

The Duty of Writers

by E.B. White

***Background** - This essay appeared in White's column for Harper's magazine in January 1939. It was a disturbing time, when it was clear that world war loomed. England and France had just appeased Hitler by allowing him to take over part of Czechoslovakia. The Nazis had looted and burned Jewish homes and businesses on a night that became known as Kristallnacht. Fascist forces were winning in the Spanish Civil War, and Japan had invaded China. In his State of the Union address, President Franklin D. Roosevelt warned that the freedoms Americans enjoyed were in danger.*

I was sorry to hear the other day that a certain writer, appalled by the cruel events of the world, had pledged himself never to write anything that wasn't constructive and significant and liberty-loving. I have an idea that this, in its own way, is bad news.

All word-mongers¹, at one time or another, have felt the divine necessity of using their talents, if any, on the side of right--but I didn't realize that they were making any resolutions to that effect, and I don't think they should. When liberty's position is challenged, artists and writers are the ones who first take up the sword. They do so without persuasion, for the battle is peculiarly their own. In the nature of things, a person engaged in the flimsy business of expressing himself on paper is dependent on the large general privilege of being heard. Any intimation that this privilege may be revoked throws a writer into a panic. His is a double allegiance to freedom--an intellectual one springing from the conviction that pure thought has a right to function unimpeded, and a selfish one springing from his need, as a bread-winner, to be allowed to speak his piece. America is now liberty-conscious. In a single generation it has progressed from being toothbrush-conscious, to being air-minded, to being liberty-conscious. The transition has been disturbing, but it has been effected, and the last part has been accomplished largely by the good work of writer and artists, to whom liberty is a blessed condition that must be preserved on earth at all costs.

But to return to my man who has foresworn everything but what is good and significant. He worries me. I hope he isn't serious, but I'm afraid he is. Having resolved to be nothing but significant, he is in a fair way to lose his effectiveness. A writer must believe in something, obviously, but he shouldn't join a club. Letters flourish not when writers amalgamate², but when they are contemptuous of one another. (Poets are the most contemptuous of all the writing breeds, and in the long run the most exalted and influential.) Even in evil times, a writer should cultivate only what naturally absorbs his fancy, whether it be freedom or cinch bugs, and should write in the way that comes easy.

1. **word-mongers**: those who deal in words for a living.

2. **Letters...amalgamate**: Writing and literature do not do well when writers form groups.

3. **deleterious**: harmful.

The movement is spreading. I know of one gifted crackpot who used to be employed gainfully in the fields of humor and satire, who has taken a solemn pledge not to write anything funny or light-hearted or “insignificant” again till things get straightened around in the world. This seems to me distinctly deleterious³ and a little silly. A literature composed of nothing but liberty-loving thoughts is little better than the propaganda which it seeks to defeat.

In a free country it is the duty of writers to pay no attention to duty. Only under a dictatorship is literature expected to exhibit an harmonious design or an inspirational tone. A despot doesn't fear eloquent writers preaching freedom-he fears a drunken poet who may crack a joke that will take hold. His gravest concern is lest gaiety, or truth in sheep's clothing, somewhere gain a foothold, lest joy in some unguarded moment be unconfined. I honestly don't believe that a humorist should take the veil⁴ today; he should wear his bells night and day, and squeeze the uttermost jape,⁵ even though he may feel more like writing a strong letter to the *Herald Tribune*.

4. **take the veil:** become a nun or here, a serious, religious person.

5. **wear his bells...jape:** consistently act like a jester (who wears a cap with bells) and see the humor in everything.