

KAELI HOOD



Kaeli Hood is a senior at the University of Pittsburgh studying poetry and English literature. She started as a literature major, but over the course of her studies she found true love in the form of poetry. Her poetry is informed by her lit-crit background, especially semiotics, and her literary criticism is often informed by the everything-falling-together gut feeling of poetry.

MIDLING CULTURE: THE MIDDLEBROW, THE PULITZER, AND DEVOTION TO THE NEGATIVE

On April 9, 2003, Jeffrey Eugenides received the Pulitzer Prize for best American fiction. The Pulitzer Prize Committee released a statement that said of the novel: “Spanning eight decades - and one unusually awkward adolescence - Jeffrey Eugenides’s long-awaited second novel is a grand, utterly original fable of crossed bloodlines, the intricacies of gender, and the deep, untidy promptings of desire.”¹

Prizes like the Pulitzer and its ideological parent the Nobel emerged as methods of awarding value to – or perhaps identifying the intrinsic value of – literary works. Pierre Bourdieu, in his seminal work *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, describes this value in economic terms, suggesting that we must “extend economic calculation to *all* the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular formation – which may be ‘fair words’ or smiles, handshakes or shrugs, compliments or attention, challenges or insults, honour or honours, powers or pleasures, gossip or scientific information, distinction or distinctions, etc.”² These economic terms speak well to standard prize “transactions,” where an author receives, for an individual work or body of works, the praise of any of several prize-giving institutions. This praise typically comes in the form of both a financial and social endorsement, and in some ways serves as a modern-day patronage system, although grounded more in capitalism than the original patronage systems. The praise of a prize committee lends a work and its author a sort of “cultural capital” that works in a way similar to credit in the system of cultural exchange. The cultural capital afforded by a prize has been intended to confer a value status; it serves as a recognition of High art.

Alfred Nobel’s will explicitly states the literature portion of his prize should be awarded “to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction,”³ dictating that his committee should select an author with a mind toward social growth. This, predictably, has been interpreted, reinterpreted, and misin-

terpreted in the approximately 113 years since the prize's origin.

The Nobel website itself describes the numerous periods of its prize's social focuses as, in order, "A lofty and sound idealism," "A policy of neutrality," "The great style," "Universal Interest," "The Pioneers," "Attention to Unknown Masters," and "The Literature of the Whole World."⁴ Each described era has an identifiable set of staunch social priorities, and the Nobel committee seems to be aware of this in a consciously near-playful way. The titles for each era become increasingly focused on discovering undiscovered or overlooked artists and bringing them to light, combining "Attention to Unknown Masters" and "The Literature of the Whole World" as a way for the Nobel committee to participate in a cultural globalization to match the pre-existing financial globalization.

This system of prize-giving, endowed with heavy (if questionable) globalized social implications, relies heavily on Antonio Gramsci's social notion of hegemony, by which the majority of any population gives their consent to "the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production."⁵

It's important to pause here and note that Gramsci acknowledges that "All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals," and proceeds to note: "Thus, because it can happen that everyone at some time fries a couple of eggs or sews up a tear in a jacket, we do not necessarily say that everyone is a cook or a tailor."⁶ So, the members of this socially dominant group enjoy the title of "intellectual" and its inherent respect. These intellectuals are capable – through this hegemonic consent to the recognition of their prestige – of influencing (perhaps even creating) the taste of their nation, and perhaps even, in cases like the Nobel, a Global taste.

Globalization: Financial and Cultural

Globalization is the term given to the modern emerging global financial economy, and thus, by extension, the emergent global cultural

economy. Along with participation in the global economy, the advent of Globalization brought about a desire to participate in an almost recombinant sense of “Global” culture. Pascale Casanova, in *The World Republic of Letters*, describes the origins of this Global taste. She begins by citing Paul Valéry’s “La liberté de l’esprit,” which makes a similar argument to Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, relating culture to money and suggesting a sort of cultural capital. Casanova goes on,

“Extending Valéry’s line of thought to apply more precisely to the specific economy of the world of letters, one may describe the competition in which writers are engaged as a set of transactions involving a commodity that is peculiar to international literary space, a good that is demanded and accepted by everyone – a form of capital that Valéry called “Culture” or Civilization,” which includes literary capital as well.”⁷

In his essay, “The University, The Universe, The World, and ‘Globalization,’” Masao Miyoshi suggests that “globalization” is “By now a thoroughly overused but still abused term, [yet it] was a ‘new’ development... striking some as a hopeful consequence of the end of the Cold War. Believers celebrated it as a true cosmopolitanism, worldwide prosperity, utopia.”⁸ This certainly sounds like Nobel’s “work in an ideal direction.”

This desire for cultural globalization in some ways comes from an urge to lay claim to some of the cultural capital associated with finding the “Unknown Masters” of literature: the hegemonic structure of prize-giving is self-enforcing in that the credence to award prizes only grows with each prize given. Awarding renown, especially among a slew of other prizes, can only increase the prestige of the institution: “The ambition of the newer prize, rather, is to situate itself in a relationship of marked, and possibly antagonistic, complementarity to the dominant one, establishing its own apparent necessity by reference to some failing or lack in its more esteemed predecessor.”⁹

With this desire for cultural globalization comes the Nobel Committee’s recognition of Gabriel García Márquez’s heavily South American novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The Nobel committee quite open-

ly awarded the Nobel to García Márquez as a sort of stand-in for South American culture at large: “Many impulses and traditions cross each other... influences from European surrealism and other modernism are blended into a spiced and life-giving brew from which García Márquez and other Spanish-American writers derive material and inspiration.”¹⁰ The Nobel Committee became the “first” to recognize talent in a far-off, exotic part of the world.

Here lies a certain Orientalism (or perhaps a Global-South-ism) not unlike that described in Edward Said’s book of the same name in this global seizing of cultural capital. By recognizing “Unknown Masters,” the Nobel committee becomes, in a way, their representative. Said describes this concept of representation: “The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient.”¹¹ The term Orient may be out of favor:

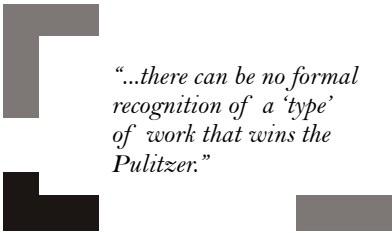
“The phrase ‘Global South’ refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It is one of a family of terms, including ‘Third World’ and ‘Periphery,’ that denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized. The use of the phrase Global South marks a shift from a central focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical relations of power.”¹²

Here, the term Orientalism stands for a sort of focus on drawing attention to representations of “less fortunate” cultures (the Global South rather than just Eastern cultures) for personal gain. These privileged, distinguished intellectuals composing the Nobel committee have controlled via recognition what’s been socially recognized as “work in an ideal direction” at any given time. In recent times, these social obligations have moved toward a more global view, which leads to a new brand of Orientalism. How does this all relate to *Middlesex* and its Pulitzer?

Middling Culture

Middlesex, as previously stated, is an example of Pulitzer Prize-winning fiction. It is an example of an attempt (arguably either successful

or unsuccessful) at global recognition in that its first-generation characters originate from Greece and struggle their way to America. It is a novel that spans approximately eighty years. The Pulitzer's citation for Eugenides' prize cites the jacket of the book, published by Farrar: "Spanning eight decades – and one unusually awkward adolescence – Jeffrey Eugenides's long-awaited second novel is a grand, utterly original fable of crossed bloodlines, the intricacies of gender, and the deep, untidy promptings of desire. It marks the fulfillment of a huge talent, from a writer singled out by both *Granta* and *The New Yorker* as one of America's best young novelists."¹³



"...there can be no formal recognition of a 'type' of work that wins the Pulitzer."

The Pulitzer's literary prizes, dubbed its "Prizes In Letters," are presented among a wide array of journalistic prizes. The six categories of Letter prizes are genre-based: fiction, play, historical nonfiction, auto/biography, verse, and nonfiction "not eligible for consideration in any other category." The requirements are simple: an American author or publisher submits a book "first published in the United States during the [past year] and made available in hardcover or bound paperback form for purchase by the general public."¹⁴ The Pulitzer Prizes are self-described as "the country's most prestigious awards and as the most sought-after accolades in journalism, letters, and music."¹⁵ So, the Pulitzer committee is aware of its prestige, and thus its ability to endow works with cultural capital.

However, there can be found no formal recognition of a "type" of work that wins the Pulitzer – the closest the site comes to such is an acknowledgement of the prize's movement away from conservatism in "matters of taste":

"In letters, the board has grown less conservative over the years in matters of taste. In 1963 the drama jury nominated Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but the board found the script insufficiently "uplifting," a complaint that related to arguments over sexual permissiveness and rough dialogue. In 1993 the prize went to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, a play that dealt

with problems of homosexuality and AIDS and whose script was replete with obscenities. On the same debated issue of taste, the board in 1941 denied the fiction prize to Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, but gave him the award in 1953 for *The Old Man and the Sea*, a lesser work."¹⁶

The notion of "matters of taste" here speaks to the idea that some art possesses more cultural capital than others.

Dwight Macdonald's 1960 essay "Masscult & Midcult" delineates a distinction between Mass culture (masscult: pop culture, kitsch) and High culture (highcult: avant-garde modernism, "true art"). Using Bourdieu's terminology, Masscult has a very low amount of cultural capital, but achieves a high volume of transaction with actual capital, while High Culture has a high amount of cultural capital and may or may not achieve successful capital status. Macdonald sets aside a third category: Midcult, the "bastard" of Masscult.¹⁷ Since its inception, Midcult has been the subject of much criticism. Macdonald very apparently has no respect for it, and many others would agree. Virginia Woolf once threatened, in a letter written but never sent to the Editor of the *New Statesman*, "If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat or half-crushed worm dares call me 'middlebrow' I will take my pen and stab him, dead."¹⁸ William Deresiewicz, in his essay "Upper Middle Brow," similarly condemns poor midcult: "Midcult is Masscult masquerading as art: slick and predictable but varnished with ersatz seriousness... peddling uplift in the guise of big ideas."¹⁹

As champions of journalism, the Pulitzer Prizes are criticized as part of this nigh-universally loathed "Midcult," or middlebrow culture. "Objectively, the journalist dwells squarely in middlebrowland, a reasonably literate writer describing assorted lowbrow happenings: car thefts, politicians' poses, presidential foibles, felonies and misdemeanors, weddings, home runs, and bicycle races."²⁰ Similarly, the idea that the middlebrow is "peddling uplift in the guise of big ideas"²¹ situates the Pulitzer, with its eye toward literature that is "sufficiently uplifting," comfortably in the middlebrow.

Deresiewicz goes on to list some examples of the Midcult of today: *Tree of Life*, Steven Spielberg, Jonathan Safran Froer... *Middlesex*.

Thus, the inescapable: the Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, the novel that so many enjoyed, praised, and purchased so thoroughly – it is inescapably middlebrow.

As an alternative to this despicable Midcult, Deresiewicz describes a glorious-sounding new category: the upper middle brow. He describes this as “infinitely subtler than Midcult. It is post- rather than pre-ironic, its sentimentality hidden by a veil of cool. It is edgy, clever, knowing, stylish, and formally inventive... and the films that *should* have won the Oscars.”²² This, to me, is an extremely tenuous assertion. It seems to come from an urge to avoid simplistically accepting the hegemony of high culture but also an urge to avoid dipping down into a sense of diminishing cultural capital. It stems mostly, it would seem, from the fact that Macdonald has already condescended to the category of Middlebrow, and therefore it has become to him a culturally bankrupt institution.

I would like to suggest that the critical condescension to the Middlebrow is symptomatic of a larger corruption in the economy of prestige, a corruption based on an increasing need for consumers of culture to be at the forefront of taste formation. Macy Halford suggests that there is a shift to accessibility of high-art, using *Harper's* and *The New Yorker* as examples: “both magazines are devoted to the high but also to making it accessible to many; to bringing ideas that might remain trapped in ivory towers and academic books, or in high-art scenes, into the pages of a relatively inexpensive periodical that can be bought at bookstores and newsstands across the country (and now on the Internet).”²³ Halford's argument is that this Highcult mentality with Masscult availability is the heart of the Middlebrow.


The Internet is absolutely the primary player in this mass availability of high-cult ideas; Kutler says that “The Internet presents a growing obstacle to any individual, institution, or medium attempting to influence the public's cultural tastes. It is giving voices to millions of individuals, and provides a platform for every imaginable cultural offering... Internet users are challenged to develop their own cultural standards, whether high, low, or that comfortable old friend: middlebrow.”²⁴

When the Middlebrow is viewed through this less demonizing view, based on physical accessibility rather than intellectual accessibility, it

becomes perhaps more palatable to institutions of High culture.

The Prize Game's Diminishing Returns

In the beginning, prizes developed as a way to confer distinction upon both the prized work and the prizegiving institution. This distinction was a mechanism by which valuable works of art and literature



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would become more accessible where they may not have before. However, in an age where the Internet is prevalent, the accessibility aspect of prized literature is a vestigial organ. This is, of course, not to say that accessibility to prized literature is entirely extinct. There are certainly still "Unknown Masters" to be discovered, and prize committees are indeed searching for them. However, this search is in itself quite corrupted, both in its new-Orientalism and its self-serving proliferation of prestige: it can be trusted neither to bring forth truly unknown works nor truly artistically masterful works.

When increased accessibility is removed from the Prize Game, what is left? The proliferation of prizegivers' prestige. In *The Economy of Prestige*, James English details a number of "Strategies of Condescension" and "Styles of Play" used by the Prize Game. Among these strategies are a great many that can be employed by those receiving or not receiving prizes, including refusal of prizes (a strategy employed by Sartre) and asking for prizes (Toni Morrison). These new strategizing contrivances to the Prize Game embody a lot of frustration and mistrust, among which is Deresiewicz's concept of an Upper Middle Brow made up of "films that *should* have won the Oscars."²⁵ In a way, because the corruption and condescension of the Prize Game has been recognized and openly addressed, Gramsci's idea that not everybody performs the function of an intellectual has become outdated. The same men who are not, as Gramsci has said, cooks and tailors, are doing the work of intellectual distinction. The act of differentiation, of proliferation of distinction, is no longer a simple transaction. Deresiewicz craves genuine, subtle, post-ironic art, works that do not present the facade of cultural

capital. He sees a disparity between the rise of this more genuine literature and its social capital. For lack of a better term, I will refer to a work's status as genuine as its genuity. There is a new absence of genuity in the game that is almost infectious – a rapid growth of cultural capital has in effect escaped the gold standard of increased accessibility.

The Midcult as Respite

At the heart of this intellectual analysis of the prize is this insurmountable contradiction: the Prize Game has become a petty game, a prestige-mill. However, our salvation may come from an unlikely place: the “insidious” Midcult. This hybrid of cultural and physical capital, which “sells” but also maintains a sense of at least a minor ideological responsibility, seems to me the closest to a genuine conferring of prestige that literary culture has come. Consider it: the Midcult is where people earnestly invest their money and where they are the most emotionally affected; “uplift” is not a bad thing. There is an organic and visceral reaction to the Midcult that is not by necessity present in Masscult and High Cult, and it diametrically opposes the detached transaction of cultural prize-giving institutions.

English says,

“The prestige of a prize – the collective belief in its cultural value – depends not just on the prestige of the jurors, the scale of their cultural portfolios, but on their own apparent belief in the prize, their willingness to invest in it personally... If their belief is seen as feigned and cynical, if their interest in the prize is perceived as having been bought, then the whole virtuous circle is imperiled.”²⁶

The idea that the value of a prize is in the collective belief in its genuity, at least in financial terms, is an important one. However, if we are taking prestige, as Bourdieu wishes, to bear resemblance to a system of currency, then prize committees' genuity should also be important in terms of their base level of prestige. I would like to contend that the higher interests of the Nobel committee, including globalization and the proliferation of its own prestige, makes the prize “feigned and cynical,” to use English's terms.

Multigenerational Narrative Across the Highcult/Midcult Divide

I received more joy, more natural pleasure, from the middlebrow *Middlesex* than I did from the Highcult *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The multigenerational narrative in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was wrapped up in a great amount of difficulty. Between the muddled temporality of the narrative, the confusing gesture of naming several generations of characters with the same name, and the metafictional move at its end, there was a great barrier to my understanding of and connection with the book. This difficulty registers as inaccessibility, which is an easy way to feign prestige; in terms of differentiation, having been one of “the few” to slog through a certain read works to proliferate prestige as if it were, itself, a prize. There is a certain sunk cost fallacy to a difficult read – one becomes inherently more invested in something that they have spent a large chunk of time reading.

This is, of course, not to say that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is not a work of literature worth being prized. It is a fantastic work of magical realism with vibrant, vivid characters. It has a lot to “say.” However, and García Márquez acknowledges this in his Nobel citation, it was chosen as a representative of a larger culture, a member of the Global South: “Eleven years ago, the Chilean Pablo Neruda... enlightened this audience with his word. Since then, the Europeans of good will – and sometimes those of bad, as well – have been struck, with even greater force, by the unearthly tidings of Latin America, that boundless realm of haunted men and historic women, whose unending obstinacy blurs into legend.”²⁷

Middlesex did not have the same difficulty of reading that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* had. Its multigenerational narrative was sewn together with the present narrative thread of Calliope Stephanides, the primary character and dead end for the Stephanides family. Because the narrative was “easier,” more accessible than stories like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it is relegated to the shelf of “Middlebrow” by discerning intellectuals like Merton Lee, who wrote an article devoted to explaining “Why Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* is so Inoffensive.” The idea that offensiveness is necessary for a work to be successful goes back to the idea of politics of difficulty: Kafka says in a letter to Oskar Pollak that “we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn’t shake us awake like a blow to the skull,

why bother reading it in the first place? So that it can make us happy, as you put it? Good God, we'd be just as happy if we had no books at all; books that make us happy we could, in a pinch, also write ourselves."²⁸ Lee, however, says that "*Middlesex* is inoffensive, but only because to be offensive requires commitment to the negative."²⁹

This is also not to say that it is entirely unproblematic for the Pulitzer to be so blindly focused on American literature. There is very obviously a number of benefits to understanding the literature of the "Whole World," including a general sense of awareness as well as the enlarging of one's worldview. However, the obstinacy with which prize institutions stick to their metaphorical guns in their Globalism and the politics of their proliferation of prestige take away some of the legitimacy with which their awards are given.

I'd like, then, to suggest that more prizes should attempt to emulate the "middlebrow" Pulitzer. Its genuity, evidenced by its system of self-entry and unabashed interest in uplift, is commendable. Its resistance to the notion of Globalism, to this new brand of Orientalism based in the Global South, makes it less contrived, less "feigned and cynical," less "devoted to the negative."