William Faulkner said: 'The primary job that any writer faces is to tell you a story, a story out of human experience – I mean by that, universal mutual experience, the anguishes and troubles and griefs of the human heart, which is universal, without regard to race or time or condition'.

While the writer’s material comes out of his or her experience which can never be separated from his or her sex, race, nationality, and the socio-political issues of the time, the good writer is invariably one who pays little attention to these factors and writes instead about that which is basic to the human condition or what Faulkner calls 'the universal patterns of man’s behaviour inside the human condition'. It goes without saying that we are all creatures of our time as it is equally redundant to remark that I am always I. If I happen to be a brown-coloured male, my writing would be of no interest if it appealed to other brown-coloured males and to no one else; in any case, on the evidence of literary history, it would be foolish of me even to think that I needed to write that which would be applauded by my particular sub-group of the human species. The only person who thinks of writing about the injustice to his or her sub-group is a political propagandist, never a writer of fiction. Faulkner said: 'I think that no writer’s got time to be drawing a picture of a region, or preaching anything – if he’s trying to preach you a sermon, then he’s really not a writer, he’s a propagandist, which is another horse'. He made this quite explicit, and it is important to repeat what has been quoted earlier: 'The temporary conditional things of the time are not too important. At this time, in my country, the South, there is a problem of segregation and integration – racial trouble. But they are not really important in the long view of man’s record. At other times, unemployment; at other times, women’s rights – they were important ephemerally at the moment, but not important as measured against the passions and hopes of man’s heart'.

Blacks among you who have been denied some opportunity because of the colour of your skin; women among you who have
had to endure sexual wrong; and those of you who have suffered the humiliation of being unemployed; the aggrieved among you will perhaps be offended by Faulkner saying that your suffering is only a temporary, passing phenomenon that is not important. The fact, however, is that Faulkner is absolutely right. He is not being indifferent to political wrong; and he is not being insensitive to your pain. He is simply giving you the larger point of view, and in that larger perspective human pain always remains though the causes of it are varied and therefore for the writer it is more to the point to talk of the pain than to lament the causes.

Tolstoy wrote to a novelist: 'Both your novels are written on contemporary themes. Problems of the zemstvo, literature and the emancipation of women etc. obtrude with you in a polemical manner, but these problems are not only not interesting in the world of art; they have no place there at all. Problems of the emancipation of women and of literary parties inevitably appear to you important in your literary Petersburg milieu, but all these problems splash about in a little puddle of dirty water which only seems like an ocean to those whom fate has set down in the middle of the puddle'.

It is perfectly noble to champion some cause, but that is a separate activity from the art of writing fiction. Nationalism and historical time are of no material interest to the writer either. You may not know a word of Russian, but you and Tolstoy speak the same language as writers and, doing so, share a common patriotism to art and are contemporaries. No doubt only a Russian could have written War and Peace, but once written the imagination behind it is perceived to be universal and the sufferings and joys of its characters are the same as those of people living today in Patagonia or Malawi or wherever you choose to put your finger on the spinning globe. Faulkner said, 'If a spirit of nationalism gets into literature, it stops being literature'. Reflect upon this a moment. Faulkner’s fiction is charged with the imagery, experience and the language of the American South; by contrast, much of Hemingway’s fiction is set in foreign lands; and yet, in an important sense, Faulkner’s fiction is never ‘American’ while Hemingway’s is: in Faulkner’s work one is absorbed in those profound levels of experience that art gives us that create in the mind a simultaneous apprehension of knowledge, truth and beauty, which is to say, it engages us in that complex experience for which we have the rather inadequate