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Reflection on Sophocles and Flannery O'Connor

By CLAIRE ANASTASIA KITZ
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Sophocles was born just outside of Athens in 496 BC to a well-to-do family and lived to be 90 years old. He wrote more than one hundred plays, of which only seven in complete form have survived: *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *The Women of Trachis*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. He was a contemporary of another great playwright, Euripides, and wrote most of his plays after those of Aeschylus.

Sophocles' most famous plays were his three "Theban" ones: *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*, written at different stages of his life. Although they do not have a consistent story line, they have traditionally been grouped together in modern times because the three casts of

characters are related and all of the plots involve the reign of the King of Thebes.

Beyond his striking characters, Sophocles' contributions as a dramatist were substantial and innovative. His brilliance as a playwright was first noticed in 468 BC, when he took first prize in a theater competition over Aeschylus, the master dramatist. Over his lifetime, he was awarded many other prizes as well. But Sophocles was also known for something more fundamental: transforming the structure and form of the tragic play. He increased the number of people in the chorus from twelve to fifteen, added a third actor to make the dialogue and plots more complex, and pushed his characters toward more introspection and psychological realism. He introduced both painted scenery and dramatic exits and entrances by actors. Through the medium of his tragic works, he explored the intensity and fluidity of human emotions, displayed the consequences of human folly, and surveyed the role and function violence and brutality played in society.

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Sophocles' characters, such as Antigone, Electra, and Oedipus, are renowned for their attributes: haunted, worthy, hard-boiled, stubborn, brash, courageous, blind, and sometimes lost. His stories, and thus their stories, are as relevant now as they were thousands of years ago.

their stories, are as relevant now as they were thousands of years ago. Through his characters, Sophocles represented what was virtuous, brave, and noble, as well as what was wicked, prideful, wanting, and corrupt, in all societies and not just ancient Greece. The characters begged some of the great questions: Do love and decency prevail over arrogance, mendacity, and power? Do individual rights undermine the needs of the state? Are those who are blind morally culpable? Is faith enough? Are pride, fear, and loathing the downfall of all? Do wisdom and understanding come only after profound loss, suffering, or violence?

Sophocles was not unlike the 20th century original Southern Gothic writer, Flannery O'Connor from Andalusia Farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. The theological writer and Trappist monk Thomas Merton said as much. Her books and stories were in many ways just as breathtaking, mordant, heart-rending, disturbing, and brutal as the surviving Sophocles plays, and they asked similar questions. *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away* and the short stories "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" come to mind. These works focused on related themes: the human capacity to commit evil, how revenge and brutality devour, how grace can be transformative in the midst of chaos and confusion, why pride is noxious, why blindness is fatal, and how revelation and understanding are often achieved (or forced) in unexpected ways after great suffering, violence, or death.

The poet Robert Fitzgerald rightly praised the power of "the clashes of blind wills and the low dodges of the heart" characteristic of Flannery O'Connor's writing. In rivaling the genius of Sophocles, she was not far off the mark. In all the turbulence in these authors' masterworks, Sophocles could be viewed and judged as her guide, inspiration, and equal.

Politics Dictating Consumer Choice

By ERIC FISCHER
STAFF WRITER

In the era of President Trump, political speech by businesses and business leaders is now under more scrutiny and more controversial. Many businesses and their executives have come under fire for donations to political campaigns, often through industry interest groups, and the criticism has led to frustration among corporate leaders. Companies were condemned from the left when their chief executives took part in Trump's now-defunct business advisory council, even though they were preaching positions of moderation and stressing business over politics. The recent shooting in Parkland, Florida has brought businesses back into the political limelight for doing exactly what they are set up to do: sell their products. While consumers should reward businesses that have strong corporate social responsibility programs, we should not allow their political ideologies or positions to dominate our consumption choices.

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Business leaders are not accustomed to their businesses themselves being treated as political statements. The tobacco, alcohol, and fast food industries have long been criticized for promoting unhealthy life choices. Consumers sometimes condemn energy and mining corporations for doing business in unstable parts of the world. However, in today's hyper-partisan, social media-driven political environment, formerly uncontroversial businesses have been thrust into the political dialogue.

In response to the Parkland school shooting, retailers Walmart and Dick's Sporting Goods announced new restrictions on the sale of firearms. Additionally, airlines, rental car companies, and hotel chains

continued on back

have severed their ties with the National Rifle Association. In the wake of such an incident, companies are under pressure not just in the sense of becoming controversial, but also in more practical ways. Delta Airlines, because it cut ties with the NRA, lost a tax break from the state of Georgia. Various other businesses seemingly unrelated to firearms are getting pressure from activists to sever their relationships with the NRA.

We should not allow politics to dictate consumer choices. We rely on the free market to offer us high-quality goods and services at competitive prices, and introducing politics into consumption distorts this activity. It means that business leaders focus less on producing and marketing

a high-quality, relatively inexpensive product, and more on public relations, after a national political incident.

This is not to say that businesses shouldn't react to a changing consumer base. In fact, they should strive to reflect the values of their customers, and customers can rightfully consider corporate social policies in their consumption choices.

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The line is crossed when consumers demand ideological purity. No business will ever be able to perfectly mirror every consumer's political preferences simultaneously. In attempting to pander to ideologies or political positions, companies risk alienating large segments

of their consumers. This is not only detrimental to the business itself, but tends to exacerbate political polarization.

Business decisions have also added to the disgruntlement among so many in Middle America that political pundits so often talk about. We shouldn't blame them. By bending to political pressure, businesses have expanded the sphere of politics from lobbyists on K Street to our grocery stores and hotel rooms. The intrusion of politics into more of the consumer choices we make, and perhaps eventually into every such choice, fuels more political resentment and encourages more chat about it among pundits.

Our failure as a society to adequately separate business and politics will lead to worse products, increased polarization, and even more political resentment.

The Many Images of Teddy Roosevelt

By ELZA HARB
STAFF WRITER

“Speak softly, and carry a big stick.” These are the words most often associated with a bellicose, adventurous, and strong “alpha” man. He was the president who set the stage for hawkish foreign policy, and began the age of American imperialism. For most people, he was a larger-than-life character, almost cartoonish in that sense. This is, of course, President Theodore Roosevelt.

Teddy, as he vehemently disliked being called, was a sickly child with a myriad of physical health problems. From a young age, family and friends described him as effeminate and weak. This image would stick with him throughout his young adulthood into his time as a New York state assemblyman. Roosevelt's father, who was his personal hero, forced him to take up strenuous physical activities, such as boxing, in order to cure him of his diseases.

In a speech during his brief tenure as governor of New York, in 1899, Roosevelt would explain the concept of overcoming hardship that his father taught him: “I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the *strenuous* life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach that highest form of success

which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph.”

Roosevelt took the “strenuous life” concept to heart. He took up boxing, hunting, and ju-jitsu, and he played virtually every other rough sport. He was obsessed with nature, and the American West. He even moved to North Dakota to become a “cowboy.” When the United States went to war with Spain in 1898, he promptly quit his job in President McKinley's cabinet and joined the war, becoming the leader of the famous Rough Riders. Even the name of his team was intentionally masculine. Roosevelt had always been

obsessed with war, especially due to the Civil War, when his father, a man whom he otherwise deeply respected, had paid to get himself out of conscription. This left him feeling humiliated for the rest of his life. He wanted to man up, unlike his father.

This is the Roosevelt every American knows. But to see him primarily in this way would make him a caricature. While it is true that Roosevelt was a tough man, he was also an intellectual. He would read a book

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a day, and if he had time he might read three. By one estimate, he wrote more than 150,000 letters in his lifetime, compared with the 13,000 that the prolific Thomas Jefferson wrote. He wrote several books, including histories that historians praise to this day. He held a French Enlightenment-like salon at the White House, to which he would invite the leading artists and intellectuals of the time for conversations.

Although Roosevelt was obsessed with war, he avoided it during his two-term presidency, unlike McKinley immediately before him and President Wilson not long after. He added the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, making the U.S. the “international police power” of the Western Hemisphere, but he rarely used it. His administration's foreign policy mostly used diplomacy and law to settle international disputes, often thanks to the help of his Secretary of State, Hamilton graduate Elihu Root. He may have liked the idea of war, but as president he promoted peace, which even

won him the Nobel Peace Prize. Some historians like Richard Collin even argue that Roosevelt, in addition to being an intellectual, was not war-mongering at all but merely understood that this image would help him, and therefore promoted it.

Theodore Roosevelt was a Renaissance man in many ways. Everyone who knows anything about him, and every historian, has his or her own take on him. The most important thing to remember about Roosevelt is his complexity. Boiling him down to one quality or concept would be a caricature of a truly multi-faceted man, and that is unfair to him as a historical actor.

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