

# Creativity as liability: The oppression of the arts in Weimar in Nazi Germany

Jacqueline White



When I was approached about the prospect of speaking at the dinner tonight, I instinctively said "yes". When I remembered a prior engagement and realised that it would probably prevent my involvement with the dinner, I was disappointed beyond what I considered all reasonable proportion. I couldn't understand why I was so despondent, until I stopped to think about the nature of these awards and the people being honoured. I realised that there was a very obvious reason for wanting to be here – my admiration, not only for the literary gifts of these young men, but also for their bravery.

In terms of what the average single sex, boys school views as a manly endeavour, poetry and prose are not just "NOT macho", they are positively to be avoided. Whereas ability on the rugby fields draws admiration, literary creativity is at the very least ignored and more often than not, ridiculed. Such ridicule always says more about the critic than it does about the author, but in an environment such as St Peter's (or Grammar, or Kings, or Westlake – or any number of other boys' schools), it takes a special type of character and self belief to submit ones inner thoughts, hopes or fears to paper. To commit those thoughts, hopes and fears to the public arena.

When tonight's recipients were called up on to the stage at the assembly last week, it took courage, because although I'd like to think that their audience respected and admired their achievements, I surmise that the majority didn't. **Badges for poetry and prose will probably never have the same kudos as badges for rugby.** Let's face it – if we live in a country that doesn't even think soccer is manly enough, how could we expect Murray Mexted, Jonah Lomu or your average Year Ten student to admire the deceptively simple form of a well constructed Haiku or a delicate piece of satire?

So what am I saying? Am I telling these young men to give up writing and take up boxing or Formula One? Of course not: – what I want to say is that – in many ways it takes more bravery to submit a poem to an audience than it does to climb into the cockpit of Michael Schumacher's Ferrari.

Dr John Gerarts, facilitator of the Sam Hunt Competition, said "talk about creativity". It was a fairly broad instruction. It's a popular word in the world of 2002. It's a buzz word in marketing. Creativity is a quality that apparently gets people jobs. **But is creativity REALLY embraced by society?** If we look at the history of the arts – be they fine arts or the literary arts, it would seem that being creative actually puts one at risk. By its very nature, being creative means breaking the rules. Breaking the rules means insecurity for others and insecurity for others means that punishment needs imposing. Sam Hunt himself experienced these punishments while still a student at St Peter's. Why was he caned for reading a poem in class? Because his creativity challenged the status quo.

*In this piece Jacqueline discusses the notion that creativity, far from being rewarded by society, often becomes a dangerous liability for those willing to express their artistic genius.*

Again, this brings me back to the question of courage. Essentially, my message tonight is to exhort our young winners to greater literary heights but to also remind them that the role of the artist, like the role of the biblical prophets, is a lonely one.

The essential problem is that the artist reflects their environment. Picasso painted bull fights because he lived in Spain; the Brontes wrote books about governesses because that's what they were; William Blake wrote poems about the exploitation of the industrial revolution because he witnessed it; Arthur Miller wrote about mass hysteria because he experienced it. **But the trouble comes when, in reflecting what one sees, the artist highlights the hypocrisy or the flaws of a particular government or community.**

Authors, like all other artists, have a twofold obligation. An obligation to be true to their beliefs or vision and an obligation to hold a mirror up to society. Both these obligations require considerable bravery.

In 1919 a new school of art and architecture was opened in the German town of Weimar. This school – the Bauhaus – was established to bring innovation to the world of industrial and domestic design. The aim of its director, Walter Gropius, and its other

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tutors was to combine the functionality of factory produced items with the beauty of the craftman's labour. This beauty was to be based on clean lines and symmetry, rather than the gargantuan, classically inspired work of the pre-war period. The people of 1920s Germany had been forced into a sort of emotional austerity due to their suffering in World War One. Gropius believed, similarly, that after the destruction of the First World War, frivolous design was inappropriate. Having said that, he believed that there was beauty to be found in the clean lines and austerity of Bauhaus design. The only trouble was – society wanted elaborate, frivolous art and architecture.

Although retrospectively celebrated as one of the leading art and design schools of the modern age, the existence of Bauhaus was as fleeting as that of the Weimar Republic into which it was born.



*I have nothing to offer those who know everything already.*

Throughout its existence it faced constant public ambivalence and political suspicion; its eventual closure by the Nazis in 1933 simply serving as the last act in fourteen years of criticism from the artistic and political establishment. So the question is – what was it about these designers that made them a target for municipal and eventual national harassment? I believe that the answer lies in their creativity. Their architectural designs, their office furniture, their domestic implements were **CREATIVE**. **They stepped outside the bounds of conventional artistic and architectural wisdom, and in this – they made other designers feel threatened.**

Throughout the 1920s (and remember – this is the liberal, pre-Nazi period) the students and directors of the Bauhaus were regular targets for municipal harassment. Visits by the police were a regular occurrence, as the authorities searched for art of a “contraband” nature. Works viewed as in any way

controversial, whether politically or religiously, were frequently removed from exhibitions.

Their detractors' criticisms were always relatively vague. They claimed the Bauhaus to be a centre of political radicalism and that the challenging, creative nature of its art and architecture was the outward and obvious manifestation of their outlandish and dangerous political views. It is perhaps telling that the authorities found it difficult to detail what these “outlandish” views were.

During this period the Bauhaus artists moved from Weimar to Dessau and then finally, to Berlin – in the hope of finding a community and regional government that would accept their brand of creativity. In 1927, Gropius resigned as director. His letter of resignation explained his motives. He claimed that “until now 90% of my work has been devoted to

the defence of the school” – clearly, **for Gropius, the creative spirit that had led to the school's existence, was also its biggest liability.**

The final Director of the Bauhaus, Mies van der Rohe, was committed to cleansing the school of its radical reputation. Upon his appointment, he simultaneously invited the police into

the school to search the premises and threatened his students with expulsion for overt involvement in political movements or works of “excessive creativity”. Essentially, the new Director was trying to “neuter” the school. The creativity that was at the very heart of the Bauhaus had ironically been its downfall – well before the school was forcibly closed by the Nazis in 1933.

But what of the Nazis? It is significant that when they came to power in 1933 they created a Ministry of Culture. This Ministry had two objectives: To use art and literature to extol the virtues of the fascist state, and to root out and destroy the works of artists and authors who were classed as being of “inferior races” or were seen as promoting values not in keeping with Nazi state ideology. Along with the closing of the Bauhaus, the Nazi party had lists of 1000s of “non-German” texts that needed removing from German libraries.

On May 10th, 1933 right wing students at Wilhelm Humboldt University in Berlin began removing books from the university library and other private collections. All texts were deposited in a large courtyard. As the authors were denounced variously as being "Jews" or "Communists" or "libertine" or "depraved", their texts were thrown into the flames of a huge bonfire. This act lasted throughout the evening and was mimicked in the following weeks in cities throughout Germany.

Authors targeted included some of the most creative authors of the nineteenth and twentieth century. People such as Thomas Mann, Heinrich Heine, Ernest

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Hemingway, Siegmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Jack London, Karl Marx and Sinclair Lewis. High on the list was the novel "All Quiet on the Western Front", by German author Erich Maria Remarque. The crime of his novel – its focus on the futility of war. **For a German government gearing up for future war, Remarque's pacifism, presented so clearly in the creative eloquence of his novel, was unacceptable.**

What did the Nazis realise? That these authors were dangerous – either because they supported philosophies at odds with fascism or because they were representatives of groups deemed inferior and, therefore, the genius of their work would negate the theory that they were "untermensch" and therefore intellectually inferior.

One such author, deemed "untermensch" or sub-human was the deaf, mute and blind American author – Helen Keller. Her life and her intellectual capacity negated everything the Nazis believed about the inferiority of physically handicapped people. The great irony of targeting her is that since the First World War she had devoted the royalties from her books to the charity that assisted German soldiers blinded in gas attacks.

In a letter to the students of Germany, an outraged Keller wrote the following: **History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas. Tyrants have tried to do that often before, and the ideas have risen up in their might and destroyed them.**

**I encourage you to persevere in  
your literary endeavors and  
remain true to your creative  
voice, because without the  
authors and artists, a society has  
no conscience.**

*You can burn my books and the books of the best minds in Europe, but the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds. I deplore the injustice and un wisdom of passing on to unborn generations the stigma of your deeds.*

In 1942 Pulitzer Prize winner, Steven Benet, produced a radio play based on the issues surrounding the ongoing censorship of literature by the Nazi Party.

The centre piece of the play is a dialogue between the narrator, representing, perhaps, the general public, who don't realise the power of literary creativity, and Schiller – one of Germany's greatest eighteenth century poets.

**Narrator**  
*A book's a book. It's paper, ink and print.  
If you stab it, it won't bleed.  
If you beat it, it won't bruise.  
If you burn it, it won't scream.  
Burn a few books-burn hundreds-burn a million-  
What difference does that make?*

**Voice of Schiller**  
*It does to me.  
Excuse me, sir - my name is Friedrich Schiller,  
A name once not unknown in Germany,  
One of the glories, so they said, of Germany,  
A Germany these robbers never knew.  
Over a century and a half ago  
I spoke and wrote of freedom.  
  
I spoke against oppressors and dictators.  
I spoke for every man who lifts his head and will not  
bow to tyrants.  
And, though I died, my poems and plays spoke on  
In every tongue, in every land for freedom,  
For that's what books can do.*

**So, to you young men. I want to commend you for your talent, I want to commend you for your creativity, but most of all – I want to commend you for your bravery in choosing a road that is not always easy.**

**I encourage you to persevere in your literary endeavors and remain true to your creative voice, because without the authors and artists, a society has no conscience.**

As Heinrich Heine wrote in 1821: "*Dort wo man Buecher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen*"- "*They that start with burning books will end by burning men*".