

George Oates

Is literature always a force for good?

It is reductive to look at texts in the polarising terms offered by this statement, as nothing can ever be entirely 'good', a term which is in itself highly subjective. In encouraging us to change our views, the powerful tool of literature can of course be abused and consequently have a negative impact, such as populist texts like 'Mein Kampf'. Like all art, literature can be open to interpretation. For example, the inclusion of the popular 'Harry Potter' series in American schools has been frequently challenged due to its promotion of witchcraft, and the series faced further criticism from certain parties when Rowling suggested in 2007 that the character of Dumbledore was gay; of course, the books being vilified by certain communities does not mean that the series is inherently 'bad'. In 1930s Nazi Germany, thousands of books were burned as they were viewed as either inflammatory or directly opposing Nazi ideologies; by having these texts removed, the government was reducing freedom of knowledge and purposely limiting people's minds, thus unintentionally emphasising the power literature possesses and its ability to affect thought. I would argue that it is this capacity which means that literature as an art form is inherently good, encouraging expansion of knowledge and providing a lens through which to observe the world around us. Good literature should function as a mirror, compelling us to scrutinise and interrogate ourselves and our society, even if this entails discomfort. This can be accomplished by fiction that is overtly political, such as 'Animal Farm', as well as that which focuses on topical matters more indirectly.

George Orwell's formative 1945 novella 'Animal Farm' uses fiction as a tool to explore the political and moral issues of the 1917 Russian Revolution in an accessible way. Orwell intended to use his brutally honest fiction in order "to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole" as if to create a vacuum where art and truth form an alliance. When the publishers in London initially refused to print the text due to the mounting political tension between Britain and the Soviet Union, it resulted in the text being unpopular and highly criticised. Yet, 'Animal Farm' is now regarded as a highly influential, pioneering text, with Orwell's style of writing helping to usher in a new brand of cynical fiction. This demonstrates Lorna Hardwick's idea of "critical distance" which suggests that looking at issues through the lens of literature helps to provide a safe space in which to address them. The text is now seen as both a powerful story and a commentary on the truth, while also being a useful educational

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tool about the rise of Communism. Orwell used literature successfully to explore topical, possibly controversial information with a depth and openness that could otherwise not easily be accomplished.

As 'Animal Farm' demonstrates, well-written texts which deliberately oppose societal norms can be dangerously persuasive or even threatening to those who are alien or averse to the ideas that they present. When the seminal German play 'Spring Awakening' was first performed in 1906 it was branded dirty and unsavoury by critics and audiences alike, and has been subject to censorship ever since. The play focuses on the oppression that children suffer as a result of the ignorance and repression of older generations, as well as sexual awakening and its potential consequences. The issues it explores were not fictitious, but were taboo and uncomfortably radical for an early 20th-century audience. The play deals with the suicide of a fifteen-year-old boy who, early in the first act, asks "Don't you think that man's sense of shame is just a product of his education?". A line of this nature purposely provokes the audience to scrutinise themselves harshly at the expense of their comfort. However, to a modern audience this line chimes well with current theories that a person's childhood has significant bearing on the rest of their life and their mental health. The play offended the middle-class, bourgeois audience due to its failure to conform to both literary and societal standards. The first American performances in 1917 resulted in a court case with the play being deemed "pornographic" and it was banned from being performed in England until the 1960s due to the Theatre Censorship Act, with the first unadulterated performance in England not occurring until 1974. Yet, when adapted into a very successful 2006 Broadway musical, theatre critic Polly Wittenberg remarked that "the issues it explores are universal and timeless". A once heavily criticised text that offended the audiences it played to is now regarded as a feat of timeless, almost dogmatic storytelling. Charles Martindale argues that "Meaning is realised at the point of reception", suggesting how all literature is subjective, and can simultaneously be judged by both the reactions it is initially met with and its potentially innumerable receptions over time. All texts have inherent worth and innate 'goodness' even if these qualities are not immediately realised or recognised.

With that in mind, we can recognise that literature often surpasses its original purpose and can outlive its initial context. Sophocles' Ancient Greek play 'Philoctetes' (409 BC) was used as the basis for Seamus Heaney's 1991 play 'The Cure at Troy', in which Heaney was indirectly addressing the

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'Troubles' in Northern Ireland and the necessity for peace and reconciliation after years of violence. When closing out his speech accepting the democratic nomination for president in August 2020, Joe Biden turned to a favourite passage from Heaney's play: "History says/ don't hope on this side of the grave/ But then, once in a lifetime/ the longed-for tidal wave/ Of justice can rise up/ And make hope and history rhyme". Then, the now US President added, "This is our moment to make hope and history rhyme." Heaney was captivated by the longevity of Greek theatre, and Biden's emotive use of Heaney cements literature's perennial relevance. Literature possesses a unique capacity to encapsulate timeless qualities of the human condition, which ultimately is a force for good, helping us to articulate our thoughts or feelings or in Biden's case, to capture the zeitgeist at a pivotal moment.

In the wake of the tragic murder of George Floyd in May of 2020, literature assumed the role of helping people to understand the white privilege and systemic racism inherent throughout western society. Book stores were selling out of texts such as Reni Eddo-Lodge's 'Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race', showing the public's desire to use literature as an accessible way to immerse themselves in other cultures and understand differing viewpoints in order to 'do the work' needed to start proactively combatting racism. In an interview with 'Vogue', British author Bernadine Evaristo described how "Literature can foster and express our shared humanity." Books are more than just words on a page: they possess the power to transcend boundaries and captivate minds. Evaristo's motto is "to put presence into absence", helping to kindle awareness and empathy for marginalised groups within society, particularly in those who have no first-hand experience of such hardship. In her 2019 Booker Prize-winning novel 'Girl, Woman, Other', Evaristo seeks to provide insight into what it is like to be a womxn of colour in modern-day Britain. The novel is fearless and vibrant, delving into issues that historically tend not to be discussed openly. The novel is split into five chapters, each containing several subdivisions. It is sparsely punctuated, with full stops only appearing at the end of each section. This could signify reluctance to conform to an expected standard, under which we are all too accustomed to doing what we are told instead of carving our own paths and forging our own identities, irrespective of what is already in place. Like 'Animal Farm' and other pioneering texts, 'Girl, Woman, Other' depicts current, prevalent issues and experiences in a way that encourages us to reevaluate what we see, and how we see it. When exploring gender within the novel, Evaristo writes that it "is one of the biggest lies of our civilisation". Presenting gender as a

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societal construct within a work of fiction helps to educate people subtly in ways that other mediums cannot, encouraging further thought and research. The noun “civilisation” recognises that as a society we are still developing, and can repeatedly adapt our viewpoints. Texts of this manner act as catalysts for change within the issues they present, thus emphasising the good literature can do.

Evaristo states “Be a person with knowledge not just opinions”. Literature, in particular fiction, helps to achieve this, inviting us into a world otherwise beyond our reach. In order to make a valid judgement on anything, a solid foundation of knowledge is required, which literature can provide. While not everyone will agree with what is presented in a text, reading and experiencing literature enables a broadening of the mind and, ultimately, the growth of a more aware, knowledgeable and empathetic person.

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