealistic direction” changed during the century: A lofty and sound idealism in 1901-1902, A policy of neutrality during World War I, The great style in the 1920s, Universal interest in the 1930s, The pioneers after 1946, Attention to unknown masters after 1978, and the literature of the whole world after 1986 [2]. These interpretations raised debates and have problems, as some scholars such as Kjell Espmark consider “each new generation in The Swedish Academy interpreted the will according to their own values”[3]. I consider this comment from Espmark very authentic, as Espmark has been a member of the Swedish Academy since 1981 and was chairman of its Nobel Committee from 1987 to 2004. He specifically criticizes Carl David af Wirsén, the Swedish Academy’s permanent secretary from 1884 to 1912, who understood Nobel’s will as A lofty and sound idealism [2]: “Nobel’s will gave Wirsén – who has been called the Don Quixote of romantic idealism – the chance to pursue a provincial campaign on the international literary stage. Such an application of the will was far from Nobel’s own values”[3]. As a previous member of the Swedish Academy, Espmark not only acknowledges the problem of interpreting the Nobel’s will in the Academy deciding the Nobel Prize in Literature’s winner but also problems including nationality, the Swedish Academy’s authority, and political influence. This work will explain each term specifically with examples to question whether the Nobel Prize is authentic enough to decide a “great” book in the following passages.

3. Nationality—Focusing On China

In the history of the Nobel Prize in literature, there were only two Chinese laureates: Gao Xingjian and Mo Yan. Specifically, Gao Xingjian was exiled from China after the Tiananmen Square massacre and joined French citizenship in 1998 [4]. Hence, it is fair to say only one Chinese citizen, Mo Yan, won the Nobel Prize. Regardless of Mo Yan, it is clearer to focus on Gao Xingjian and another Chinese citizen writer who has the potential to win the Nobel Prize—Bei Dao, to understand the nationality problem in the Nobel Prize.

The reason for Gao’s award in 2000 is “for an oeuvre of universal validity, bitter insights, and linguistic ingenuity, which has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama”[4]. However, looking back to Bei Dao, he has many similarities with Gao: He also engaged in the Tian’anmen Incident and was exiled, joining American citizenship in 2009. Like Gao, Bei Dao is also a victim of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and his works “embody a certain idea of the writer as a public intellectual, speaking out in favor of civil liberties and demanding the release of political prisoners”[5]. In addition, Bei Dao was nominated several times for the Nobel Prize [6]. To answer the question of why Bei Dao missed the prize so many times while Gao became a laureate, we need to return to the Swedish Academy itself.

As mentioned above, the core of the Academy’s debate for accepting the mission to fulfill Nobel’s is whether to broaden their focus on a global scale or not. This foreshadows the Nobel Prize’s preference for European literature, as Espmark mentioned: “In the early 1980s, one could still see, in a world context, headlines like ‘The European Prize’. It was criticism which the Academy itself accepted as justified”[3]. After the Permanent Secretary Lars Gyllensten claimed the ambition to achieve “a global spread” in 1984, more writers from other nations won Nobel Prizes. Still, the true breakout was after Orhan Pamuk and Mo Yan [3]. Thus, it can be inferred that in 2000, when Gao won the Nobel Prize, Gao was a French citizen while Bei Dao was still not an American citizen. Since

the true breakout came after Pamuk won the prize in 2006, nationality was still an important factor of consideration, and the Academy preferred a European citizen more. However, in defense, Espmark pointed out that “we have seen an effort to widen the overall survey in the usual decision-making process such that a Chinese novelist can be weighed at one point, and an Arabic poet at another, against candidates from closer linguistic regions” [3]. But in the following explanation of Gao’s prized dramas, he mentions, “Gao Xingjian happily makes good of lessons from Brecht and Kafka at the same time as, according to the press release, he chooses to “open the flow of sources from popular drama” [3]. To argue against Espmark’s defense, the Academy sees the influence of the well-known German-speaking Bohemian writer Franz Kafka and the German writer Bertolt Brecht in Gao’s works. In this aspect, Gao’s works are not purely “Chinese” and contain many European elements. Due to this reason, it is clear that nationality still plays an important role in the Academy for deciding the prize winner. Other writers from China are debatable whether qualified to win the Nobel Prize, but for this topic, comparing Gao Xingjian to Bei Dao is the most effective case.

4. The Swedish Academy’s Authority

The Swedish Academy plays an important role in deciding the laureates. Thus, it is necessary to consider whether this institution’s authority is to determine the authority of the Nobel Prize. In this part, this work will take a specific look at the Academy from its process of deciding the winner, its ambitions, and its reputation.

In the process of determining the winner, it is noticeable how they treat the candidates’ works: Translations can be ordered for works written in languages that the Academy is not familiar with, and the members of the Academy learn the nominated positions in the literary world and read the candidates’ works as much as they can [7]. According to the data, there are about 100-150 candidates each year [7]. Thus, it is doubtful whether the Academy read through all the proposed works before deciding the winner. Due to this reason, this work does not consider the process of determining the laureates is authentic enough to define a “great” book through the Nobel Prize. If the Academy did not read through all the works possible to result in the Nobel Prize for the author, there might be influential works left out. Thus, the Nobel Prize is not qualified to decide a “great” book. Instead, the Nobel Prize focuses on the author more than on specific works.

Not only the decisions of the Academy is affected by the author more than the works, but the Academy’s ambitions also make a difference in determining the winners. One example of this claim is James Joyce, the author of *Ulysses* and *Dubliners*. *Ulysses* is a prominent book in the stream of consciousness and influenced the literature world. Great figures such as Carl Jung and T. S. Eliot all appreciated it. Hence, it is fair to define *Ulysses* as a great book. But such a great book did not lead its author James Joyce, to win the Nobel Prize. Many scholars discussed the reason for Joyce missing the Nobel Prize, and one opinion is that Joyce did not live until the ambition of the Swedish Academy suited his work [8]. Taking a look at the ambition of the Academy, after the Second World War, they aimed to promote “new” ideas to break with the previous phase: they preferred new scientific methods and discoveries, and in literature, their understanding of Nobel’s will changed to “The pioneers” [3]. This new ambition resulted in laureates “beginning in 1946 with Hesse, then Gide, then Eliot, then Faulkner, and ending with Beckett in 1969” [8]. Unfortunately, Joyce died in 1941 before the ambition of the Academy would consider his works.

The Academy also recognized the value of Joyce, as one of the members of the Academy, Anders Österling, mentioned the value of Joyce in the 1948 Nobel celebration as “the previous era’s greatest and now irreparable neglect” [3]. This example of James Joyce illustrates the fact that the decisions of laureates in the Nobel Prize in Literature are not purely based on literature itself but also on the Academy’s ambitions. Beginning from Carl David af Wirsén’s ambition to “pursue a provincial campaign on the international literary stage,” which is “far from Nobel’s own values” [3]. As Wirsén

took Nobel's will for the sake of his ambitions, his decisions under this principle were authentic enough to determine a "great" book. The new generation in the Academy changed this principle but maintained the ambition of praising classic works [3]. Until the 1930s, the Academy changed its ambition to reward "the greatest benefit to humankind." Still, members of the Academy debated this ambition, especially conservative members trying to block out Herman Hesse. However, after 1946, the Academy shifted its ambition to search for pioneer writers and to interpret the word "ideal" more in Nobel's word "ideal direction" [3]. In 1978, the Academy aimed to raise unknown writers, giving poetry significant attention [3]. Beginning in 1986, the Academy's ambition focused on searching for influential works worldwide. Given this map of shifted ambitions, it is not surprising that many great works and authors, such as Odysseus Elytis, Elias Canetti, and Jaroslav Seifert [3], were neglected due to their works and identities not fitting the Academy's aim at that time. Thus, it can be said that Nobel Prize winners and works were "great" books that suited the Swedish Academy's ambitions in that specific period but were not qualified enough to be considered a "great" book throughout history.

Another aspect that is related to the Swedish Academy's authority is the Academy's reputation. One noticeable event was the Swedish Academy's scandal in 2018: The member Katarina Frostenson's husband Jean-Claude Arnault sexually harassed and physically abused 18 women and may have leaked the names of seven Nobel literature laureates [9]. The result was that "no Nobel Prize would be given for that year. The 2018 winner would instead be declared together with the 2019 winner" [3]. This event also happened when the power of the Swedish Academy began to fall, as after Sara Stridsberg left, only ten members remained and faced harsh criticism [3]. Following this disaster, three members left the Academy: Klas Östergren, Kjell Espmark, and Peter Englund. Östergren criticized the Academy strongly in his departure: "The Swedish Academy has for a long time had serious problems and has now tried to solve them in a way that puts obscure considerations before its own statutes, which is a betrayal of its founder and patron, and not least its mission to represent genius and taste. Therefore, I have chosen to no longer take part in its activities. I'm leaving the table. I'm out of the game," [10]. In other words, this criticism can be interpreted as the Academy failing to solve long-lasting serious issues while following the beliefs and mission of this Academy since it was founded. It has gone on the wrong path, putting considerations in other aspects above its mission. Due to the Academy's reputation and criticism from a former member, it is doubtful of the Swedish Academy's corruption and authority to decide a laureate and a "great" work fairly.

In conclusion, the decision of laureates of the Nobel Prize in Literature made by the Swedish Academy is focused more on the authors, and the process of determining has many problems, such as overlooking influential works and being strongly affected by the Academy's own ambition. In addition, the Academy also has issues in itself, and with recent events, the authority of the Academy should be questioned along with corruption. Not to mention that the Nobel Prize in Literature is affected by so many other elements, not purely based on literature. Thus, this paper does not regard the Academy as authentic enough to determine a "great" work.

5. Political Influences

To discuss political influences, this paper will start with a quote from Lars Forsell, a member of the Swedish Academy: "The Nobel Literature Prize is absurd, and the only serious question is how to get rid of it." By this quote, Forsell meant to pick out the needle in the flesh of the Nobel Prize, and this work will discuss this "needle" from the political aspect [11]. One political influence is from the Swedish Academy itself. The Swedish Academy's preference is tilted toward works that suit their interests. Using Ingemar Björkstén's words, the prizes represent "what people have called a very Swedish exercise, reflecting Swedish tastes." He adds, "The Nobel often means something, but for most of us, it has a Swedish framework, and we see it, unlike most foreigners, in relation to the academy itself" [11]. This quote shows the limitation of the Nobel Prize, as the Swedish Academy is

the institution that decides the laureates and cannot ultimately discard the Swedish influence in literature.

Another aspect is the international influence on the Academy. One example is the focus on South American writers after the 1960s and 70s when Swedish society developed more respect for third-world countries [11]. Before the 1960s, there were only four writers from South America winning the prize, three from Spain and one from Chile. After 1960, more writers from different countries in South America, such as Guatemala and Mexico, became laureates of the prize [12]. Another example is the winner of the Nobel Prize in 1980: the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz. Due to the rise of the Solidarity trade union in Poland in 1980 August and September and its influence in Swedish society, in October, the literature prize winner was Miłosz. From these two aspects, we can see that the Nobel Prize is deeply connected with politics. Even though these attachments were not shown on the surface, one could still easily link the Nobel Prize winners with political themes in Sweden and the world, making the decision of laureates not purely based on literature. Hence, with politics playing an important role in deciding on a “great” book or an influential author, the Nobel Prize is not authentic enough. Combined with the reputation of the Swedish Academy mentioned previously, it is crucial to pick out the “needle” and make the “flesh” of the Academy and the Nobel Prize pure again.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has organized studies of the Nobel Prize’s authority to define a “great” book in four major aspects: Nobel’s will and the Swedish Academy’s interpretation, problems in the Nobel Prize regarding nationality, the Academy’s authority, and political issues. By explaining these aspects, this paper aims to provide critical thinking about the Nobel Prize and the definition of a “great” book for future studies. Due to the problems listed in each aspect, this paper does not regard the Nobel Prize as authentic enough to define a “great” book. Not only did the interpretation of Nobel’s will detach from his intention from time to time, but also the process of deciding on a laureate and the Swedish Academy itself has many issues. However, this does not mean that the laureates’ works are not influential. For this reason, this paper will end with a quote from Lars Gyllensten, a former member of the Swedish Academy, “You can absurdly define the Nobel Prize if you chose, but then spending time writing instead of curing people of malaria is absurd, too. There is no best writer. Everybody knows that. But I can say there is no prize I regret giving” [11].

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