



REDEFINING TABOOS IN MODERN LITERARY (CON)TEXTS

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Abstract: *The present paper aims at demonstrating how the concept of taboo has evolved and its meaning has changed since it was first introduced in the English language. According to the present-day tendency, taboo represents a custom that emphasizes that one must avoid a particular activity or subject, either because it is considered to be offensive or due to the fact that one's religion does not allow it. The paper lays focus on the frequent use of the term taboo, which springs from the fact that each and every culture is defined by a certain set of prohibitions, depending on the period of time, the way of thinking or the religious beliefs. Thus, taboo has turned into a recurrent issue having a spectacular effect upon the literary field. Taboos have been absorbed, explored and used in a wide range of literary (con)texts all over the world. One of the most representative figures in modern literature, who has written against the ideology of his time, is D.H. Lawrence who redefined and transformed taboos by including and converting them into art, by making them seem as normal human behaviours. Furthermore, his revolutionary exploration of new territories made it possible for the representation of human experiences to advance towards modernity. This paper also brings into the spotlight the outcome of Lawrence's daring act of writing about the unspeakable and the unpalatable issues, the Victorian age conceding its place to the modern era.*

Keywords: *taboo, prohibition, culture, ban, rule, sexuality, unspeakable*

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to better understand how taboos have entered the literary field, it is important to define and describe this term. The concept of *taboo* represents a custom that emphasizes the fact that one must avoid a particular activity or subject, either because it is considered to be offensive or because one's religion does not allow it. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, taboos are 'the prohibition of an action or the use of an object based on ritualistic distinctions of them either as being sacred and consecrated or as being dangerous, unclean, and accursed'. The *Longman Dictionary* offers a more complete definition of *taboo*: 'noun (plural taboos) - a social or religious custom prohibiting or forbidding discussion of a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing: many taboos have

developed around physical exposure the use of violence must remain a taboo in our society/ *mass noun* - a practice that is prohibited or restricted in this way: speaking about sex is a taboo in his country/ *adjective* - prohibited or restricted by social custom: sex was a taboo subject, designated as sacred and prohibited: the burial ground was seen as a taboo place/ *verb (taboos, tabooing, tabooed)*[with object] place under a taboo: traditional societies taboo female handling of food during this period' (2003:1687). Wundt describes *taboo* as the oldest set of rules of the humans (Freud, 2001:22). This term is considered to be older than the gods, appearing before any religion.

The origin of this term is Polynesian and it achieved widespread currency after the visit of Captain James Cook to Tonga, in 1771. He was the one who introduced the word in the English language calling the chiefs in Tonga, who were not allowed to behave as commoners, *taboo* people. He also stated that

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if anything is forbidden to eat, drink or touch, that thing is also called *taboo*: 'Not one of them would sit down, expressing my surprise at this, they were all taboo, as they said; which word has a very comprehensive meaning; but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden. Why they were laid under such restraints, at present, was not explained' (Horlacher, Glomb, Heiler, 2010:5). What is certain regarding this concept is the fact that it primarily referred to a ritual prohibition against contact with an object, an animal or a person. Therefore, in its original, Polynesian context, the word *taboo* was linked with the idea of *mana*, term which defines the religious power, force of some people or objects. Certain persons or objects are thought of as being possessors of a kind of special substance which renders them untouchable. On the one hand, they may be considered pure; on the other hand, the impurity is the one which imposes a barrier between that certain object/person and the rest of the world. What is worth mentioning is the fact that the noun and verb related to this term are English innovations, first recorded in Cook's book, in its original meaning *taboo* being an adjective.

The majority of the commentators argue that nowadays there is no consensus on what taboos constitute. This term has come into common usage in Europe although in its original meaning it was not precisely an exact term. On the one hand, *taboo* has diminished its terminological precision, and on the other hand, it has increased its semantic scope. The phenomena and manifestations of taboo require an approach from the perspective of different disciplines, such as: anthropology, ethnology, psychoanalysis, sociology, religious studies, literary studies, cultural studies, etc. The goal of this concept's theorization with the help of numerous disciplines springs up from the fact that taboo has proved to be central in understanding how cultures are formed. At a first glance, taboos play a different role depending on the type of society, cultural area, and period of time. In fact, this concept appears to be characterised by constants in anthropology and psychoanalysis.

2. DESCRIPTION AND USE OF THE TERM *TABOO*

The first observers did not know whether this term referred to something sacred or defiled. This is not strange because the concept is an ambivalent one, and can mean both. The 19th century anthropologists, such as James Frazer, perceived the taboo as a sign of irrationality. He argued that only a primitive man can believe in a supernatural world, full of dangers. According to Sir Franz Steiner (quoted in Horlacher, Glomb, Heiler, 2010:6), primitive societies do not perceive the difference between what belongs to the gods and what belongs to the world, between physical evil and spiritual evil, between the unclean or polluted and the sacred or the holy. The savage sets them all under a single notion, danger, which corresponds to a single feeling and that is fear. Frazer can be perceived as being the one who creates an anthropological tradition by relating taboo with the danger of contagion or pollution. Frazer paved the path for Sigmund Freud's theories upon primitive societies. The father of psychoanalysis argues that the multitude of fears and prohibitions in which the savage lives is parallel with the world of the neurotic. Furthermore, only what is desired is forbidden by the people, therefore they are always in an ambivalent position towards their prohibitions. This is a particularity of the incest prohibition, which Freud labelled the *incest taboo*: the mother is a prohibited sexual partner because she is the target of an intense desire (Freud, 2001:31-35).

It does not matter whether taboo is related to moral values or to the magical world or whether its dimension in psychoanalytical, sociological or anthropological studies is more important. To reach a logical explanation of this term requires taking into account 'the classification of objects and the cosmological ideas that exist in particular societies' (Horlacher, Glomb & Heiler, 2010:7). According to Edmund Leach (quoted in Horlacher, Glomb & Heiler, 2010:8), the concept of *taboo* includes all kinds of social prohibitions, no matter what their nature is. What stands at the basis of this theory is the

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fact that taboo is perceived as a difference-maker, as a social discriminatory tool. Furthermore, it is considered to be a term which reduces ambiguities and leads to a successful communication process.

Taboos differ from period to period and from culture to culture. The violation of a taboo does not only create tensions triggering mechanisms of exclusion from a certain group, culture, society, but it also attracts punishment. Society does not see with good eyes the transgression of boundaries set by fixed laws, norms and conventions. Hardly do we realise that the present day wide recognition and spreading in most of the languages of the world of taboo is certainly due to the numerous social prejudices that each and every society has. Moreover, other reasons for this amazing spread are that each and every culture is restrained by religious laws and also that we have no other word to describe socio-religious prohibitions. Taboos evolve and change and the fact that most western societies are more relaxed about sexual transgressions than they were in the 19th century, for example, is a proof of this spectacular evolution. Taboos in literature imply the category of subjects, words, activities, etc. which includes profanities, sexual terms, racial epithets, vulgar remarks, and other insults. All these subjects have been present throughout all human existence, being included in literature, from the beginning of writing up to now, and therefore involved in the life of every reader.

3. CENSORSHIP AND TABOO IN MODERN WORLD LITERATURE

The trespassing of conventions gave birth to the laws of censorship. Censorship refers to the suppression of speech or other public communication which may be considered harmful, dangerous, sensitive or inconvenient to society, culture, government or other institutions of control. The reading public was pushed away from pieces of literature which have proved to be valuable after all, even if at a certain point they have been excluded because they were considered inadequate for the development and flourishing of culture.

There are some books which have been censored because at a certain moment they were considered to be obscene. Literature was on the one hand suppressed on sexual grounds. Boccaccio's *Decameron* was banned in 1873 for containing obscene, filthy and inappropriate material. This book does not belong to Modernism, but it was rediscovered and also banned in modern times. Voltaire's *Candide* was another piece of literature which was considered to contain obscene scenes and that is why it was banned in the United States in 1930. Of course, this is not an isolated example. There were also other books which had the same fate: for instance, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, banned in the United States for obscene and inappropriate material because of the main character who had been married to her brother, committing incest. The case with Defoe's adventurous character is a more complex one because of the fact that the author makes a clear concession about the style of the narration even from the *Preface* of the book. He prefers the conventional language, strictly linked to morality to insert taboos regarding sexual pleasures: 'However, tho' he took these freedoms with me, it did not go to that, which they call the last Favour' (Defoe, 1994:26). Therefore, a structure of modesty is imposed by editorial intervention. This *modest* language is also to be found in other scenes, such as the ones in which Moll steals, when she makes an abortion and in many others which emphasise the character's wicked behaviour. Marry Shelley's *Frankenstein* is another novel which was banned in South Africa for indecent material because of the overt way in which the human body was described. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* suffered the same treatment and was rejected for sexual scenes and for offences against public moral because of the adulterous affairs that Emma had. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was banned in the United States for being obscene and also was Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, because of the sexual scenes and due to its general subject, as well: 'All three had brilliant, white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me

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uneasy, some longing and at the same time deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips' (Stoker, 1994:51). On the other hand, books were also suppressed on social grounds. Some literary works have been banned and challenged due to racial characterization, language, drug use, sexual orientation or other social differences. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* were banned in the past for being obscene due to the language and portrayal of the Black race. The books do not conform to the social, racial or sexual standards of their censors.

When speaking about censoring or banning, Modernism was not mouldable either. In 1961, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments about whether D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was indecent or not. By 1969, the book had been required college reading. Another important book, *Mrs. Dalloway*, by Virginia Woolf, was banned because of some allusions to homosexuality, referring to the relationships between Clarissa and Sally and between Septimus and Evans. Many 19th and early 20th century books were banned simply because they discussed or alluded to ideas, such as: prostitution, pregnancy before marriage and adultery. James Joyce's *Ulysses* was another example. A 1920 literary magazine serialised an excerpt from *Ulysses* and this excerpt scandalised the members of a group called the *New York Society for the Suppression of Vice*. They were shocked by the novel's masturbation scene and decided to set a barrier against the U.S. publication of the full work. The novel was reviewed in 1921 by a trial court and was considered to be pornographic. Thus, it was banned under the accusation of having broken obscenity laws. Many have believed that *Ulysses* was banned in Ireland, but this never happened. Twelve years later, in 1934, the novel was allowed to be published. In 1957, the U.S. Supreme Court changed its definition of obscenity. While many formerly banned books gained more and more acceptance, new works have freely included sexual details.

4. TABOO-BREAKERS IN THE ENGLISH LITERARY MODERNISM

One of the 20th century authors who maintained the continuity of taboo in literature was E. M. Forster. In his novel, *Maurice*, the main character is a homosexual. The word *homosexuality* appears only twice in the text, being uttered by Mr. Lasker Jones, Maurice's psychiatrist. Mr. Lasker is hired to 'cure' Maurice from homosexuality, what the former perceives as being a congenital defect. To a certain extent, this novel 'is such a creation, a plea for the acceptance of homosexual desire as a "natural" condition' (Harned, 2002:49). Realizing that the therapy is failing, Mr. Lasker suggests the main character to move to a more flexible country than England, such as France or Italy, where homosexuality was not considered a crime anymore. *Maurice* is one of the works in which the theme of sexuality appears almost natural. The novels in this period have the tendency to follow this course and to highlight subjects which were not supposed to be explored. As it was mentioned before, the theme of homosexuality is also present in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa Dalloway is strongly attracted to Sally, her friend, and considers the happiest moment of her life the one in which the two shared a kiss. Although she does not recognise her feelings as proof of homosexuality, she feels about women 'as men feel' (1996:36). This is also the case of other two characters in this novel, Septimus and Evans. Septimus is haunted by his friend's image and refuses the idea of a heterosexual relationship, ignoring Rezia. He and Evans 'had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other' (1996:47).

Another taboo-breaker, the Irish writer James Joyce, is one of the first, among the most important figures of the 20th century, who uses scenes with sexual implication, such as the one in which Stephen Dedalus, in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, confesses to the priest and says that he has been acting sinfully with himself and with others (referring to women) or the one in which Leopold Bloom is masturbating in the

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bathroom, in *Ulysses*, and also uses bad words in print. One of the main characters in *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom says: 'O Lord, I wanted to shout all sorts of things fuck or shit or anything at all' (Joyce, 1992:894), or 'I know every turn in him I'll tighten my bottom well and let out a few smutty words smellrump or lick my shit or the first mad thing comes into my head' (Joyce, 1992:930). Robert Graves, in his *Lars Porsena* work where he declines and rejects English swearing, perceives a 'record of a novelist James Joyce' (1927:71), whose *Ulysses* 'could be studied as a complete manual of contemporary obscenity' (1927:89). What Graves observes is, in fact, the reason why Joyce's novel was banned: 'it is a deadly serious work in which obscenity is anatomized as it has never been anatomized before' (1927:90). Another example, which confirms the fact that in *Ulysses* taboo words are used, is that of Leopold Bloom when he refers to the Dead Sea and to '...the oldest people. Wandered far away over all the earth, captivity to captivity, multiplying, dying, being born everywhere. It lay there now. Now it could bear no more. Dead: an old woman's: the grey sunken cunt of the world' (Joyce, 1992:60-61). The word *cunt* is used here by Joyce figuratively rather than literally. While Joyce uses the word only once in *Ulysses*, D. H. Lawrence uses it in a more direct sense and on numerous occasions in the novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Mellors, the gamekeeper and Lady Constance's lover, tries to delicately explain the meaning of this word to Hilda, Constance's sister, and says: 'If your sister there comes ter me for a bit o' cunt an' tenderness, she knows what she's after' (2006:245). D. H. Lawrence is also one of the representative figures among the taboo-breakers and his work definitely needs an attentive and in-depth analysis from this point of view.

5. D.H. LAWRENCE - A TABOO BREAKER

One of the purposes of D.H. Lawrence's fiction is to raise awareness upon the necessity to speak openly, honestly and freely about sex

and that is why he can be considered a road-opener for the mentality that we, the modern people, have today.

5.1. The Purity of Speech. Even though his novels have been rejected, excluded and condemned, we cannot consider them as being pornographic novels. According to Stephen Marcus's study upon sexuality and pornography in the writings of Victorian English writers (1964), pornography represents carnal intercourse lacking feelings and emotions. Therefore, it is obvious that pornography does not fit in the novels of D.H. Lawrence. For example, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the most representative novel when we talk about the purity of speech, the relationship between the protagonists, Connie and Mellors, is depicted as being the product of a passionate love, a kind of love which can do without sex and still remain untouchable and strong: 'But not now, not yet! Now is the time to be chaste, it is so good to be chaste, like a river of cool water in myself. I love the chastity now that flows between us. It is like fresh water and rain' (Lawrence, 2006:301). What love represents in this novel is a sacred, serious and major theme explored both with conventional and unconventional instruments of the language. Connie is certainly the successor of Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina, but only to a certain point. Instead of condemning his heroine to death, as Flaubert and Tolstoy do, Lawrence shows her the way to a fulfilled and enriched life.

Therefore, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is an erotic rather than a pornographic novel, and it portrays the sexual relation between two mature people as something natural, normal, as a generator of pleasure, not as the reservoir of shame and dishonour. Moreover, the author is trying to stress the fact that a sexual relationship cannot be detached or separated from feelings and emotions. This is exactly what Alastair Nirven remarks in *D.H. Lawrence. The Novels*, where he states that Lawrence had the clear aim of emphasising the importance and magnificence of feelings in any human relationship. This argumentation is justified by the choice made by Lawrence

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when choosing the novel's original title, *Tenderness*.

One of Lawrence's ambitions is to *purify* and reintroduce the taboo words he uses (*cunt*, *fuck*, etc.) in everyday language and to express through this language feelings and emotions pertaining to the intimacy of the individual. This is possibly the reason why Steven Marcus (1964) considers *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as a pornographic novel. One of the aspects, which he brings into discussion, is that regarding the use of euphemisms and taboo words. D.H. Lawrence avoids euphemisms in a conscious way, his intentions being to recover the possibility of speaking and thinking freely and openly about sex. He certainly uses taboo words to achieve his goal, to wipe the entire ambiguous aura related to sex issues and to exclude the fear regarding our own body. Unfortunately, these words have gained such negative connotations and have been used as swear words and insults for so long, that Lawrence's effort to recuperate their original, primitive meaning was unsuccessful.

It seems that Lawrence is absolutely convinced of the need to approach themes, such as love and sex, by ignoring social conventions and the codes of morality specific to a certain class. The author tries to use language as a means of explaining and expressing the mystery which lies beyond the most beautiful feeling man can feel, that is love, and physical experiences, such as the finality of sexual intercourse. It is quite clear that what Lawrence tries to achieve, not only by using forbidden four-letter words, but also vernacular language (in Mellors's case) in his fiction, is a purified speech, a speech which should bring the reader closer to the characters' feelings, emotions and sensations. This is one of the main reasons why *Lady Chatterley's Lover* became Lawrence's most famous and recognised novel. The fact that readers can identify with the characters and their emotions is an engine that converts any novel into a successful one.

5.2. Untouchable Themes and Modernism. D.H. Lawrence continually searched the means to overcome the alienation, which was typical to the

industrialised and mechanized society he was living in, through the union of man with woman, of man with man and of man with nature. This is the main reason why themes, which were considered taboos in Lawrence's age and which highly contrasted with the previous era, the Victorian period, appear and are developed in his fiction. It is quite impossible to imagine how shocking sexual scenes used to be in the modernist fiction when living in the era of *Sex and the City*. What we nowadays perceive as normal, usual and common, was considered in the early 19th century as outrageous, unthinkable and unspeakable. One of Lawrence's early novels, *The Rainbow*, explored new territories that made possible for the representation of human experiences to advance towards modernity. The frankness of this novel regards the life of the body in its most recognisable, common and earthbound form. *The Rainbow* is the expression of how the Victorian period conceded its place to the modern era, its author daring to write about the unspeakable: 'No aspect of human life changed more in the transition from Victorian England to modern England than the way Englishmen thought about sex' (Hynes, 1968:171).

Lawrence was brave enough to introduce sexuality in *The Rainbow*, a novel regarding family relationships. Of course, *Women in Love*, the sequel of *The Rainbow*, also contains intense, passionate scenes which hint at sexuality: 'So, under the bridge, they came to a standstill, and he lifted her upon his breast. His body vibrated taut and powerless as he closed upon her and crushed her, breathless and dazed and destroyed, crushed her upon his breast. Ah, it was terrible, and perfect. Under this bridge, the colliers pressed their lovers to their breast. And now, under the bridge, the master of them all pressed her to himself! [...] She was almost unconscious. So the colliers' lovers would stand with their backs to the walls, holding their sweethearts and kissing them as she was being kissed' (Lawrence, 1996:377-378). Expressing carnal, physiological desire was also considered shameful, scandalous and shocking, but Lawrence once again did not step back and

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described it as it was: a natural instinct which was not foreign to humans.

Women's independence is another sensitive topic which is approached by Lawrence. The literature in the Victorian period prepared the beginning of the assertion of women in the English society. The starting point was certainly the fact that women began to write and to emphasise in their writings what were the difficulties they had to face because of strict Victorian social norms and conventions. It is commonly known that women in those times had few employment opportunities and were dependent on the men in their families or on the men who hired them. The novels of the Brontë sisters, first published under pseudonyms, are the ones which can be seen as the first expressions of early feminism. What they bring into the spotlight is the struggle of the female protagonists to gain independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency.

The turn of the century underlines the interest that D.H. Lawrence shows in continuing the work that the Brontë sisters started. The fascination towards femininity is easily noticeable in his novels, where he emphasises that the role of women is not just restricted to marriage and looking after the children. This is, of course, a sign of modernism in his novels. Marriage is no longer a common interest among the modern female characters in D.H. Lawrence's fiction. What many of these women seek is happiness, sexuality, passion, financial independence and self-reliance. One might think that the Edwardian author complicated the existence of his characters by engaging them in modern pursuits, instead of settling them down. I believe that this attempt of enlarging the sphere of women's rights was both a step forward in the emancipation process of women and a boost in what was to become the open-mindedness that we are referring to today. In *Sons and Lovers* and *Women in Love*, Lawrence creates female characters who are strong-willed and independent, such as Clara, Ursula or Gudrun.

Another rule which is totally ignored is that of the prohibited relationships between people

who pertain to different social classes. Cross-class relationships were unacceptable in the English society at the end of the Victorian period. The strict rules imposed by Victorianism were still kept even after the death of the queen. As we have previously pointed out, D.H. Lawrence did not settle for any of the rules or conventions imposed by society. Furthermore, he chose to unite characters from different social strata in order to demonstrate that people can love and relate despite social discrepancies. This aspect is highlighted both in *Sons and Lovers*, where Mrs. Morel was of a higher class than Mr. Morel, and in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, where Constance falls in love with the gamekeeper.

Women in Love, a true modern masterpiece, is the novel which daringly explores homosexuality through one of its protagonists, Rupert Birkin. His search for equilibrium between the love for a woman and that for a man has given birth to contradictory interpretations. Lawrence intends to explore another kind of love and this is obvious in the words that Birkin utters to Ursula at the very end of the novel: 'Having you, I can live my life without anybody else, any other sheer intimacy. But to make it complete, really happy, I wanted eternal union with another man, too: another kind of love' (Lawrence, 1996:542). Also, what Lawrence wants to point out is the obsessive relationship between the mother and the son. The so-called Oedipus' complex was firstly introduced by Sigmund Freud in his studies about the unconscious. Freud states that this complex appears in the childhood years. According to him, in the mind of the child a hidden desire arises: to reject and exclude the parent of the same sex and to possess and passionately love the parent of the opposite sex.

The pattern of this desire is easily noticeable in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. There is no doubt that this novel is an autobiographical one, many of the issues described and debated here being present in the life of the author himself. The close relationship which Lawrence had with his mother is represented brilliantly in the novel. Lydia, Lawrence's mother was the prototype

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of the overprotective, loving, possessing, ambitious mother. Lydia became the model for an extraordinary character present in *Sons and Lovers*, Gertrude Morel. Even from the first pages of the novel, it becomes obvious that the mother-sons relationship is a special, unique one. Gertrude Morel's love for her sons trespasses the usual limits of parental love. Paul is the main character of the book and it is his evolution that emphasises how influential a mother can be in her child's process of taking decisions.

6. CONCLUSIONS

All in all, as we have pointed out, the concept of *taboo* has a debatable nature. Its meaning has changed in time and it became what we understand by it at present. Taboos have always been present in literature no matter the time period and the works, which have trespassed the boundaries set by different cultures, have been banned and rejected by the society. Many of the representative figures among the 20th century English modernist writers were not seen with good eyes because of their resistance against the ideologies and the stereotypical thinking of their age. D. H. Lawrence is considered to be one of the most controversial writers in the history of literature. The proof of this fact lies in the numerous taboos he has broken, which have been highlighted in this paper: relationships between people of different social classes, openness to sexual issues, women as independent people, homosexuality and the obsessive relationship between mother and son. Although D. H. Lawrence's novels have been rejected, banned and judged by the society, his purity of speech and his way of describing normal human behaviours triggered the success that his works have nowadays. This success is also granted by the daring and courageous nature of the writer who fought for what he believed in.

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