

# LITERATURE AS AN ACTIVIST TOOL TO SPARK CONVERSATIONS

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*ABSTRACT: When asked to think about activism and social change, what comes to mind are activists, political speeches, protests, and the notion of creating movements that bring people together to lend voice to their ideas. What comes before these acts of activism and social change are that they originate from ideas. Where can these ideas come from? One source is the arts. There is the belief that activist art does not have power and that people should become politicians and not artists if they want change. Art by itself may not do much work on its own, but where activist art contains power is that they can act as initial sparks for ideas. It is the realization that there is an aspect within society that needs to be brought up to attention and needs to be changed. The arts can spark change and literature is one example that has this kind of potential.*

When asked to think about activism and social change, what comes to mind are a person's actions and spoken words. We think of activists and politicians giving speeches, protests, petitions, and creating movements that bring people together in the physical space to give voice to their ideas. What comes before acts of activism and social change are the ideas they originate from. Where can these ideas come from? One source is the arts. I share Lucy Lippard's argument against the idea that art can't change anything, and that people should become politicians if they want to create change (3). Art on its own cannot do much work, but it is worth considering where its potential power can lie. Teenagers and young adults today gain new information and ideas from a variety of outlets that were not available in the past. Given this new knowledge, they can come to the realization that there is an aspect within society that needs to be brought up for attention and/or needs to be changed but might not necessarily know where to start. Literature can serve as an activist tool used to spark ideas and conversation on social justice and activism amongst readers, specifically amongst our younger generation today.

Social justice, activism, and social change that address social issues begin with the formation of ideas and dialogue. Many of these terms may

be used interchangeably, but there are subtle differences in each. In my view, social justice entails that everyone deserves equality in terms of rights, treatment, and opportunity, activism involves direct action to bring about political or social change, and social change involves larger structural and transformational adjustments to society. When thinking about how each of these terms works as a progression, an order that makes sense would be social justice, activism, then social change. Another term called "artistic activism" is described as "a dynamic practice combining the creative power of the arts to move us emotionally with the strategic planning of activism necessary to bring about social change" (Duncombe and Lambert). These terms play a role in some literature, lending itself to being a tool for activism through addressing these topics.

Activist art has a part to play in our evolving society. Justice Judge Bruce Wright with the New York State Supreme Court notes that "participating in the system doesn't mean that we must identify with it, stop criticizing it, or stop improving the little piece of turf on which we operate" (Bishop 135). Everyone is a part of society and plays a role within, and particularly the United States still has many social issues and injustices that people who are not in a position of authority or privilege experience constantly.

There can be underlying pressure as citizens to conform to dominant ideas and expectations of our time, to fall into a “this is just how it is, and nothing will change” mindset, and to not speak against them in fear of causing conflict or trouble for oneself. In order to make improvements in society, individuals should be challenging and pushing back against ideas and agendas that are built on cruelty and discrimination. Lippard notes the counterargument that some insist that “art is powerless feel that its power lies precisely in that powerlessness—that art escapes social pressures by being above it all or below it all” (5). While there is truth to this statement, she says that it tends to encourage irresponsibility, so it is key to consider how art can insert itself into conversation of social issues today, even if not directly. To begin any kind of change, it starts with gaining new knowledge—as they say, “knowledge is power,” and the arts serve as one outlet to attain it.

Younger generations are our future when it comes to activism and social change. It is crucial to note that “powerful institutions, such as schools, government, media, and the family, can be reshaped by young actors who then reveal, through the power of a youthful perspective, the wrongs and weaknesses of the system” (Gaffney 120). A common phrase that goes around is “children are the future.” Young people today have access to a vast amount of knowledge through many different sources given our advancement of technology and communication. Specifically in the United States, citizens are given rights and the freedom of speech to voice out opinions on inequalities and injustices faced in not only the individual’s life but their communities as well. It would make sense that acts of activism could fall into the hands of the younger generation. They observe and witness the faults in the system as well as learn about the traumas and mistreatment their ancestors faced. Now they have a chance to openly share and discuss those issues because “With economic and political inequality on the rise, ubiquitous violence against young immigrants and people

of color, and the steady dismantling of public education, we need a literature of social change now more than ever” (Gaffney 120). Due to these issues, one of the best forms of activist literature to start understanding these injustices is the literary genre of books targeted at teen and young adult (YA) readers as these books reflect the diversity and issues that surround our world today.

Reading activist literature helps readers realize and understand the faults in society and see a need for change. According to Marxist literary criticism, there are two distinct possibilities in reading literature. The first is that “literature does nothing but reflect the ideologies of its time. What it reflects, therefore, is ‘false consciousness’ mediated by the influence of the dominant ideas of the time” (Panikkar 6). The second is that “literature challenges the ideology it confronts and tries to transcend the ideological limits of the time, yielding insights into the realities that ideology hides from view” (Panikkar 6). Essentially, while the first possibility tends to maintain the status quo, the second possibility contributes to changing it (Panikkar 6). Both parts of Marxist literary criticism can be applied to how we read literature, especially literature on social justice topics. A story will feature a society that has flaws as it reflects a dominant ideology, and the characters in it will interact with those ideas – challenge them, push back against them, form innovative ideas, and/or figure out how to find their place in such a world.

*Animal Farm* by George Orwell is a book that demonstrates concepts from Marxist literary criticism. The story is about farm animals who want to overthrow their human farmer to live equally and freely, but it grows dark as the pigs are the animals that gain control and form a dictatorship at the end. The book reflects the events leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the following Stalinist era in the Soviet Union (Campbell). In *Animal Farm*, a wise pig named Old Major shares his thoughts

with the other animals on how they are all mistreated by their human farmer. Old Major tells them, “Remove Man from the scene, and the root cause of hunger and overwork is abolished forever” (Orwell 8). His speech is enough to get the other animals to realize the faults of their state of living, which reflect the dominant ideology set by the humans who hold authoritative power. This realization makes the animals want to challenge and confront this power as they start a rebellion to seek change. By reading literature through a Marxist lens, there can be a case made for why certain books may be considered as activist literature; it can be used as a medium to spark change through helping readers figure out what parts of society need change.

Literature has power in targeting changes to an individual’s beliefs and ways of living. Not only can literature be about topics on social justice, activist movements, and social change, but there is also a layer of what happens beyond the books as the ideas can open up and change the way an individual sees the world. Social change is described to be “articulated at three different levels: changes in the life conditions of an individual, of an institution and of the society as a whole” (Panikkar 9). Examples of the three different levels of social change can be seen in *Animal Farm* when the animals try to reconstruct their society. The change in the life and conditions of an individual can be seen when “the pigs now revealed that during the past three months they had taught themselves to read and write from an old spelling book which had belonged to Mr. Jones’s children and which had been thrown on the rubbish heap” (Orwell 27). The pigs learned to read and write on their own terms in order to initiate the rebellion, which in itself is an act of change at an individual level. The change of an institution can be seen when the animals establish the “seven commandments” which “would form an unalterable law by which all the animals on *Animal Farm* must live for ever after” (Orwell 27). The animals create commandments that only apply to their farm

and amongst themselves. The change of society is seen later in the book when “years passed” as the pigs establish higher power than the rest of the animals and they are no longer equals (Orwell 140). Social change does not happen quickly, but often takes years to establish. In *Animal Farm*, the pigs finally resembling humans is a new norm that developed over time.

Given the three different levels of social change and varying terminology related to it, the focus is on social justice, activism, and social change in relation to the ideas we gain from literature and how we discuss them with others opposed to actions or acting upon those ideas to create a higher systemic change. In other words, literature has power in that it targets the beginning of the progression, starting with changes to an individual and not the end goal of a structural social change of society as a whole. Changes at an individual level are important because movements that fuel changes to society as a whole can’t start without a personal change.

Literature serves as a way to enter into the conversation of activism that is not daunting, unlike traditional activist movements. It is hard to imagine that by looking at a piece of art or literature, someone would feel compelled to ignite a big change in their community. However, it is more about the information we gain and the new ideas formed by engaging with art. People are able to share ideas with others, which is where art can have power. The term “activism” itself is “foreign to many people, and a bit daunting: it seems to take too much commitment, too much risk, and too much time... But that’s why mixing arts and activism works so well” (Duncombe and Lambert). For those who see activism as the act of putting oneself out there in a risky situation with fear of potential violent acts or harsh consequences against them, it can be intimidating and might be a reason for someone to step out of the conversation. Art and activism conform to certain views of what they should look like—for example, art is seen as paintings and drawings

while activism is seen as large scale protest movements. This is why artistic activism works well, because “artistic activism is activism that doesn’t look like activism and art that doesn’t look like art” (Duncombe and Lambert). One of the unique ways *Animal Farm* brings readers into the conversation is that the story as art portrays historic people as animals instead of people while being a work of fiction. This deviates from the expectations of what activist engagement and readings on the topic might look like, but still retains the truth of historic events. No one expects that reading fiction can give readers an activist frame of reference, but it has the capacity to without readers realizing it. Literature offers an indirect way into activism as reading books can serve as a way to engage with social justice, activism topics, and social issues without directly putting oneself out there.

Literature that strays away from social norms may fall subject to censorship. Some may argue that books alone have no power to create change in society. While there is truth to that statement, it can also be argued that “YA literature has power; why else would so many would-be sensors not want teenagers to read these books? Teen readers also have power. They have power not as adults in training or as deficient adults but rather as youth who may see more clearly through the layers of insincerity and deception” (Gaffney 121). When topics and ideas presented in literature go against the dominant ideas of society and what is deemed “appropriate” for readers, especially younger readers, they get censored and banned. These books are removed from bookshelves and schools, which prevent people from engaging with them. This can show that even exposing the mind to new knowledge has a power of its own.

*Animal Farm* is a book that has a reputation for being banned for its conflicting subject matter. It has been accused to be communist propaganda and a call to overthrow organized states (“Banned Books Week 2021: *Animal Farm*”). *Animal Farm* was rejected several times

by publishers before it was published (“Books They Tried to Ban”). It was also banned entirely from the Soviet Union, had plenty of pushback from British and United States publishers and classrooms, and to this day is still banned by the United Arab Emirates because of its depictions of pigs, alcohol, and other content conflicts with Islamic values (“Banned and Burned: Restricted Books Throughout History”). Literature has power in how ideas are shared and spread around. If it did not, it would not make sense how much effort from publishers and school boards goes into making sure books that are controversial do not get into the hands of readers. Those who get to decide what books get read have power, so if they decide against certain books, it may mean that the messages in them contain a challenging power of their own.

Young adult literature is accessible because of its relevance to its target audience. Gaffney states that “YA literature is a useful and appropriate literature for classroom instruction – it is accessible and relevant to young readers, making it a more forgiving canvas for young literary critics and theorists” (124). There are a few reasons why the specific genre of YA literature appeals to a younger generation. One of the reasons is that these stories often contain characters, including a protagonist around the reader’s age, providing the reader someone to relate to. Another reason is that the content in these books reflects the current time period and setting we live in, which then provides further reason for the reader to relate and see themselves in the story. The second reason may lend itself as one that is more important than the first at times. There are many older books labeled as “classics” which are marketed for teens and young adults to read such as *Little Women*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Peter Pan* etc. and while they feature characters that may be around the age of the reader, there is a difference in time period and content. It is also important to note that not all, but many dominant “classics” are Eurocentric—written by white authors and feature white characters. Literature such as these classics still retain their

relevance in diverse ways to readers to this day (they are beloved classics for a reason), but it is important to consider that contemporary YA books can offer a different perspective. Consider that “The power of YA literature lies not in empowering readers as individuals but rather in its potential to connect individual readers to a larger, more diverse community” (Gaffney 121). In recent years, there has been a wide range of YA literature being published by authors from minority groups, such as people of color, who tackle topics present amongst these communities in our current time. When readers who belong to such communities pick up these books, they see themselves represented and can start to see where they fit into the conversation.

Literature can offer a space for privacy and enjoyment in conversations related to social justice and social change. Educators and librarians play a key role in ensuring books for teens and young adult readers are presented to them in a way that makes them want to participate in the ongoing dialogues of social issues in our society. They have some power in choosing what books go on bookshelves, what books can be taught in their institutions, and what books they recommend students to read when asked. They also have influence in the lives of teens and young adults who may see them as trusted adults to confide in outside their family and other social circles. Even if literature is targeted towards a specific age demographic, that does not mean older adults cannot enjoy them too as “YA is becoming only more popular and pleasure oriented, as evidenced by the fact that adults seem to enjoy it as much or more than teens do themselves” (Gaffney 125). This enjoyment is all the more reason for educators to be engaged and be a source of encouragement for the younger generation of readers.

An example of how educators effectively bring students together to engage with literature is at the University of Washington (UW) in Tacoma. I was a part of a book club called Real Lit[erature] that was initiated in the year 2018

as a collaboration between the UW Tacoma library and diversity center on campus. The books chosen each academic quarter by the staff who lead the club are YA fiction which focus on topics of social justice. A few of the books read in the past include *The Hate You Give* (focus on the Black Lives Matter movement), *The 57 Bus* (focus on LGBTQ+ hate crimes), *Darius the Great is Not Okay* (focus on Mental Health), and *There There* (focus on Native American History and Identity) to name a few. The goal of the book club is to bring students, faculty, and staff on campus together to read and have a discussion around the book’s topics—to engage in how they impact their own lives and society as a whole.

The process of reading literature in our education systems can often feel like a chore to teens and young adults, but that does not always need to be the case. What an idea like the book club at UW Tacoma does is serve as an incentive for those who enjoy reading. Participants are given a free copy of the book and have the pleasure of engaging in conversations about it with others, including the author of the book who usually gets invited to speak at one of the book club sessions. Another effective aspect of the club is even though the librarians and staff are facilitators in a sense of organizing the club, the power dynamic of being viewed as an instructor is less present. All participants are encouraged to freely express ideas at their own comfort level without the worry of facing grade penalties for having not read the book, pressure to fully understand the book, and/or the lack of verbally sharing ideas within the group. Since a book club might consist of people who are considered to be peers rather than close family, this also lends itself to being a more private place to share ideas, build trust, and establish close connections to others, especially considering the sometimes personal and relatable nature of topics presented in the literature. The act of reading literature alone can serve as a safe place for young adults because “in a world where we think we understand

what teenagers want and what they are about, reading is a space for radical privacy, where any and all meanings are possible” (Gaffney 126). Literature can open up teens and young adults to new knowledge or even topics that are frowned upon and shied away from discussing within their own families. It is a place to experience personal and intellectual change as readers have a place to process and engage these topics with others in a way they may not get the chance to experience in other settings. A book club is one example of creating intentional spaces to build trust and have conversations about social justice with others. There are other ways educators can make this happen within classroom spaces, like having students write and reflect on these issues or having one-on-one conversations with them. Educators can play a major role in ensuring teens and young adults get these kinds of opportunities where they can contribute to the larger conversation of issues in our society.

Literature can influence readers to have a deeper understanding of social issues today by eliciting an emotional response. Today we are surrounded by multiple platforms to gain access to information on what is happening in the world. A few sources include television, radio, newspaper, articles, social media, and word of mouth, so it is important to consider how these sources differ from literature. Duncombe and Lambert state: “Activism moves the material world, while Art moves the heart, body and soul. In fact, however, they are complimentary. Social change doesn’t just happen, it happens because people decide to make change. As any seasoned activist can tell you, people just don’t decide to change their mind and act accordingly, they are personally moved to do so by emotionally powerful stimuli.” News stories often present social issues and activism in a way that is direct, factual, and short, which does not leave a lot of time for information absorption from the viewers. Literature on the other hand has the potential to deliver information that can make readers feel more empathetic and connected to the characters in stories and their personal

struggles. In *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas, there is a scene in the book where the protagonist Starr witnesses her friend Khalil be shot multiple times by a police officer when their car gets pulled over. Khalil is shot because the officer mistakes the hairbrush he pulled out from his car as a gun. Even though *The Hate You Give* is a work of fiction, the story is inspired by true events. People who read this particular book may have a strong emotional reaction to the events within because it is clear that what happened was wrong and unjust. Readers are able to develop more empathy for Starr because they see the world through her perspective before and after the incident occurred over a longer period of time. *The Hate You Give* book and movie were influential when they were released because topics of racism, implicit bias, and activism are still present in society today, encouraging young adults to consider their place in society and how they want to get involved in a conversation that is still ongoing.

Artists, art, and literature alone cannot change the world, which is why it is worth considering how the medium of the message can be used and further utilized for social change. Today, we live in a society where people, and especially those from minority groups, are recognizing and voicing injustices instead of being silent about them. They are encouraged to speak up and challenge them. If activist art is successful, then there should be changes in the larger culture that can be observed whether big or small. Literature used as an activist tool to spark conversation may not be a large-scale change, but is a positive change, nonetheless. It might not even be as small of a change as we think because literature and the arts are shared, alive, and thriving in our communities. It is important to use these art forms to continue conversations that critique authority and how society operates to set the stage for any kind of positive social change in the future.

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