

Janneke ten Kleij

5535115

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Prof. dr. David Pascoe

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The Nobel Prize in Literature: Controversy and Literary Politics

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Introduction

When Alfred Nobel included the Nobel Prizes in his will, he probably did not foresee the impact they would come to have over the years. For over a century, since its inception in 1901, the Nobel Prizes have been awarded to the best in their respective field each year. The Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded by the Swedish Academy. Throughout the years, some exceptions have been made during which the Prize was not awarded. For example, it was not awarded in the years 1940 – 1943, due to the Second World War. The last exception was in 2018, during which the Prize was postponed, and two laureates would be announced on October 10th, 2019 instead.

Over the many years that the Prize has been rewarded by the Nobel Committee and the Swedish Academy, they have been subjected to scandal and criticism, the postponement of the 2018 Prize being the most recent example. The reason for this postponement was the involvement of the husband of an Academy member in the #MeToo-whirlwind. As a result, the Academy decided not to award the Prize in 2018, and to instead award both Prizes in 2019. Although this has all the marks of a setback, the Swedish Academy actually created a unique opportunity for themselves. They have had a year to reflect on the past, evaluate the choices they have made and decide on the future of the Nobel Prize in Literature. The criticism that they especially have to face and hopefully plan on changing, is the accusation that the Nobel Committee for Literature has been too concentrated on European and Western authors when it comes to awarding the Prize, and ignoring or disregarding non-European and non-Western authors. This is an important critique, given the interconnected world we live in today. With inventions such as the internet, which has substantially increased access to world literature, to get into contact with people from everywhere, the world seems to have become smaller and smaller. It is a shame that the Committee of a prestigious Prize such as the Nobel

Prize in Literature, unmatched in its influence in the literary world, neglects to embrace these developments that allow them to broaden their horizon.

The Nobel Prize in Literature established itself as “the epitome of cultural value” since its first award in 1901 (DLA Marbach). Each year, right before, during and after the announcement of the winner, the Prize receives a massive amount of press coverage, which shows that the world finds the Prize to be very important as well. Winning the Prize is a tremendous honour for the chosen author, because it confirms that their work is acknowledged, and that their contribution to literature is appreciated. In short, it means that the Swedish Academy thinks the whole world should know their name and the works they have created. However, the Academy has often been blind to real distinction and has been unduly influenced in the past by geography, politics, race and gender. This resulted in the Prize being “frequently awarded to mediocrities” instead of more deserving authors (Meyers, 214).

The Academy seems to have a blind spot when it comes to authors from non-European and non-Western countries. Authors from these countries and nations are underrepresented in the long list of laureates, which makes it easy to assume that the Nobel Committee and the Swedish Academy intentionally ignore these authors. This is a criticism that they have received for years and is something that the Swedish Academy is well aware of. The problem with this ignorance of world literature is problematic because the Nobel Prize in Literature is so influential, it should strive to include authors from all over the world rather than concentrate on a small part of it. Furthermore, it was Alfred Nobel himself who stated that the nationality of the winner of the Prize should not play a role in the decision. According to him, it should not matter if a writer was Scandinavian or not.

This thesis will investigate how the Academy used this past year to reflect on the intrinsic nature of the Nobel Prize in Literature, and what the Nobel Committee for Literature wants to express with the Prize, which will largely show in the laureates they choose for the 2018 and 2019 award. The hypothesis is that even though the Academy is aware that they albeit unintentionally European and Western authors, there are other factors at play that make it difficult for the Committee to treat non-European and non-Western authors and works the same way they would European and Western works. The statement for this thesis will thus be:

Even though the Swedish Academy might have shown a preference for non-European and non-Western authors over the years, they cannot be fully held accountable for this. The way the Nobel Committee chooses their laureates is outdated and should change.

It will be researched how Nobel Committee has taken advantage of their year of retrospection. This will be done by analysing the criticism they have received over the years, with special attention to the Europe-biased tendency that has been criticised by so many. This thesis will be divided into four chapters.

In the first chapter, it will be investigated how the Nobel Prize in Literature came into existence in the first place. Given that Alfred Nobel was a chemist and industrialist, it seems that the field of literature could not be further away from his life.

In the second chapter, the main focus will be on the laureates from 2018 and 2019: who are they, where are they from, and what message is the Nobel Committee sending with their chosen laureates?

The third chapter will research the first problem the Committee is facing when it comes to including non-European and non-Western writers, which is the issue of translations. There is more to translating a novel than simply changing words, and as will be illustrated, this often has as an unintended consequence that the translated work is less enjoyable or aesthetically pleasing than the original.

In the fourth chapter, the research will concentrate on another considerable issue for the committee, namely the way that candidates are nominated. Given that they can only be nominated by certain persons, it will become clear that authors from non-European and non-Western countries have a lesser chance of getting nominated, simply as they do not have access to these kinds of institutions. This results in an unfair distribution of chances, which is not entirely to blame on the Nobel Committee or the Swedish Academy.

Chapter 1: The Big SurPrize

In May 2018, the Swedish Academy made it known that no Nobel Prize in Literature would be awarded that year. The reason for this were “infighting and resignations following allegations of sexual misconduct, financial malpractice and repeated leaks” (Flood, Henley). The Academy issued a statement in which it said that “The present decision was arrived at in view of the currently diminished academy and the reduced public confidence in the Academy [...] We find it necessary to commit time to recovering public confidence, before the next laureate can be announced. This is out of respect for previous and future literature laureates, the Nobel Foundation and the general public” (Flood, Henley). The solution of the Academy for this situation was to postpone the Prize instead of cancelling it, which meant that in 2019 two laureates would be awarded the Prize. To fully understand the impact of the Nobel Prizes, it is important to know how they came into existence.

The Nobel Prizes are all powerful. Those who win are no longer a physicist, a chemist or a novelist. They are a Nobel Prize Winner. Each year, a Prize is awarded in each of the following categories: Peace, Physics, Chemistry, Medicine and Literature. Alfred Nobel decided that after his death, his wealth should be used to benefit humankind and this was the way to do it. Some of the categories he chose are easy to explain: Nobel himself was a chemist, which meant that he operated in a field that is close to Physics and Medicine. However, the categories Peace and Literature are choices that seem less obvious for a multimillionaire industrialist who gained his fortune through inventing – among other things – Dynamite. Especially the Nobel Prize in Literature seems to be surrounded by mystery: why did a great industrialist wish to award a Prize in Literature – a category that was not named in his first wills and was only added in his final will? In this chapter, it will be researched how

the Nobel Prize in Literature came to be, and why Alfred Nobel held the art of literature close to his heart.

There is evidence that when he was young, Alfred Nobel was interested in literature and poetry. His parents made sure he was educated well. Before he reached the age of eighteen, he was fluent in Swedish, Russian, French, English and German. According to Ringertz, Nobel was mainly interested in English literature and poetry, next to chemistry and physics. We know that he did not only study literature and poetry, rather he also attempted to write some of his own. While he was still in school, one of his professors stated that he “had every prospect of becoming a writer of reflective poetry as he had great sensitivity and imaginative power, which can be noticed in his youthful, Shelley-influenced poetic attempts in English” (Evlanoff and Fluor, 213).

Nobel admired Shelley and other romantic idealist poets, naming Lord Byron as his favourite poet. In his poem “You say I am a Riddle”, traces of romantic idealism can be found, showing that he tried to imitate the poets he admired and not only did he appreciate poetry, he actually wanted to write himself. He wrote “You say I am a Riddle” in 1851, during his first visit to Paris at only 18 years old. The poem can be found on the website of the Nobel Prize.

Supposedly, Nobel wrote it for a lovely girl who died too young:

"You say I am a riddle - it may be
for all of us are riddles unexplained.
Begun in pain, in deeper torture ended.
This breathing clay what business has it here¹?"

¹ A photocopy of the original poem can be found in the appendix.

Paris would become a very important place for Nobel in regards to his love for literature. Between the years of 1873 and 1891, Paris was his main residence. here he would visit Madame Juliette Adam's famous salon, where he met with writers such as Victor Hugo, whose writing inspired Nobel even before they met. It is not entirely clear when Nobel and Hugo met exactly, but it is assumed that they met quite quickly after Nobel moved to Paris and started to visit Adam's salon.

Hugo and Nobel would become friendly with one another, and "their companionable hours together became a bright spot in Nobel's life (Evlanoff and Fluor, 214). When the two men first met, Paris was a dangerous place. There were rumours that the police ran torture cells in the sewer systems beneath the streets, as well as regular Raids, constant rounding-up of suspects and executions in the countryside (Coyle).

Victor Hugo was right in the middle of this turmoil, with protesters gathering on his doorstep and accusing him of being a terrorist sympathizer. It is easy to assume that Nobel saw something in Hugo that resonated with him. They were both men who were criticised for what they did. Hugo was criticised for his writings and political preferences (and for not being quiet about it) and Nobel had invented dynamite in 1867, an invention which invited a lot of discussion and criticism. Over the years, the two men became good friends, with Nobel dining with Hugo often and them visiting famous celebrity salons in Paris together. due to of his inherent? restlessness, which showed itself in moving often and seemingly being unable to find a place to truly call home, Hugo described Nobel as "Europe's richest vagabond" (Johnson).

It is likely that Nobel's friendship with Hugo deepened his understanding of, and connection to literature and the men and women who wrote literature and poetry. Most of these writers did not have the freedom to write what they truly desired, as they had to sell their work to be able to live. A few of them were brave enough to write what they wanted nevertheless, even though it may have cost them their income. Others had enough funds to publish their own works, allowing them to write without the consequences of not being published.

Alfred Nobel wrote two novels himself: *I Iljusaste Afrika* (In Brightest Africa, 1861), and *Systrarna* (The Sisters, 1862). These novels were never published. Concerning *Systrarna* (1862), Peter H. Schück wrote that the novel was “Utterly weak, especially in its language” (Fant, 40). He went on to say this might partly stem from the “appallingly poor” contemporary Swedish novel, after which Nobel seemingly modelled his own work. He continued saying that “[h]is characters are almost puerile and his dialogue unnatural. Nobel is no storyteller...” (Fant, 40). This is supported by Evlanoff and Fluor in *Alfred Nobel, the Loneliest Millionaire*, in which they mention that his works “weren't written very well.” They also argue that the gift for poetry and literature he seemed to possess when he was younger had disappeared (Evlanoff, Fluor, 214). However, Nobel eventually wrote a tragedy which got published, titled *Nemesis* (1896). This play was published right before Nobel's death. After his passing, the entire stock of the piece was destroyed, except for three copies, apparently by Nobel's family, who felt that the play was “too weak to honour his memory” (Arendt). According to Gunnar Gällmo, the translator of the piece, the stock was destroyed because it was “too controversial” (Deni). That might be the reason that the play has only been performed once, at the Intima-theatre in Stockholm, in 2005. Director Rängstrom, who, even though he chose to bring the play to the stage in honour of the 109th Nobel Day, is also critical of the play:

"He's not a very good playwright," admits the theatre's director Ture Rangstrom, "but it shows another side to Alfred Nobel. It's full of love and sex, it's an attack on the capitalist system and it's about religious questions" (Arendt).

Knowing he was not a very talented author must have been disappointing for Nobel.

However, it did not lessen his love for literature in any way:

About bit-part actors it is often said that if nothing else they derive joy from proximity to the theatre. In the same way, many a shipwrecked writing talent has found solace in a well-filled library. Alfred's library, which has been preserved at the Björkborn estate (where he lived part of the time during his last years) in the city of Karlskoga, Sweden, was well stocked. In a remarkably involved manner, he followed contemporary literature (Fant, 41).

So far, it is clear that Nobel had an interest in literature and poetry, and that he had several friends and acquaintances who wrote professionally. He also turned to literature during his periods of depression, from which he suffered since he was young. He often felt isolated, despite his successes in science, industry and finance. These periods became worse as Nobel grew older, with the main reasons being poor health and "his disillusionment with fraudulent colleagues" (Sohlman, 44).

The vindication of the Merchant of Death

In 1888, Ludvig Nobel, the older brother of Alfred, died due to a long and grave illness² while living in Cannes. Alfred wrote shortly about the sad event in a letter to his mistress Sophie Hess:

Dear Sofferl,

My poor brother [Ludvig] passed away yesterday after a long and grave illness. He died a gentle and, it appears, painless death. Since the funeral will take place in Petersburg, I did not return to Cannes. Instead the family will stop here en route [to Petersburg] and rest for a few days, staying with me (Nobel, 144).

The news of the demise of Ludvig quickly spread, but due to miscommunication many newspapers believed that it was not Ludvig, but Alfred who had passed away. As a result, several papers published the wrong obituary. They did not cover Ludvig's death, but Alfred's and they did not hold back when they told the world what kind of man Nobel had been in their eyes. The most frequently used example is that Alfred read an obituary which was headlined *The Merchant of Death is Dead!* in which Alfred was accused of gaining riches by inventing faster ways to kill more people (Openculture).

According to history, Nobel was mortified and disappointed that this was how the public thought of him and that this would be his legacy. He then decided to set aside a small fortune aside to establish the Nobel Prizes and rewrote his earlier wills to include them. The Nobel Prizes were his attempt to vindicate himself: his riches would now go to benefit humankind (Feldman, 36). Richard Jewell adds a possible reason for the founding of the Nobel Prizes in

² Sources are not really clear on this. Sohlman states that it was a heart attack (46), but there are also sources that name illness or even an accident in one of the Nobel factories.

The Nobel Prize History and Canonicity. He states that Nobel also greatly respected the pioneering spirit, which is not surprising seeing how he himself invented various things, and that he intended to support “the innovative spirit and the young struggling scholars and artist with new ideas” with the Prizes (Jewell, 100).

That is how the famous will of Alfred Nobel came into existence. It was signed by Nobel on 27 November 1895, in Paris. It existed of only four handwritten pages, with less than one page that referred to the donation which would “link his name with the supreme achievements of the modern world in science and literature, and with the cause of peace” (Sohlman, 7).

The will was opened in January 1897 and the settlement of the estate took three years to complete, mainly because some of Alfred’s family members contested the will. Also, seeing as Nobel had not wanted a lawyer to draw up the will, the legal aspect of the document “left much to be desired” (Stähle, 13). It contained many flaws that invited criticism and protest. For instance, Nobel had not given any indication of his plan to the institutions he appointed to award the Prizes. Some of the mentioned institutions were hesitant to carry such a responsibility, which was not only foreign to them but seemed overwhelming (Sohlman, 7). Another problem was that his estate was scattered over eight European countries, which allowed several nations to claim the will.

Finally, Sweden came out of this dispute as the winner, presumably because Nobel appointed Swedish institutions to award the Prizes in all categories except for Peace, which is until this day awarded in Norway. With the rights to Nobel’s will, Sweden strengthened its position as a cultural centre in the world. Even now, over a hundred years after Nobel’s death, the award ceremony is an annual event of international importance in the fields of Physics, Chemistry,

Medicine and Literature and Peace. Sweden received the responsibility to carry out Nobel's final wishes as he had stated in his will:

The whole of my remaining realizable estate shall be dealt with in the following way: the capital, invested in safe securities by my executors, shall constitute a fund, the interest of which shall be annually distributed in the form of Prizes to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit to mankind. [...] one part to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency [...] that [The Prize] for literature by the Academy in Stockholm. It is my express wish that in awarding the Prizes no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates, but that the most worthy shall receive the Prize, whether he be Scandinavian or not" (Nobel).

To be able to execute the will and honour Nobel's final wishes the Nobel Foundation was created in 1900. The foundation is an independent non-governmental organization and is the sole owner of the fund capital. They are also responsible for the economic administration and the foundation is the central body in the Nobel organization. They also host the Prize presentation ceremonies in Stockholm on behalf of the Swedish Prize-awarding institutions (Stähle, 15).

The Nobel Foundation is an overarching institute. For each Nobel Prize, Alfred appointed an institution that he wished to award that Prize. The three Swedish Prize-awarding institutions have special Nobel Committees of five members each at their disposal for the preparatory work connected with the Prize. They submit opinions on the proposed candidates in the form

of recommendations to the Prize-awarding institution concerned (Ståhle, 14). For Literature, this is the Swedish Academy in Stockholm.

The Swedish Academy consists of 18 members, who have tenure for life. The Nobel Committee consists of five members from the Swedish Academy, who serve a three year term before five different members from the Swedish Academy assume their role in the Nobel Committee. The Committee is responsible for choosing the laureate for the Nobel Prize in Literature from the nominated candidates.

The candidates can only be nominated by “members of the Academy, members of academies and societies similar to it in membership and aims, professors of literature and language, former Nobel laureates in literature, and the presidents of writer’s organisations which are representative of their country’s literary production” (Nobelprize.org).

As Nobel stated in his will, the laureate of the literary Prize should be chosen for their work, and he explicitly stated that the nationality of a prospective winner should not matter.

However, over the years, the Academy has been accused of favouring European writers as candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Academy is aware of this critique. Peter Englund, who has been a member of the Swedish Academy since 2002, stated in 2009 that:

“In most language areas, there are authors that really deserve and could get the Nobel Prize, and that goes for the United States and the Americas, as well.” According to Englund, the judges in the Swedish Academy tend to have a European outlook on literature: “I think that is a problem. We tend to relate more easily to literature written in Europe and in the European tradition” (CBC News).

Even though Englund issued this statement, there does not seem to be a notable change in laureates. A prime example of this is when Herta Müller was awarded the Prize in 2009. Even though her career spans decades, she is fairly unknown outside of Europe, with only five of her novels having been translated into English³ (Kulish). When asked to comment, Harold Bloom⁴ told *The Washington Post* that “I have nothing to talk about because I have never heard of this writer” (Gibson).

After the laureates of 2018 and 2019 were announced, it became clear that the Swedish Academy had once again chosen two Central European authors. The disappointment with this decision is embodied in the countless press articles which were released after the announcement, which point out the controversial choice the Academy made. Maya Jaggi from *The Guardian* stated that the Nobel Prize has been “painfully slow to open up to the wider world of literatures beyond Europe and North America” and that The Academy had proved this once again with their 2018 and 2019 laureates (Jaggi).

³ In 2009, the year she was awarded the prize

⁴ Harold Bloom is a famous literary critic and Yale professor

Chapter 2: Opportunity for a new path

On the tenth of October in 2019, a unique situation for the Nobel Prize in Literature took place. Instead of awarding one laureate with the prestigious Prize, two Nobel Prizes in Literature were awarded. It was an event that was looked forward to and watched by many across the world⁵. Per tradition, the announcement took place in the Swedish Academy in Stockholm. The grand hall, decorated in white and gold and luminated by no less than twelve gold chandeliers, was filled with people from the press, photographers and videographers, all there to watch the announcement of the 2018 and 2019 winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

After everyone had found a place and quieted down, a member of the Swedish Academy entered the room through two gold and white doors, which led to a small podium where he held his speech. Without much theatre and seemingly unfaded by the wave of flashes from the cameras, he made it known that Olga Tokarczuk was the 2018 laureate and Peter Handke the 2019 laureate. After having made the announcement, he quickly disappeared, thereby making room for the Nobel Committee, whose members seemed nervous to be in the spotlight. They were there to answer any questions the press might have regarding the chosen winners and explain the process of how they have come to their decision. Once again, this was a short session with time for only few questions before the Committee disappeared again the same way they entered. This announcement was purely to make it known to the world that Tokarczuk and Handke were the winners of the Prize. They have traditionally received their medal, diploma and monetary prize on December 10th, together with the rest of the 2019 Nobel laureates. The ceremony was held at the Konserthusert in Stockholm. December 10th is

⁵ The Youtube-stream that covered the announcement had 107.224 views on December 19th, 2019. The Nobel Prize Award Ceremony had 245.344 views on December 19th, 2019.

the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death, and internationally known as Nobel Day. In the week leading up to this event, fittingly named "Nobel Week", this year's laureates have given press conferences and gave their Nobel Lectures.

The Academy had a year to reflect on their choices and the path the Nobel Prize had taken. It would be expected of the Committee to make a safe choice, one that invites little criticism. As shown, this is not what the Academy chose to do.

First, it is important to know who the winning authors are, before explaining why they are not the safe choice that was expected from the Academy. The laureates are Olga Tokarczuk and Peter Handke. Both are Central-European authors, who have a career that spans decades. They are also both authors who attract controversy and, in some cases, political scandal.

Olga Tokarczuk (1962) is one of the fiercest critics of contemporary Poland. Her left-leaning political preference and feminist attitude made her very unpopular with her fellow countrymen and women. This expresses itself in the accusations from nationalists that she encourages anti-Polish feelings with her novels and being labelled a "persona non grata" (Freriks). Her works are usually about events that have been covered up and kept hidden from the people. Nonetheless, she is also a very beloved writer who has sold tens of thousands of books. She was the first Polish writer to win the Man Booker International Prize in 2018. The Nobel Committee has awarded her the Nobel Prize in Literature 2018 "for a narrative imagination that with encyclopaedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life" (Nobelprize.org).

Peter Handke (1942) was born in Griffen, Austria. Handke's literary breakthrough was in 1966, when he made a "crushing impression" during a meeting of the literary movement *Gruppe 47*. During this meeting, he accused the members of "being clumsy writers who wrote futile prose, copied from a lexicon" (Freriks). Handke became the literary idol of the generation that grew up in the sixties. He studied Law, but quit when his first novel *Hornissen* (1966) was published. From that moment on, he was a rising star. However, scandal would echo throughout his career, with notable moments in 1996 and 2006. In 1996, Handke's essayistic travel story *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien* (*A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*, 1997) was published. In this narrative, he minimised the Serbian concentration camps in Bosnia and plead for peace while the wounds were still healing. This novel led to attacks on the author, who was called a 'monomaniac terrorist' (Boevink). Next to that, Handke struck up a friendship with ex-dictator Slobodan Milosevic, at whose funeral he spoke in 2006. From that moment on, He was no longer simply controversial. Handke was awarded the 2019 Nobel Prize in Literature "for an influential work that with linguistic ingenuity has explored the periphery and the specificity of human experience" (Nobelprize.org).

Many newspapers from Scandinavia, Europe, and the rest of the world paid attention to the announcement of the winners. This resulted in countless articles in which journalists gave their opinion on the choices the Nobel Committee made this year. Overall, it can be stated that many were disappointed by the laureates the Committee has chosen for this year.

PEN America, an organisation that "stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect free expression in the United States and worldwide. [PEN America] champion[s] the freedom to write, recognizing the power of the word to transform the world. Our mission is to

unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible” (PEN America). The organisation released a statement regarding a literary award for the first time ever, in which their President Jennifer Egan showed the discontent and disappointment regarding Peter Handke winning the Prize:

“PEN America does not generally comment on other institutions’ literary awards. We recognize that these decisions are subjective and that the criteria are not uniform. However, today’s announcement of the 2019 Noel Prize in Literature to Peter Handke must be an exception. We are dumbfounded by the selection of a writer who has used his public voice to undercut historical truth and offer public succour to perpetrators of genocide, like former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. [...] We deeply regret the Nobel Committee on Literature’s choice” (Egan).

Not only is it shocking that an organisation like PEN America would comment on the choice the Committee made, they accuse Handke of using his voice to undercut historical truth. To shock an influential organisation like that into releasing a press statement like above, shows us that the committee did not make a safe choice with Peter Handke.

The Mothers of Srebrenica association, an organisation comprised of Bosnian war survivors, including mothers who have lost sons and husbands in the Srebrenica massacre, called for the Nobel committee to revoke Peter Handke’s Prize. Munira Subasic, the president of the association, has said that “they were offended to hear that a man who spread hatred and wrote falsehoods was awarded such a prize.” They are especially angered by Handke’s relationship with Milosevic, “who went down in history as the butcher of the 20th century, who gave the

green light for genocide” (Gadzo). The association wonders what the message is that the Nobel Committee wants to send with awarding the Prize to Handke. They started a petition in order to revoke Handke’s Prize which was signed by 20.000 people in less than 24 hours (Gadzo).

Albanian Foreign Minister Edi Rama turned to Twitter to express his feelings after the announcement:

“Never thought would feel to vomit because of a [@NobelPrize](#) but shamelessness is becoming the normal part of the world we live 🤢 After disgraceful choice made from a moral authority like the Nobel Academy shame is sealed as a new value 🙅 NO we can’t become so numb to racism&genocide!” (@ediramaal)

Even though Rama’s choice of language and medium is a little unsophisticated, the emotion in his message is clear. He was not the only one to turn to Twitter to voice his opinion. Vlora Çitaku, Kosovo’s ambassador in the United States, also tweeted about her feelings regarding the announcement:

Have we become so numb to racism, so emotionally desensitized to violence, so comfortable with appeasement that we can overlook one’s subscription&service to the twisted agenda of a genocidal maniac? We must not support or normalize those who spew hatred We can do better! [#Nobel](#) (@vloracitaku)

Since Çitaku is an ambassador for her country, it is important to note that she would have had to get her tweet checked before she was allowed to post it. As an ambassador, she speaks for

her country. This suggests that it may not have been only her personal opinion, but that the people she reports to also agree with her statement.

It is notable that given the fact that Tocarzuk is a controversial writer in her home-country and that she is only the fifteenth female Nobel Prize in Literature laureate, her winning the Nobel Prize is little discussed in the media. As shown, most press concentrates their attention on Handke and his turbulent career and political involvement. The main criticism that is aimed at Tokarczuk is the fact that she is a European author, when the Nobel Committee had promised to broaden their view and look further than only European and Western authors when awarding the Prize.

Nonetheless, these examples show the reaction of people and organisations regarding a specific laureate of which they disapprove, and would have liked to see differently. What is shown here is that the Committee has once again chosen laureates that invoked criticism and disappointment from the public. It is evident that by awarding Tocarzuk and Handke the ..., the Committee has continued a trend which they have been accused of numerous times over the years: a preference for European authors. In the last fifty years, only thirteen non-European authors were awarded the Prize⁶. It is important to note that of those, three authors came from Western, English-speaking countries. The fact that another two European authors were awarded the Prize this year is something that Maya Jaggi from *The Guardian* thought to be a misguided decision. She wrote an article titled *We were promised a less Eurocentric Nobel. We got two laureates from Europe*. In it, she accuses the Nobel Prize to be “painfully slow to open up to the wider world of literatures beyond Europe and North America.” Jaggi states that “If the Nobel committee is sincere in looking “all over the world”, then such

⁶ See the official Nobel Prize website

writers not only offer “outstanding work in an ideal direction” but also the formal and linguistic innovations that can arise from radically different perspectives and projects – such as representing one culture in the language of another” (Jaggi).

Jaggi is not the only one who argued that the Committee could have changed the course of the Nobel in Literature with this year’s laureates. Nayantara Mazumder of *the Telegraph India* wrote that this year could have been a chance “to go beyond the more Eurocentric perspective on literature that the award has always taken, and instead look all over the world.” However, she claims, the story remained the same, even after a year of “purported introspection” when the award once again went to two European authors (Mazumder).

Alex Marshall and Alexandra Alter stated in *The New York Times* that with the laureates for 2018 and 2019, the Nobel Prize in Literature “waded into fresh controversy” by awarding the Prize to Peter Handke. They explain how this year “was supposed to be a reset for the Nobel Committee” but that the Committee did not deliver and did not lose the Prize’s image of being “a polarizing spectacle, with critics denouncing the winners as too obscure, too Eurocentric, too male, too experimental, or simply unworthy of literature’s highest honour” (Alter, Marshall). Alter and Marshall view the decision of the Academy to award two European authors as a brushing off of the criticism of being too Western and Eurocentric. This coming after the statement that Anders Olsson⁷ made earlier this year, where he said that diversity should be more of a priority for the committee, and where he suggested that the committee moving further would take geographic diversity and gender into account when making its selection (Alter, Marshall).

⁷ Head of the Nobel Literature Committee of the Swedish Academy

All in all, the press seems to be thoroughly unimpressed and disappointed by the Committee's choice of laureates this year. A returning point of criticism is that the Nobel Prize in Literature seems to be too fixated on Western and European writers and that the Committee seems to ignore non-Western and non-European writers as candidates for the Prize. As demonstrated, this is an issue that the Nobel Prize in Literature has been struggling with since the beginning.

Richard Jewell summarises the publicity problem The Nobel Prize in Literature is struggling with perfectly:

Through the decades the Nobel Prize in Literature has been criticized negatively as being at best a popularity contest and at worst a political event run by second-rate provincials who know too little about literature beyond their own borders and who, in addition, are almost exclusively white and male (Jewell, 97).

Jewell gives his readers a list of often made complaints regarding the Prize, such as great authors being overlooked for reasons never made public. Among the examples he gives are Paul Claudel, Bertolt Brecht, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Meyers states that “[t]he criminals and crazies, the rebels and extremists in ideas and behaviour, whose very presence might have disrupted the solemn ceremony, had absolutely no hope of winning” (218). He gives authors like Henry Miller, Jean Genet, Dylan Thomas and Allen Ginsberg as examples (Meyers 218). This shows that the personal lives of authors definitely influence their chances of winning the Nobel Prize in Literature and that politics often influenced the awards. It is unfair that these authors have been overlooked, since no one can deny that they left a great

legacy filled with works that have influenced the literary field immensely and are, as a result, still read today. Jewell also notes that next to these European authors, there are “a number of deserving non-Euro-American writers in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa who have yet to receive proper recognition for their places in world literature (99). As discussed before, the Academy relies on professors at universities and the presidents of writing organizations of countries all over the world to nominate authors.

Jewell does take the issue of pro-Europeanism seriously, stating that “[t]he greater problem for the Academy in recent decades has not been too many Scandinavians but rather too many Europeans” (102). The Academy has tried to fix this problem partly by awarding authors who did not come from, but rather who wrote about other cultures. This meant that the Academy was aware of the problem but is until this day still somehow incapable of fixing it. This is illustrated by the recommendation of Yeats for the Prize, in 1922:

We must always be careful to judge literary works that are to us more or less strange, not according to our own standards, but against their proper background and according to what we may infer that they mean to the people of the country where they were produced and whose local traditions and national culture make it easier for them to appraise both the content and the form of such works.

It was established earlier that a great number of laureates are from Europe or the Western world, and that very little part of the laureates of the past fifty years are non-European or non-Western. Above, it is suggested that a reason for this might simply be that these authors do not get nominated by the appointed organizations. Another reason might be the composition of the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Committee. In 2019, of the 18 chairs, four are vacant.

The other fourteen are occupied by twelve white men and two white women.⁸ Inequality aside, there is not one non-white person currently occupying a seat. What is illustrated here is that the Swedish Academy is composed of Europe-based white people, who have the task of deciding who deserves the most influential literary Prize of the world. Jewell states that a criticism the Swedish Academy has received is the notion of “provincials who know too little about literature beyond their own borders” (97). The debate is whether a group of middle-aged white Swedes can decide what represents the best of world-literature.

⁸ See official website of the Swedish Academy

Chapter 3: An ambiguous interest in World Literature

In the first two chapters, it is discussed how the Nobel Prize in Literature came into existence and how the choice of laureates for 2018 and 2019 was received by the world. It was shown that the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Committee have a preference for European and Western-based writers, something that the rest of the world has disapproved of for years. Yet it seems that the Committee cannot shake this image or the preference of European and Western writers as their laureates. The question remains how the Nobel Prize in Literature participates in creating a canon for world literature, and whether this is intended or not. To come to an answer, it is important to research what Alfred Nobel wanted to achieve with the Prize in general and more importantly, *if* he had a specific goal in mind for what he wanted to accomplish with the Prize.

To begin answering this question, it is important to know what a literary canon is and what it means for world literature. The definition for a canon is in general “the best and most representative works in a literary or cultural tradition” (Longxi, i). It comes from the Greek word *kanon*, which means “a straight rod,” “a ruler.” The term *kanon* can thus be seen as “a standard.” It was used in the Alexandrian library by scholars as a reference to a list of exemplary books “as guidelines for student readers” (Longxi, 119).

When researching the literary canon, the name of Harold Bloom is one of the first that pops up. Bloom was “the most notorious literary critic in America” during his lifetime.

Bloom assembled *The Western Canon* (1994), a work that covers the most important Western literary works. In it, he argued for “the literary superiority of the Western giants like Shakespeare, Chaucer and Kafka”, all of them white male authors, a fact that was quickly pointed out by his critics. He favoured these authors over “the School of Resentment”, which

was the name he used for multiculturalists, feminists, Marxists, neoconservatives and others whom he saw as betraying literature's essential purpose (Smith). This essential purpose is, according to Bloom, that a literary work is not a social document and that it is not to be read for its political or historical content, but "it is to be enjoyed above all for the aesthetic pleasure it brings" (Smith).

Seeing as Bloom named his canon '*the Western Canon*', it is clear that this is a list of works that is meant for the Western World. This means that there are very little non-Western names on the list he composed. However, this is the list that most people refer to when talking about the literary canon, which indicates that the Western Canon is in reality regarded as *the* literary canon. Longxi argues for a more inclusive literary canon: a canon for world literature. Longxi sees a rise in world literature and a preference for literature written by non-white, non-male, non-Western authors: "In our time, scholars and readers alike are more interested than ever before in literary works by women and minority writers, writers from non-Western traditions, and what is admissible in the canon has expanded to include works overlooked by the traditional European canon (Longxi, 121). He argues for a canon which includes these works, saying that it would only be logical that scholars from the world's different literary traditions, "should be able to select the best of their works from a canon of world literature" (Longxi, 122). This would provide a great opportunity for scholars to become acquainted with various literary traditions in the world, especially when it comes to non-Western traditions, which have traditionally been neglected and overlooked. This way, those minor literary traditions have a chance to introduce their works to a global audience and introduce their canonical works to the world, breaking them free from the confines of their limited national environment.

Alfred Nobel's final will had few details. Nobel did not explain what he wanted to achieve with the Nobel Prize in Literature, or what he intended the Academy to do. He left few guidelines, so it was up to the Academy itself to interpret his will and give shape to the Prize and the process of awarding it. However, it is a plausible suggestion that Nobel wanted the Prize to contribute to the canon for world literature. It is a known fact that Nobel was close friends with Bertha von Suttner, a peace activist and the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1905. Their friendship had a great impact on the contents of his will, especially regarding the establishment of a peace Prize. Nobel once said: "Inform me, convince me, and then I will do something great for the movement" to von Suttner and seeing as there now is a Nobel Peace Prize, one could say Von Suttner definitely did her work for the cause (The Norwegian Nobel Institute). Von Suttner also was the person who gave Alfred Nobel the first issue of *Magazine International*, a journal which was first published in 1894 by the international artists' union Société Internationale Artistique. The term "*Weltliteratur*" was first mentioned in this magazine, where Goethe's famous passage with his long-time personal secretary Johann Echer mann is placed on the cover. In this passage, Goethe introduces the idea of world literature and urges everyone to support the idea:

"Nationalliteratur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Weltliteratur ist an der Zeit, und jeder must jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen"

"National literature has no great meaning today; the time has come for world literature, and each and every one of us should work to hasten the day" (Engdahl, 42).

Engdahl argues that since Nobel and Von Suttner were close friends, and there is evidence that Nobel received and read the magazine. His edition is preserved in the Nobel Library of

the Swedish Academy. It can be argued that the magazine and Goethe's passage inspired him to add his wish that "no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates, but that the most worthy shall receive the Prize, whether he be Scandinavian or not" to the final will (Engdahl, 42).

This idea of the Nobel Prize in Literature supporting and contributing to the canon of world literature is supported by that Kjell Espmark, former chairman of the Nobel Committee for Literature. He shared his view on this in 2017, when he was visiting China to speak at a literature form at Beijing Normal University. Espmark said that the Prize "should be a canon for the literature of the contemporary world" and that each generation of the academy has its own interpretation of Nobel's will. Espmark explained that:

"Starting from 1978, the idea is that the Prize should be given to a master who is unknown to the world in order to give the world a new writer they would otherwise not hear of, and give the writer the audience he or she deserved. In this way, the Prize can better contribute to the canon of world literature" (Wenrui).

His statements indicate that each committee interprets Nobel's wishes in their own way, however seeing as Espmark mentions world literature to be important, it is clear that the Committee assumes that Nobel found that important, as well.

Jewell supports this idea too. He argues that "the history of the Nobels in literature is to some extent a history of how the literary canon has been – and will be – determined" (Jewell, 97). He admits that in recent years, the Committee has showed effort in not only including non-white and female authors, but that they have also redefined the meaning of "good – canonical

– literature in accordance with the literatures of non-white and female authors who differ from the traditional canon” (Jewell, 97).

Then, there is the key word from Nobel’s will when it comes to the Prize in Literature:

idealisk which translates to ‘ideal’ in English. This is factually the only word the Academy and Committee have as a guide to what kind of work Nobel wanted to award with the Prize in Literature. What exactly did he mean by idealistic? Did Nobel want the work to be optimistic, defying the status quo? If this is the case, then Sully Prudhomme has been rightly criticised for winning the first Nobel Prize in Literature, seeing as his works are “of philosophical pessimism” – the exact opposite of what Nobel wrote in his will (Washbourne 60). Österling states that Nobel’s hope was that the Prize would “Have the effect of making a good piece of work known in much wider circles than would otherwise have been the case” (Österling qtd. in Schück et al., 94). Nobel might have factored in translations as a mean of facilitating the circulation of literature, given that he specifically chose The Academy, an institution full of Swedes, to award the Prize each year. Now that we have established that it is very plausible that Nobel wanted the Prize in Literature to contribute to creating a canon for world literature and that that is how the Nobel Committee interprets his wishes as well, one question remains: Why is the Committee still so concentrated on Western and European writers, when it is clear that they aim to contribute to world literature?

Lost in translation

In the last fifty years there have been only thirteen non-European who were awarded the Prize, of which three authors came from Western, Anglophone countries, meaning that even though they were not European, they could be categorised as Western authors, seeing how their cultures are very much alike to Western and European culture. A major issue for non-

European and non-Western authors is that they write in their native language, which the Academy might not be able to read. This is supported by Meyers, who stated that “authors who write in or have been translated into English – today’s universal language – have the best chance. Eleven of the seventeen best winners and nineteen of the twelve best losers wrote in English” (Meyers 218).

Even though the Committee is composed of people who are multilingual, it is impossible for them to master every language that is spoken in the world. Espmark explained in his interview how the academy resolves these problems, like the language barrier between the Nobel Committee members and works that come from varied cultural origins: “We read many languages, including Italian, Spanish and Russian. Among 18 panel members, we have one of the world’s leading Chinese experts”, he said. He also explained that if there are no translations provided in English, French or German, the Academy can order their own translations, which include cultural and social references to the nominated book. “We do as much as we can to understand literature as it is understood where it was written”, the former Chair of the Committee said.

While Espmark mentions Chinese, a non-Western language but spoken by many people, he also mentions English, French and German, all languages that are spoken mostly in Europe, with English being a second language to many people. Even though the Academy can order their own translations if they so wish, if they happen to receive a nomination for a candidate that writes in a language not mastered by any of the Committee members and who has not been translated into a language that can be read by members of the Committee, there is still the problem of reading a translation versus reading the original work.

When it comes to translating literature, there are a few inhabiting factors must be taken into account. To begin, translation ‘is a process of change from one language to another retaining the sense of the text’ or ‘a process of analysis, interpretation and creation which leads to a replacement of one set of linguistic resources and values for another’ (Das, 2). This means that while translating a narrative from the source language to the target language, there is much more to take into account than just grammar and punctuation. A translator has the difficult job of transferring a story written in the context of its author’s culture into a text that someone from a completely different culture has to be able to understand.

When it comes to the Nobel Prize, translations are of magnificent importance. Authors “find their fortunes hanging on the timing, quantity, quality and distribution of translations, and perhaps even the popular success of them” according to Richard Washbourne (57). He continues by saying that the Prize depends not only on translation, but also on translation into major European languages. He states that there are only one or two Swedish Academy members at a time, who are in the Literature Committee, who have a proficiency in non-European languages (Washbourne, 57). Parks and Wästberg of *The New York Review of Books* ask their readers to imagine how the Committee sets about reading works from all the nominated candidates, which will inevitably include work in languages none of the committee can read:

Imagine our Swedish professors as they compare a poet from Indonesia, perhaps translated into English, with a novelist from Cameroon, perhaps available only in French, and another who writes in Afrikaans but is published in German, and then a towering celebrity like Philip Roth, whom they could of course read in English, but

they might equally feel tempted, if only out of a sense of exhaustion, to look at in Swedish (Parks).

The point Parks makes is that translation does not so much equalize opportunity, as it “serves to show the incomparability of the authors” (Washbourne, 58). Even though within the Academy, thirteen languages are mastered, this is collectively and not individually. Feldman illustrates the problem with this perfectly:

The fact is that the Swedish Academy lacks the linguistic competence needed for a truly international jury, which is not surprising. Perhaps only three or four of the greatest universities of the world would have such resources. Unprepared to read fluently and directly in major and populous languages such as Chinese, Arabic or Hindi, not to mention the minor ones, the Nobel committee is overly dependent on translations, whose occurrence and quality are notoriously capricious (Feldman, 60).

The flaw within the Committee lies in the fact that some members, who do not master all languages, rely on different means than others for their perception of a nominated candidate.

Larson and Kraus state that:

Even if the Nobel Committee were working well, trying to spot great art from any location in the world, there is the formidable problem of translation. Much non-Western literature has not been translated into versions which can be read by members of the Committee, or it exists only in second-rate translations which do little to convey the excitement a novel or poem may arouse in its native tongue” (Larson, Kraus, 146).

Washbourne agrees with this idea and deepens this argument. When all Committee members read a translated text, even though it is derived from the original text, they in fact read different texts, of which the qualities of translation probably vary. The quality, number, timing and language of translations – commissioned or published – all influence the opinion of a Committee member on a work or author, and thus affect the Nobel outcomes.

What we also have to take into account is that even though a well-known writer like Roth might be translated into English, Swedish, Spanish, French, German – whichever language you choose – there are countless less well-known writers who are lucky to have one of their works translated into English, even if they are well-known in their home country. The difference here is that a writer who is well-known and translated into many languages simply makes a stronger impression than a writer who is less well represented.

Parks has thought of a possible solution the Committee might apply when they can't see the forest for its trees:

What a relief then from time to time to say the hell with it and give it to a Swede, in this case the octogenarian acknowledged as his nation's finest living poet and a man whose whole oeuvre, as Peter Englund charmingly remarks, could fit into a single slim paperback⁹. A winner whom the whole jury can read in the original pure Swedish in just a few hours (Parks).

This of course is a serious accusation in a sense, seeing as Parks implies that the Committee would choose a Swede simply because it is easier than reading material from all the

⁹ The poet Parks is talking about is Tomas Tranströmer, who won the Prize in 2011.

nominated non-Swedish, sparsely translated candidates. However, it is easy to assume that there is some truth to this statement, when taking into consideration the amount of reading the Committee must do before they reach their decision. It would be fairly unethical and not in agreement with what the Committee is tasked with, however it is imaginable that the idea might have taken hold at some point in time.

Chapter 4: Literary politics and unfair chances

When Alfred Nobel left his will, he burdened those he chose to award his yet non-existent Prizes with a great task. Not only did he leave very few guidelines; the ones he did leave were too vague to be applicable to the situation. However, the Swedish Academy took to the task and as we all know, they succeeded in making Nobel's final wish come true. As has been made evident, this was no easy feat. Nobel left no indication as to who would be allowed to nominate authors for the Nobel Prize in Literature, so that is where the Swedish Academy started their journey. After all, it is not possible to award a Prize without having candidates to choose from.

In order to structure the way the Swedish Academy would receive nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and to prevent an abundance of nominations, the Academy decided to set regulations in accordance with nominations. The Committee sends letters of invitation to persons who are qualified to nominate candidates for the Prize. The only people who are allowed to put authors forward are: 1) Members of the Swedish Academy and of other academies, institutions and societies which are similar to it in construction and purpose; 2) Professors of literature and of linguistics at universities and university colleges; 3) Previous Nobel Laureates in Literature; 4) Presidents of those societies of authors that are representative of the literary production in their respective countries. Only candidates who are nominated for the Literature Prize by such qualified persons who have received an invitation from the Nobel Committee are eligible for the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Academy has depended on these select individuals to nominate authors since the first time the Nobel Prize was awarded. Although this ensures in theory that the Academy receives nominations from all over the world, this is not always the reality. Sometimes, nominations were sparse which limited the number of candidates for the Committee to choose from (Jewell, 100).

In this chapter, the political factors that play a role when it comes to awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature will be explored. This will be done by looking at the opportunities that non-Western and non-European writers receive to be nominated and how this is related to the literary politics that are involved when it comes to the Nobel Prize in Literature. The first part has been briefly touched upon earlier, however it is important to discuss further as if not every author receives equal opportunities, how can a fair canon for world literature be created? These political factors will also be discussed in relation to the laureates from 2018 and 2019.

The reason that the Academy adheres to these rules when it comes to nomination, has partly to do with the fact that there was no prize in existence which came close to comparison when Alfred Nobel founded the Nobel Prizes. There were French and Spanish academies that had prizes that were comparable, but it would obviously have been unfair to only let these academies nominate candidates. The choice to limit the right to nominate to individuals instead of academies was made because “it would have been equally inappropriate to grant such rights to any institution as a body, since the Academy’s freedom of action might thereby be hampered by overwhelming external pressure” (Riggan, 401). Granting the right to nominate candidates to individuals eliminated that threat. It is clear that the Academy felt that by distributing the nomination rights so widely, they made sure that proposals could be made by qualified individuals from all over the world, and that “no domestic or foreign literary organization of any importance should have cause to complain that the rights and privileges of its members had been slighted” (Riggan, 401). This is a noble thought, of course and it should work in theory. In reality however, there are some drawbacks when it comes to this solution.

Bernth Lindfors argues that the process of nomination that the Committee relies on is unfair to authors from third world countries and countries that do not have a large cultural budget like European and Western countries generally do have:

The problem is one of assessing quality vicariously. That problem is aggravated when there is a shortage of experts available to offer authoritative advice. In Africa institutions for promoting international awareness of local literatures simply do not exist. There is no Tanzanian Academy to counsel the Swedish Academy on the merits of authors who have contributed master-works to Swahili literature” (Lindfors, 222).

With the lack of these institutions in developing countries, it is no wonder that authors from these countries cannot make their voices heard. In order to get noticed and possibly nominated for the Prize, these authors would have to undertake major steps. They would either have to move away from their home country so that they can take advantage of institutions from other countries, or stop writing in their native language. For example, if they write their work in English instead of their native language, their work is easier to access for people from the Western world, which might help these authors with getting recognition for their work. Nevertheless, Lindfors is not hopeful when it comes to this:

Given these crippling limitations and handicaps, these infrastructural constraints on the spread of African literary reputations, it appears unlikely that anyone writing only in an African language will ever be considered seriously for the Nobel Prize in Literature (Lindfors, 222).

In short, this means that African writers do not have the opportunity to get nominated, as there is no one who has the privilege to nominate them. They simply don't get the chance to enter the playing field. It is important to note is that Lindfors also involves translations in his argument. He says that it makes sense for "a small academy based in Europe" to centre their attention on writers who work in international languages. The reason for this is that more people from the Committee are able to read the original work without "the intervention of translators." Otherwise, the Committee would have to rely on texts that have been altered into a translation, making for "second-hand contact with the texts and second-hand opinions regarding their literary value" (Lindfors, 222).

This does not mean that no non-Westerner or non-European writer has ever been awarded the Prize. The first time that the Prize went to a non-Western, non-European writer was in 1986, which was awarded to Wole Soyinka "who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence" (Nobelprize.org). It was a significant event as Wole Soyinka was the first writer from the "new literatures" to receive the Prize. His mother tongue was Yoruba, with some of his work being translated into English. However, he had written most of his creative work in English. This is not strange, given that the dominant literary and political languages of sub-Saharan Africa remain to this day languages that were introduced by European colonizers such as English, French and Portuguese (Dasenbrock, 5). However, through his education there, Soyinka had ties with Europe and western culture as well, as stated on the Nobel website:

"His background, upbringing and education have given him unusual conditions for a literary career. He has his roots in the Yoruba people's myths, rites and cultural patterns, which in their turn have historical links to the Mediterranean region. Through

his education in his native land and in Europe he has also acquired deep familiarity with western culture. His collection of essays *Myth, Literature and the African World* make for clarifying and enriching reading.¹⁰

Given Soyinka's access to the English language and his closeness to European and western culture, one might wonder in how far Soyinka is truly a minority writer.

Of course, when the Prize goes to an author so different from the previous laureates, criticism will arise. G.P.D¹¹. from *Economic and Political Weekly* noticed that the reaction of the press at the time was quite crass, when it was announced that Soyinka would be awarded the Prize. *The Daily Telegraph* viewed the award as one that "appears to have been a face-saving gesture after severe criticism that only white westerners receive the Nobel Prize." He then put it quite clearly: "The message was clear and loud. Soyinka is black and African. That is all there is to it. The African needed to be given an award. Soyinka came close to qualifying to it. So he got it. That in terms of the giants who have made it to the Nobel Prize he does not deserve to get it. He is not a great writer" (G.P.D., 2022).

G.P.D. refers to a form of political influence in their article that comes into play when it comes to the Literary Prize, an aspect that Jeffrey Meyers wrote about, as well. Meyers states that the geographical origins of authors are of "paramount importance" (222). He argues that "the Academy is strongly influenced by regional distribution and likes to spread the wealth among smaller countries. A mediocre writer from a remote nation is more likely to be chosen" (Meyers, 222). Since 1998, the Prize has been awarded to an author who would appease

¹⁰ Citation from the press release from the Swedish Academy regarding Wole Soyinka's Prize.

¹¹ G.P.D. is the author that is credited on the article. I have reached out to *Economic and Political Weekly* for help clearing up who or what G.P.D. is. However, they did not respond to my message.

multiple non-European countries at once. An example of a choice like that is when they awarded the Prize to V.S. Naipaul, in 2001. Naipaul was an Indian writer, so him winning the Prize pleased the Asians, but he was born in Trinidad, which made the choice satisfactory to the Caribbean interests. Lastly, he lived in England, which in a sense made him an honorary European (Meyers, 222). When the Committee awarded Naipaul, they killed two birds with one stone.

The announcement from the Committee was also met with surprise when they awarded the Prize to Gao Xingjian in 2000. He was the first Chinese author to win the Prize, and considering the Chinese contenders, his name was rarely mentioned as having a chance to win the Nobel Prize. This was because Gao was largely unknown beyond the field of Chinese literature specialists and even they knew him better as a playwright than a novelist. However, his works had been translated to French and English, which increased his chances of being read by non-Chinese people. While this did not make him very well-known in Europe, it did make his work more accessible to the Nobel Committee (Lee, Dutrait, 738).

What we see here again is that the Committee chose authors who seemed to be non-Western and non-European at first glance, but looking more closely, they have more Western aspects in their writing or in their lives than would be evident at first sight. Of course, this is not something that the author should be blamed for, but it is striking that Gao would be chosen for the Prize when his name was not a Nobel-favourite, in comparison to poet Bei Dao and novelist Ba Jin, who were frequent suggestions when it came to Chinese authors. Bei Dao's work has been translated into English but not into Swedish and the work of Ba Jin is mostly untranslated from Chinese, save for some works that he originally wrote in Chinese and English combined.

Feldman writes that it is no wonder that “the world’s most prestigious literary award has become widely seen as a political one – a peace Prize in literary disguise” (Feldman, 58). Feldman is not the only one who has noticed how much politics influence the choice of the Academy when it comes to the literary Prize. Jeffrey Meyers accuses the Academy of not awarding some of the greatest authors of the twentieth century, an allegation the Nobel Committee disputed. According to Anders Österling, when asked about the issue, “mistakes have been comparatively few, and no truly unworthy candidate has been crowned”, a statement which Meyers disagrees with, however Kjell Espmark, who has been chairman since 1988, maintains through saying that “many of the greatest authors were not officially nominated, not translated into Western languages, not idealistic, not politically acceptable; that they died too young or were too famous, declined early or developed too late, or were too negative, experimental and difficult for middle-brow readers (Meyers, 218).

Meyers also supports the theory that authors who write in English or have had their work translated into English have the best chance of getting nominated for the Prize, when the political timing is right. Another example of this is when the award was given to Yeats, two years after Ireland became independent (Meyers 219). Circling back to Soyinka’s Prize, Meyers bitterly states that “[w]hen an African was due for the award in 1986, tribal politics influenced the decision. It was given to Wole Soyinka, [...] instead of the better writer, Chinua Achebe, a minority Ibo who’d supported Biafran independence during the civil war” (Meyers 220). Authors are well aware that the literary Prize does not simply take their writing into account. Graham Greene was denied the Prize because he was “too friendly with left-wing dictators like Fidel Castro and Omar Torrijos” while Malraux, Camus’ favourite for winning the Prize, was considered too right-wing. Auden had an excellent chance to win in 1964, but

according to Meyers, “the Swedes disliked his introduction to Hammerskjölds *Markings* (1964)” with the result that Auden was told to change it if he wanted to remain considered. However, Auden printed his introduction as he had written it and remarked simply: “Well, there goes the Nobel Prize” (Meyers, 220). This shows that while Auden remained true to himself and his writing, the Committee had rather seen that he had changed his work and used the possibility of him winning the Prize as a way to force him to do that. Although the Committee did indeed not award him the Prize, one can say that Auden won in a way because he did not bow under the Academy’s pressure.

Renee Winegarten also supports this, stating that “With the Nobel Prize for Literature, too many political and geographical motives come into play, too many extraneous considerations that have little or nothing to do with the act of writing or the art of literature as such.” She concludes that “If the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature is to be made to those writers how “continue the illustrious traditions” of their country’s poetry, fiction, and drama, it is not going to be given to the difficult loners and the daring innovators – or, at least, not until they have become self-parodists or have turned into establishment figures about to pass to a better world (Winegarten, 75).

What is remarkable here is that most academics seem to argue that the Nobel Prize in Literature is too involved with politics and that Prizes are awarded to lesser authors due to this. However, given the backlash the Committee received when awarding Peter Handke in 2019, the question is whether the Committee can do good in everyone’s eyes. The criticism from the media regarding Handke was that he was too politically involved, and not in a good way. The Committee must have foreseen that they would receive backlash with this nomination, given Handke’s political history. It even reached the point where the Committee

had to defend their choice in a press conference. There, they argued that they chose Handke because of his literary contribution: “[w]hen we give the award to Handke, we argue that the task of literature is other than to confirm and reproduce what society’s central view believes is morally right” (BBC News). In the case of Tokarczuk, her political involvement is discussed as well, although lesser than Handke’s. She is controversial in her own country and viewed negatively by the domestic political groups, however her beliefs do not make her unpopular in the rest of the world. Handke, on the other hand, is almost portrayed as a villain by the press, undeserving of the Prize not because of his work, but because of his personal and political involvement.

Conclusion and discussion

The postponing of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature made for an eventful year for the Nobel Committee. It gave them the opportunity to reflect on years that had passed, on the criticism received in regards to the preference for European and Western writers and to shape a new path that the Committee could follow in the future. The research statement for this thesis is:

Even though the Swedish Academy might have shown a preference for non-European and non-Western authors over the years, they cannot be fully held accountable for this. The way the Nobel Committee chooses their laureates is outdated and should change.

During the research for this thesis, three main conclusions came forward. First, it was found that Alfred Nobel had always loved literature and even attempted to write his own works. Although he did so unsuccessfully, this did not mean that he lost his love for the art. It can be assumed that Nobel wanted the Prize in Literature to play a role in the formation of a canon for world literature. This is confirmed by Kjell Espmark, a member of the Swedish Academy. The Academy is however neglecting this role by choosing so many European and Western authors over non-European and non-Western authors. The issue of the Committee being biased toward European and Western authors is not easily explained. The problem lies for a large part in the nomination process, which eliminates a significant amount of candidates simply because they do not have the means to get nominated. They do not have access to people or institutions which have the ability to nominate them. The problem of pro-Europeanism and pro-Westernism the Committee which is struggling with, could be eliminated by changing the nomination process to make it more inclusive. For example, allowing more institutions to nominate or to change the requirements which must be fulfilled in order to be eligible for a nomination.

Secondly, the Nobel Committee for Literature consists of only Swedish academics. This is no surprise given that the Academy is in Sweden. Even though these people speak more than one language and it is impossible to master all the languages in the world, it would help them to include people in the Academy that have a broader knowledge of non-European and non-Western languages, so that works from authors from developing countries can be read in their original language, as the author intended.

Thirdly, the Nobel Prize in Literature should back away from the politics that are involved when it comes to choosing a laureate. However, the Committee received an enormous amount of backlash when they announced Peter Handke was the 2019 laureate. The choice was criticised because of Handke's political engagement, specifically his friendship with Milosevic. The Nobel Committee defended their choice by stating that they awarded the Prize because of Handke's literary contribution and argued "that the task of literature is other than to confirm and reproduce what society's central view believes is morally right" (BBC News). They awarded the Prize to Handke because of his work, not because of who he is as a person. Although they could have chosen a laureate that invited less criticism and disappointed fewer people, emphasising that they chose this laureate for his work and not for the person who wrote it, seems like a small step in the right direction.

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Appendix

Alfred Nobel's will translated into English

I, the undersigned, Alfred Bernhard Nobel, after mature deliberation, hereby declare the following to be my last will and testament with regard to such property as I may leave upon my death:

My nephews, Hjalmar and Ludvig Nobel, sons of my brother Robert Nobel, will each receive the sum of two hundred thousand crowns;

My nephew Emmanuel Nobel will receive the sum of three hundred thousand, and my niece Mina Nobel one hundred thousand crowns;

My brother Robert Nobel's daughters, Ingeborg and Tyra, will each receive the sum of one hundred thousand crowns;

Miss Olga Boettger, presently residing with Mrs Brand, 10 Rue St Florentin in Paris, will receive one hundred thousand francs;

Mrs Sofie Kapy von Kapivar, whose address is known to the Anglo-Oesterreichische Bank in Vienna, is entitled to an annuity of 6000 florins Ö.W. which will be paid to her by the aforementioned bank, and to this end I have deposited in this bank the amount of 150 000 florins in Hungarian sovereign bonds.

Mr Alarik Liedbeck, residing at 26 Sturegatan, Stockholm, will receive one hundred thousand crowns;

Miss Elise Antun, residing at 32 Rue de Lubeck, Paris, is entitled to an annuity of two thousand five hundred francs. In addition, she is entitled to be repaid forty-eight thousand francs of capital that belongs to her and is currently deposited with me;

Mr Alfred Hammond, of Waterford, Texas, United States, will receive ten thousand dollars;

Miss Emmy Winkelmann and Miss Marie Winkelmann, of Potsdamerstrasse 51, Berlin, will each receive fifty thousand marks;

Mrs Gaucher, of 2 bis Boulevard du Viaduc, Nimes, France will receive one hundred thousand francs;

My servants, Auguste Oswald and his wife Alphonse Tournand, employed at my laboratory at San Remo, will each receive an annuity of one thousand francs;

My former servant, Joseph Girardot, of 5 Place St. Laurent, Châlons sur Saône, France, is entitled to an annuity of five hundred francs, and my former gardener, Jean Lecof, residing with Mrs Desoutter, receveur Curaliste, Mesnil, Aubry pour Ecouen, S.& O., France, will receive an annuity of three hundred francs.

Mr Georges Fehrenbach, of 2 Rue Compiègne, Paris, is entitled to collect an annual pension of five thousand francs from 1 January [1896] to 1 January 1899, when it will cease.

My brother's children – Hjalmar, Ludvig, Ingeborg and Tyra – each have a sum of twenty thousand crowns, deposited with me against acknowledgement of receipt, which will be repaid to them;

All of my remaining realisable assets are to be disbursed as follows: the capital, converted to safe securities by my executors, is to constitute a fund, the interest on which is to be

distributed annually as prizes to those who, during the preceding year, have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind. The interest is to be divided into five equal parts and distributed as follows: one part to the person who made the most important discovery or invention in the field of physics; one part to the person who made the most important chemical discovery or improvement; one part to the person who made the most important discovery within the domain of physiology or medicine; one part to the person who, in the field of literature, produced the most outstanding work in an idealistic direction; and one part to the person who has done the most or best to advance fellowship among nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies, and the establishment and promotion of peace congresses. The prizes for physics and chemistry are to be awarded by the Swedish Academy of Sciences; that for physiological or medical achievements by the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm; that for literature by the Academy in Stockholm; and that for champions of peace by a committee of five persons to be selected by the Norwegian Storting. It is my express wish that when awarding the prizes, no consideration be given to nationality, but that the prize be awarded to the worthiest person, whether or not they are Scandinavian.

As executors of my testamentary dispositions, I appoint Mr Ragnar Sohlman, resident in Bofors, Värmland, and Mr Rudolf Liljequist, of 31 Malmskillnadsgatan, Stockholm, and Bengtsfors, close to Uddevalla. As compensation for their attention and efforts, I grant to Mr Ragnar Sohlman, who will probably devote most time to this matter, one hundred thousand crowns, and to Mr Rudolf Liljequist, fifty thousand crowns;

My assets currently consist partly of real estate in Paris and San Remo, and partly of securities deposited with the Union Bank of Scotland Ltd in Glasgow and London, with Crédit Lyonnais, Comptoir National d'Escompte, and with Alphen, Messin & Co. in Paris; with stockbroker M.V. Peter of Banque Transatlantique, also in Paris; with the Direction der

Disconto Gesellschaft and with Joseph Goldschmidt & Cie in Berlin; with the Russian Central Bank, and with Mr Emmanuel Nobel in Petersburg; with Skandinaviska Kreditaktiebolaget in Gothenburg and Stockholm, with Enskilda Banken in Stockholm and in my strong box at 59 Avenue Malakoff, Paris; as well as of accounts receivable, patents, patent fees or royalties due to me, etc. about which my executors will find information in my papers and books.

As of now, this will and testament is the only one that is valid, and revokes all my previous testamentary dispositions, should any such be found after my death.

Finally, it is my express wish that following my death, my arteries be severed, and when this has been done and competent doctors have confirmed clear signs of death, my remains be incinerated in a crematorium.

Paris, 27 November, 1895

Alfred Bernhard Nobel

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Photocopy of Alfred Nobel's poem "You Say I am a Riddle" (1851)

To

You say I am a riddle — it may be
 For all of us are riddles unexplained.
 Begun in pain, in deeper torture ended,
 This breathing clay what business has it here?
 Some petty wants to chain us to the earth,
 Some lofty thoughts to lift us to the spheres
 And cheat us with that semblance of a soul
 To dream of immortality, till Time
 O'er empty visions draws the closing veil,
 And a new life sets in — the life of worms,
 Those last possessors of the human breast!
 To this hope dwindles as we fathom truth:
 Forgotten to forget — and is that all?
 To-day a mind with power to act and feel,
 A mirror of the universe, wherein
 Creation's centered rays combine to form
 A focus of intelligence; to-day
 A heart so deeply loving that it seems
 As if that hand uniting soul to soul
 Were but religion in a brighter form.
 To-day all this — to-morrow a cold corpse,
 A something worse than clay which stinks and
 Kind hands may strew their flowers; kind
^{eyes} may drop
 A tear of pity o'er the buried dead,
 But after all what matters love of theirs
 When all of us that was is at an end.