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The Power of Fiction: How Literature Educated and Reformed American Society

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a number of American stories which helped educate people and bring about legal or social change. There are many stories which caused major or minor legal and political change, particularly, in the United States. Some of them are written by Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Upton Sinclair and Sidney Kingsley. After the publication of *White Jacket* by Melville the novel was distributed to the U.S. Senate which consequently outlawed flogging on naval vessels. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is another notable example of a literary text which triggered an enormous social change in America; in this case, the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Sinclair's *The Jungle* was influential in obtaining passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act. Kingsley's play, *Dead End* raised awareness about poverty and the inadequacy of housing in the slums of New York City and was responsible for the Wagner Housing Bill which was passed by the U.S. Congress to provide financial assistance to the States and political subdivisions for the elimination of unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions. There are many such stories which helped ameliorate American society and this paper will discuss these works and their social and political backgrounds.

Keywords: reform, American literature, committed literature, protest literature, utilitarianism

1. Introduction

In the 2007 Massey Lectures, Alberto Manguel tried to tackle some of the problems we have in society and suggested a new approach. He believed that we should look at what poets and storytellers say and, in their writings, find the secret keys that politicians and social planners are looking for in order to create a better society. Manguel (2007) further stated that we should look on the library shelves marked "fiction" for the book, *"How to Build a Better Society"*. This is an imaginary book that addresses the basic question whether it is possible for writers of literary texts to shape a more perfect society.

Michael Hanne (1994) opened his book *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change* with a more specific question than Manguel's, asking the question, "Can a novel start a war, free serfs, break up marriages, drive readers to suicide, close factories, bring about a law change, swing an election, or serve as a weapon in a national or international struggle?" (p. 1) The answer to this question is affirmative. Sometimes literature becomes instrumental in bringing about minor or major changes in society. Frank Palmer (1992) calls this the "educative power" of literature (p. 182). D. H. Lawrence (as cited in Palmer, 1994) believes that readers of stories educate themselves "in the feelings" of other fellow human beings. They look into the novels and "there listen-in. Not to the didactic statements of the author, but to the low, calling cries of the characters, as they wonder in the dark woods of their destiny" (p. 181).

There are many stories which caused various social, legal and political changes, particularly, in the United States and this paper is an attempt to bring some of them together in a socio-political reading to show how, to use Jean-Paul Sartre's words in *What Is Literature* (1947), writers completely commit themselves in their works, "not in an abjectly passive role" by representing their "vices" and "weaknesses, but as a resolute will and as a choice, as this total enterprise of living that each one of us is" (2001, p. 23). According to Sartre, writers commit themselves to a "cause" and condemn "the old theory of art for art's

sake" (p. 17). They give society a "guilty conscience" and are constantly in a state of "antagonism towards the conservative forces which are maintaining the balance" they want to "upset" (p. 61). These committed writers, to use Adorno's words, did not necessarily "intend to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions – like earlier propagandist plays against syphilis, duels, abortion laws or borstals"; instead, they aimed at working "at the level of fundamental attitudes" in order to change them (1990, p. 91). They, accordingly, turned "suffering into images, harsh and uncompromising as they are" to wound "the shame we feel in the presence of the victims" (pp. 95-96). As the scope of this study is very wide, this paper brings into focus a number of stories from the realm of American literature, taken from 19th to 20th century, to discuss their liberating function and show how, from time to time, literature in America became, using Italo Calvino's words, an instrument of "self-awareness" (1990, p. 100) because society sometimes "demands that the writer raise his voice if he wants to be heard, propose ideas that will have impact on the public, [and] push all his instinctive reactions to extremes" (p. 99). The stories discussed here are divided into two different categories: the literature that actually helped change the law by exposing social problems and that which only stimulated a chain of reforms and helped change social and political institutions. But before embarking on these stories, let us briefly review the works of some of the pioneers in this field.

2. Literature of Review

In one of his literary essays, called, "The Serious Artist" Ezra Pound (1935) writes: "As there are in medicine the art of diagnosis and the art of cure, so in the arts, so in the particular arts of poetry and of literature, there is the art of diagnosis and there is the art of cure" (p. 45). This is related to the idea of literature as a subversive discourse and literary artists as critics of their societies who write with the tactic and optimistic assumption that to reveal social ills is a step towards correcting them. These writers reform society by bringing into public view problems and

experiences that might otherwise be invisible. Often these problems are those of contemporary concern which induce writers to create protest literatures with, what Pierre Macherey calls, a "distinctive 'fiction effect'" to help bring about change (cited in Bennett, 1979, p. 173). These writers show a tendency towards practical aspects of life. As Walter Benjamin (2000) puts it, "an orientation toward practical interests is characteristic of many born story tellers." The "nature of every real story," Benjamin observes, "contains, openly or covertly, something useful" (pp. 13-14). The story teller is always "rooted in the people" and has "counsel for his readers" (p. 24). This emerges from a radical view, believing that reading should result in great or extreme social and political change.

The conscience-stricken social protesters who produced literary works to effect change in society belong to the Utilitarian tradition that asks of every law, institution and convention what use they ever have. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the founder of the Utilitarian school himself began as an advocate of legal reform and believed that all institutions should promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Reformist writers have a vein of utilitarianism running through them. According to Sartre (2001), these authors write "utilitarian" prose (p. 11) as opposed to "literature of consumption" (p. 219). These "high-minded" artists try to move you and "guide you" and if they describe a "hovel", they "make it seem the symbol of social injustice and provoke your indignation" (p. 4). They contribute to social reforms and, in some instances, influence law reforms and help bring about change in society. Their words, as Brice Parrain observed, are "loaded pistols" (cited in Sartre, p. 15). We have often heard about how art imitates life but here we are talking about how life can be influenced by art.

Sartre mentions that there was a time in France when Rousseau, in his writings, "was inviting his fellow commoners to become conscious of themselves." Writers such as Rousseau, Diderot and Condorcet were preparing people for the Bastille and "the night of August the fourth" (Sartre, 2001, p. 83). These writers "intervened in public life, protested

against an unjust decree, asked for the review of a trial, and, in short, decided that the spiritual was in the street, at the fair, in the market place, at the tribunal ..." (Sartre, 2001, p. 84). Literature was "naturally revolutionary" (Sartre, p. 93).

One notable example of reforming literature outside America is Ivan Turgenev's *A Hunter's Sketches* (1852), which many claim was instrumental in convincing Tsar Alexander II to abolish serfdom in Russia (Hanne, 1994). The Tsar is said to have told people it influenced him to free the serfs in the Great Emancipation in 1861. *A Hunter's Sketches* comprises a series of vignettes about harsh peasant life, written from the view point of a member of the gentry class. One of the most interesting stories in the collection which helped arouse emotional impulse to root for the underdog involves a peasant woman who was injured while stepping off her porch. No longer able to take care of herself and not able to do much more than lie on her bed and pleasantly speak to any who might pass by, Lukeria embraces the fatalistic spirit of the tyrannized which had always been hers. She tells the narrator, after nearly losing her breath, that she does not need anything and is content with life. Throughout this essay I will refer to this kind of revolutionary literature which was a force for significant social change as "Reforming Literature"; that is to say, the literature that helped reform legal, social and political institutions and had the power to effect change in society.

In Britain reforming literature reached its highest point with Charles Dickens who was interested in changing things, including the English educational system which was in a sorry state in his days (Adrian, 1949). Some of Dickens's writings have had this effect. Dickens worked at a solicitor's office and saw the necessity of a law reform. He wrote *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House*, trying to bring about reforms in Victorian England. But there was one particular novel that actually did help reform the educational system and that was *Nicholas Nickleby* (published in monthly parts between 1838 and 1839). Before writing this novel, Dickens visited the notorious boarding schools in Yorkshire to do background research for the novel which deals with the mistreatment of

children sent to these schools. As Adrian (1949) observes, Dickens himself had sad memories of his schooldays when he was a pupil at Wellington House Academy (p. 239). He hated these schools and remembered the proprietors who were ignorant men whose business was to make as much out of the children and put as little into them as possible (Adrian, 1949, p. 239). In the novel, the generous but penniless Nicholas is sent as usher to one of these schools where the owners maltreat the children under pretence of education. Their special cruelty is expended on Smike, a half-witted boy left on his hands and employed as a drudge. Nicholas, infuriated by what he witnesses, thrashes the headmaster and escapes with Smike, who becomes his devoted friend. There was a public outcry after the publication of *Nicholas Nickleby* and a number of these so-called academies (that were actually working houses) were closed. Once the harsh realities of these schools were publicized by the novel, parents withdrew their children from these schools to avoid scandal and shame (Adrian, 1949, p. 240). The novel also helped close down the notorious William Shaw's academy, which was a dumping ground for unwanted children, on which the story was based. By 1848 only one such academies remained open thanks to the popularity of Dickens's novel.

Despite the fact that reforming stories first emerged in countries like Russia and Britain, they became very popular in the United States, particularly, in the 19th and 20th centuries when American writers such as Melville, Stowe, Sinclair and Kingsley, to name but a few, wrote stories which eventually helped cause major and minor social and political changes by raising awareness about the social problems of their time. The next section shall briefly discuss these revolutionary works of fiction under the light of their socio-political backgrounds.

3. Discussion

Reforming literature has a long history in the United States. Herman Melville's seaman's narrative, *White-Jacket* (1850), is a novel that falls within this area. As one writer notes, this is a story about "the extension of black slavery to the decks of United States frigates and to the backs of

the white sailors" (Otter, 1998, p. 24). In this story Melville "discovers a crucial analogy ... between the white and the black 'slave,'" an analogy which was "at the center of antebellum political debate" (Otter, 1998, p. 24). *White-Jacket* was instrumental in changing the law in the U.S. In 1843, after three years of voyaging in the South Seas, Melville signed up as a seaman on a U.S. naval ship. What he observed on that trip formed the basis of *White-Jacket*, a success both as a story and as an exposé of naval practices of which the American public was not aware. Melville called "the public attention to the indescribable abominations of naval life, reeking with the rankest corruption, cruelty, and blood ... vividly portraying scenes of which he was constant witness, and in many instances suggesting a judicious remedy for the evils which he exhibits" (White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War, 2011, para. 3). White-jacket is a sailor on a U.S. frigate who, like other sailors, suffers "many abuses" (Melville, 1990, p. 404). His nickname has been taken from a jacket that has been made from rags. The journey he is undertaking is a dangerous one. "A man falls overboard. There are constant floggings for the merest inkling of insurrection. All the crew members are forced to watch each flogging. A doctor stands by to stop the flogging if the victim's life is endangered, but he is so callous he does not stop a single one" (Melville, White-Jacket, 2011, para. 2). This doctor also "prescribes medications, but never attempts to change the conditions that cause the sailors' illnesses, like malnutrition and exposure" (Melville, Herman. White-Jacket, 2011, para. 2). When the ship is in Rio de Janeiro, another doctor appears. In order to show off to the ship's doctors how skilful he is, he amputates the leg of a frightened sailor who eventually dies of shock. After that White-jacket accidentally falls into the sea and hardly escapes being speared when a sailor thinks his jacket is a whale. Then the sailors fish him out and send him up again to finish his work (Melville, Herman. White-Jacket, 2011, para. 3). Shortly after its publication, *White Jacket* was distributed to the U.S. Senate which consequently outlawed flogging on naval vessels.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is another American reforming literary text. *Uncle Tom* set off a heated debate about the moral consequences of owning slaves. It had a profound impact on the abolition movement and helped bring about the Civil War in the United States. Stowe's aim in writing *Uncle Tom* was to convince Americans that slavery was not right, and this point crops up on almost every page in the novel. In this novel Stowe (1986) predicted that "if there is anything that is revealed with the strength of a divine law in our times, it is that the masses are to rise, and the underclass become the upper one" (1986, p. 392). In this story Stowe shows the horrors that slaves endure, the separation of couples and mothers and children, overwork and physical punishment. Uncle Tom is a noble black slave sold at auction to a brutal, drunken and degenerate planter who has him flogged to death. Uncle Tom is a member of what Stow calls, the "subject race," that "is down and has to stay down forever (1986, p. 393). One of the characters in the novel actually claims that "The Anglo Saxon race is the dominant race of the world and *is to be so*" (Stowe, 1986, p. 392). *Uncle Tom's Cabin* caused a national stir and encouraged many people in the North to join the abolitionist cause. During its first year after publication, more than 300,000 copies were sold, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became the most popular American novel, having a powerful anti-slavery influence. According to one writer, when Stowe, a petite woman, met President Lincoln, the president asked if she was "the little lady who made this great war" (Gossett, 1985, p. 314). The drama adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a popular play and more than the book "helped to solidify Northern sentiment against slavery. It pressed home the moral issue and prepared the people for the War Between the States" (Shipley, 1984, p. 8).

Before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was written, yet another book entitled, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African* (1789) by the well-known abolitionist, Olauda Equiano, became popular at the height of anti-slavery movement and helped further the anti-slavery cause. In this autobiography Equiano tells

the story of how he was kidnapped when he was only a little child and taken as a slave to America and how "he earned the price of his freedom by trading and saving" (Olauda Equiano: the slave who became a best-selling author, 2011, para. 14). Equiano composes the first slave narrative that triggers the growing anti-slavery movement both in England and America by depicting the abuses he witnessed as a slave (Olauda Equiano: the slave who became a best-selling author, 2011).

This kind of subversive discourse is best exemplified in the works of the so-called muck-raker writers in America. The majority of the muck-raker writers were revolutionary humanists. They regarded the greater problems of mankind as their own problems and felt deeply troubled when they saw people exploited in the world. The muck-rakers were investigative and documentary journalists who exposed corruption and malfeasance in their country. They were bent on exposing social problems and political chicanery (Regier, 1957).

The American author, or as one writer calls him, "the chronicler of society as it is" (Yolder, 1984, p. 5), and one of the pioneers of muck-raking literature, Upton Sinclair (1968), has written an essay on the power of literature in making the world a bit of a better place. In this essay, entitled "How I Reformed Three Great American Families", Sinclair claims that he reformed wealthy American families such as the Armours and the Fords through fiction. (The Armours were meat barons who were responsible for such inventions as the refrigerated train car and the kill-floor, and the meat-oriented status of the modern American diet).

As for reforming the Armours, Sinclair illustrates how he read accounts of the horrors that were perpetrated against the striking workers in the stockyards of Chicago. Then he went to Chicago and put himself in the hands of the workers and they took him around in a worker's uniform. The horrors he observed were beyond belief. So he went home and started writing a novel about life in the stockyards. The story which was published serially in the weekly, *The Appeal to Reason*, later came out as the novel, *The Jungle*. Published in January 1906, *The Jungle* unleashed a storm of public indignation. It was an expose of the appalling

and unsanitary conditions in the meat-packing industry. The novel told the tragedy of a Lithuanian immigrant and a group of his friends and relatives. Penniless and unable to speak English, they are mercilessly exploited by employers, foremen, police, political bosses, and others with access to power. Women are forced into prostitution; older men, unable to work, are left to starve. As Sinclair (1986) puts it in *The Jungle*, "such were the cruel terms upon which their life was possible, that they might never have nor expect a single instant's respite from worry, a single instant in which they were not haunted by the thought of money" (p. 121). The novel also included gruesome descriptions of food production: tubercular beef, the grinding up of poisoned rats, and even workers falling into vats and emerging as Pure Leaf Lard.

The novel travelled all over the world and was translated into 90 languages. Later someone from Armour's legal department told Sinclair that Armour was determined to arrest him for criminal libel. But his legal advisors knew what Sinclair could have produced in court so they persuaded Armour not to go ahead with his plans. Therefore, instead of suing the writer, Armour decided to take action and set his name straight before the world. The stockyards were cleaned up, and the workers were given the right to have unions. Armour built the Armour Institute in Chicago, where they trained people in different kinds of useful professions. *The Jungle* was read by President Theodore Roosevelt, who appointed a commission to investigate the meatpacking industry (The jungle: social messages in literature, 2011, para. 4). Although the commission did not find the packers "guilty", Sinclair's book put pressure that resulted in another commission and the passing of the Beef Inspection Act (The jungle: social messages in literature, 2011, para. 4). Roosevelt also met Sinclair and told him that radical action must be taken to do away with the efforts of arrogant and selfish greed on the part of the capitalist. *The Jungle* was influential in obtaining passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act. "The act forbade foreign and interstate commerce in adulterated or fraudulently labelled food and drugs" (Pure food and drug act, 2011, para. 3). Products could now be seized by officials, and

offending persons could be prosecuted. (Pure food and drug act, 2011, para. 3). With the passing of the Pure Food and Drugs Act and the Meat Inspection Act (both in 1906), Sinclair was able to show that novelists could help change the law. This, in itself, inspired a tremendous growth in investigative literature.

The next American family Sinclair reformed through his investigative writing was the Fords. Sinclair wrote about how he met Henry Ford. Sinclair told him what he thought were the responsibilities of masters of industry and how industry must be democratized. He told Ford that he should let the workers have their representatives so they could speak for their needs and wishes. Ford turned down this suggestion and explained to Sinclair how important it was that industry should have a man at the head who understands everything and has the final say. When Ford's workers went out on strike and formed unions, they were treated with brutality beyond belief. Sinclair was so outraged by the whole thing that he wrote a novelette called *The Flivver King* (1937) which was Ford's life story and showed Ford as a man obsessed with increasing his profits. As Meyer (1984) maintains, "structurally, *The Flivver King* examines two social worlds – the Ford family and the Shutt family, the successful world of the rising industrialist and the precarious world of the working class" (pp. iv, v). Sinclair tells in the story about his meeting with Ford and how Ford refused to give workers their democratic rights and how he crushed any attempt at unionization. Sinclair distributed the novelette in pamphlet form to Ford's workers all over the world. 200,000 copies were distributed. The book was instrumental in the formation of the United Auto Workers' Union. This was quite an ordeal for Ford. Ford could see he was done for and announced he was going to close his plants and go out of business. But this did not happen. Instead, Ford's managers sat down and negotiated deals with their workers all over the world.

While on a trip to East London in 1883, Jane Addams observed a distressing scene late one night: many poor people were bidding on rotten vegetables that were unusable:

Their pale faces were dominated by that most unlovely of human expressions, the cunning and shrewdness of the bargain-hunter who starves if he cannot make a successful trade, and yet the final impression was not of ragged, tawdry clothing nor of pinched and sallow faces, but of myriads of hands, empty, pathetic, nerveless, and work-worn, clutching forward for food which was already unfit to eat (Twenty years at Hull-House, 2011, para. 2).

This scene was so disturbing that it "haunted Addams for the next two years as she travelled through Europe, and she hoped to find a way to ease such suffering" She visited Toynbee Hall, a London settlement house, five years after this and decided to repeat the experiment in the U.S. "On September 18, 1889, Jane Addams and her friend Ellen Starr moved into the second floor of a rundown mansion in Chicago's West Side. From the outset, they imagined Hull-House as a center for a higher civic and social life in the industrial districts of the city." Addams, Starr, and several other people lived and worked among the needy people, established art classes, discussion groups, cooperatives, a kindergarten, a coffee house, a library, and a gym. "In a time when many well-to-do Americans were beginning to feel threatened by immigrants, Hull-House embraced them, and served as a center for philanthropic efforts throughout Chicago" (Twenty years at Hull-House, 2011, para. 3). Hull-House also provided a shelter for "the first generation of female college graduates, who were educated for work yet prevented from doing it." Hull-House became a great success, and "it inspired others to follow in Addams's footsteps" (Twenty years at Hull-House, 2011, para. 4).

Jane Addams recorded her experiences in a book entitled, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910) which was meant to be an autobiography. Addams "devotes the first third of the book to her upbringing and influences, but the remainder focuses on the organization she built." (Twenty years at Hull-House, 2011, para. 5). This work inspired not only the establishment of more settlement houses, but also the founding of social work as a profession and sociology as a serious academic subject of study.

There is another reforming literary text that goes back to the 1930s and that is, Robert Elliott Burns's 1932 novel, *I Am a Fugitive From a Georgia Chain Gang*. The novel and its film adaptation are a scathing attack at the unjust and barbaric treatment of criminals in a southern state's prison system following World War I. (I am a fugitive from a chain gang, 2011, para. 1). Burns worked for one year on the chain gang, and then a sympathetic local store owner helped him escape. He went North and then became a tax consultant in New Jersey, and wrote a series of magazine articles about his horrifying experiences on the chain gang (I am a fugitive from a chain gang, 2011, para. 7). These were later published as a book which was made into a movie in 1932 by Warners'. Warners' employed Burns as a consultant to the screenwriters. Three weeks after the film was released in 1932, Georgian officials learned of his whereabouts in New Jersey and arrested him. Governor A. Harry Moore courageously refused to extradite Burns. At the same time, the film received the year's Best Film honour from the National Board of Review (I am a fugitive from a chain gang, 2011, para. 7). Newspapers in Georgia carried headlines such as YANKEE LIES, and two prison wardens sued Warner Brothers for libel. Eventually, the long-awaited reform of the chain gang system began. By 1937, there were no chain gangs to be found in Georgia thanks to the influence exerted by the film (I am a fugitive from a chain gang, 2011, 7).

In 1935, the American playwright, Sidney Kingsley, produced a naturalistic play called, *Dead End*, which, in dramatizing the despicable aspects of New York slum life, succeeded in urging the US President to appoint "a slum study commission" in whose report the play was cited. In this play, Kingsley dramatized the injustices of the Depression years (that was in the 1930s when America was suffering from a severe economic depression). Kingsley's portrayal of people and their struggle "in lice-infested slums" near filthy rivers on a New York dead-end street became a metaphor for a greater social issue. It signified people's struggle for a chance to be honest and happy in a society which placed higher priorities on how wealthy a person was rather than on what they could do or what

they might become. Kingsley's firsthand observation of the dead-end children in New York's 53rd Street triggered the writing of this play. Kingsley used to walk around to 53rd Street and sit on the wharf, watching the kids swimming in the filthy East River, glancing over at the posh River Club, recalling a quotation from Thomas Paine about the contrast of affluence and wretchedness that is like dead and living bodies chained together. The "dead end" street of Kingsley's play portrays the literally dead-end existence of those trapped in the East River slums of New York. The dead-end street symbolizes a world with no future for the young except the dead end of reform school and organized crime, a world whose inhabitants are taunted by the constant presence of extreme wealth juxtaposed to their obscene poverty.

The argument in this play is that people who grow up in poverty are trapped in a vicious circle. From the first act of this play, Kingsley expresses his belief in environmental determinism. He believes the place you live in is important. It can give you a chance to grow, or it can twist you (one of the characters twists an imaginary object with grim venom to externalize this theory).

In an introduction to *Dead End*, Kingsley wrote how, as he watched the kids swim in the East River, his studies in the biology of the environment at Cornell and his readings on "retrogressive evolution" started to crowd his mind. At that time, theories based on the environmental causation of criminality were dominant. Criminal atavism propounded by the Italian physician, psychiatrist and pioneer criminologist, Cesare Lombroso, was very much in vogue. In *Environment and Race: A Study of the Evolution, Migration, Settlement and Status of the Races of Man* Thomas Griffith Taylor (1927) set out his theories of human evolution under the influence of environment. He argued that biological or social variations in the environment were the strongest factors in shaping human evolution. In the realm of fiction, Jack London in his beast fables portrayed the effects of environment on the development of personality and showed how an aggressive environment could breed cruel characters and how a loving atmosphere could

overpower that. In *Dead End*, Kingsley expressed this basic tenet of literary naturalism which has its antecedents in Hippolyte Taine's and Emile Zola's works in Europe and Stephen Crane's and Theodore Dreiser's fiction in America. According to this tenet, the environment you have grown in may leave you twisted and unable to rise to your potential in life, either physically or spiritually. Kingsley's America is a country in which people are trapped and are powerless over the social and economic forces which surround and control them. Kingsley's play was credited with being responsible for the passing of "the first slum clearance legislation" in Congress (Kingsley, 1995, Introduction, p. 81). Out of the awareness the play raised of the inadequacy of housing and the spotlight cast on the related health, safety, and social issues, the Wagner Housing Bill (1935) was passed by the US Congress to provide financial assistance to the states for the elimination of unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions and the development of decent and sanitary dwellings for families of low income.

William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick's political novel, *The Ugly American* (1958) became the multi-million-copy bestseller that "coined the phrase for tragic American blunders abroad" (*The ugly American: w.w.w.norton*, 2011, para. 1). First published in 1958, this quasi roman a clef (that allegedly depicted real people whose names had been changed) "became a runaway national bestseller for its slashing exposé of American arrogance, incompetence, and corruption in Southeast Asia" (*The ugly American: w.w.w.norton*, 2011, para. 2). The authors declare in an introductory note that, in this book, they have rendered "fact into fiction" (p. 10), in effect, "the book's eye-opening stories and sketches drew a devastating picture of how the US was losing the struggle in Asia." The book blames Americans who fail to understand local cultures. On the contrary, it portrays people like the

plain-looking engineer Atkins, "who lives with the local people, comes to understand their needs, and offers genuinely useful assistance with small-scale projects such as the development of a simple bicycle-powered water pump" (The ugly American e notes, 2011, para. 4). It is argued in the book that the communists are successful in Asian countries because they practice tactics similar to Atkins'. Combining gripping storytelling with an urgent call to action, the book prompted President Eisenhower to launch a study of America's military aid program that led the way to much-needed reform. The book also helped found the Peace Corps (Wilkinson, 1984, pp. 44-45).

4. Conclusion

In the end, one should not forget the fact that what comes in between reforming literature and law reform is the public and the readership. Colin Radford (cited in Palmer, 1992, p. 84) believes that we are "creatures who are moved by the suffering of our fellows." The informed public in a democracy would be moved by the horrors of their life depicted in novels which escaped their attention. They, in return, force the authorities to ameliorate the condition of life in the country and make a unique contribution to the social good. Therefore, as one credits reforming literature as a way of critiquing social institutions and legal norms and for shaping social and political institutions, one should bear in mind that the public plays an important part in bringing about these reforms. These stories revealed untold tales about the miseries of human condition and triggered other similar stories to be circulated among people. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, caused the circulation of a large number of additional stories about the grim aspects of slavery (Hanne, 1994, p. 15). It had the power to involve people emotionally so they could dare come out and speak out against the horrors of slavery and tell of their own experiences. This, one should remember, only happens

in societies where the authorities value public opinion and do whatever they can to improve their image among their people. As Sartre (2001) states in his book *What is Literature*, "the freedom of writing implies the freedom of the citizen. One does not write for slaves. The art of prose is bound up with the only regime in which prose has meaning, democracy" (pp. 48-49). Sartre further states that the author "makes an appeal to the readers' freedom, and in order for his works to have any effect, it is necessary for the public to adopt them on their own account by an unconditioned decision ..." (2001, p. 122). This is one good thing that can come out of a liberal democracy.

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