

Is literature always a force for good?

When asking the question is literature always a force for good, we must look at what books teach us. Books like *The Handmaid's Tale*, which teaches us of the dangers of restricting women's rights, or *Lord of the Flies*, which criticises colonialism jump to mind as books that teach us good things. These books are examples of literature being a force for good. Then the opposite comes to mind - books that prove that literature isn't always a force for good. *The Coral Island* preaches about the civilising effects of Christianity and the superiority of British government and leadership. *Lolita* romanticises the relationship between an adult man obsessed with a 12-year-old girl after he becomes her stepfather. The list goes on, for both sides of the argument. These books provide no clear answer to the question, however. It is in looking at these books that are so clearly teaching us something right or wrong that we struggle to answer the question. We shouldn't look at books that are neatly categorised as good or bad. Instead, we should look to the morally grey books - literature that isn't clearly right or wrong.

As of recent, I've seen many issues with the Harry Potter series pointed out. This series was one of my favourites as a child, so I took time to think about it. The goblins at Gringotts bank are anti-Semitic tropes and the werewolves, who are supposed to be metaphors for people with AIDs, depict people with AIDs as dangerous and evil. These were such innocent parts of the story to me as a child, but now as I look back at them, I see their problems. The same can be said for many of the books I read as a child, and I'm sure that everyone looks back on books from their childhood that have clearly problematic elements that they never recognised as a child. So surely, this must prove to us that literature cannot always be a force for good.

I'm not sure if it does.

When I read Harry Potter, I didn't realise that the werewolves were supposed to be bad guys. I thought that they were all just people, struggling with something that the government ignored and actively discriminated against them for. That isn't what some people read in those books however - some people read about an evil and dangerous group, with a few good people among them, who hid themselves and tried to be normal. These are two staunchly different narratives, but here's the thing - we were reading the same book. The same book taught us different things.

While it may be easy to dismiss this as an ignorant, youthful reading of an offensive story, the same can be said for many more books I have read. The book I read most recently was *King Lear* - and the same thing happened again. As I read it, I interpreted the play as telling me that primogeniture is a flawed system that only causes violence and family conflicts. But as I researched the book, I learnt that in Shakespeare's time, the play was a propaganda piece in favour of primogeniture.

This left me thinking, before writing this essay. How could literature that had been a force for good in my life be a force for evil and prejudice to other people?

The answer is simple. Literature is about interpretation. Very few books offer a set of moral instructions, and even those that do are often up to interpretation. Books are often meant to be interpreted in a certain way, but ultimately it is up to the reader how they interpret a book. You read a book, and you interpret the story in your own way, as a way of developing your own morals.

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I don't think it is our morals that guide how we interpret stories, but stories that help us to create our own morals. As we read, we decide who we like, who is being treated unfairly, and who the bad guy is. We do this with every story we hear or read, and slowly over time these come together to form morals. No one can form morals without stories, because without stories we are alone in this world and have no way of learning about and relating to other people. So, whether the story is fictional or not, it will help us to slowly form our morals, as we interpret it in our own way.

This is why storytelling is such a huge part of our culture. That's why the werewolves in Harry Potter were a force for good to me and a force of evil for others. Literature is subjective.

And before you ask - what of the books that are clearly morally wrong? How can they be a force for a good? Another thing that we interpret about a book as we read it is who is the good guy and who is the bad guy. Or to be more formal, who the protagonist and the antagonist is. We think that the books tell us this, but, it is yet another thing that we interpret about literature. While the boys in *The Coral Island* may have been written as the protagonists, to many, myself included, they are the antagonists of the story.

Literature is not a science, like some would have you believe. It is an art form, and it is all about interpretation. When I started this essay, I talked about morally wrong books and morally right books, but I'm not sure if I believe in them anymore. Books do not have a clear message that everyone agrees upon. That is why we talk and debate about literature, why stories written hundreds of years ago are still relevant to us. We use literature as a way of simulating situations for us to base our own morals off.

Any book can be interpreted in any way. It simply depends on the reader, and whether they read the books with kindness or with fear. As long as kindness exists within humanity, every book teaches a good story. *Coral Island* is a story about the evils of colonialism and the arrogance of privileged people. *Lolita* is a story about the dangers of predatory men who are considered trusted members of the family. Stories cannot be good or evil, they can only be read in good or evil ways. That is why I believe that literature will always be a force for good, because there is a positive and kind interpretation to every story. We need these interpretations to form our own morals, and to be able to be kind and just in the real world, when we are faced with decisions we must make, based on the real-life stories we hear. Having sympathy for fictional characters is what teaches us to have sympathy for people in the real world. We read children stories so that they know how to love and care for other people. It allows us to relate to others on a level that we wouldn't be able to otherwise.

When you finish reading a book, you feel as if you have got into the head of another character, as if you have experienced what they have experienced. No matter how many accounts of situations my friends and family tell me, I will never relate to and understand those stories the way I do to the fictional ones I've read. This doesn't mean that I cannot sympathise and care for real people, however. In fact, it is quite the opposite. From reading books my entire life, from filling my head with the lives of these fictional characters, I have gained the understanding that there are a million stories happening around me every day, to every person. Everyone is the main character of their own book, and by getting to read these books, even if they are fictional characters, I have learnt to sympathise with the stories of those around me, even if I haven't read them.

It is commonly believed that humans are naturally sympathetic, that we are born with it like we are born with lungs and a heart. However, in reality, we are taught it through stories.

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When you exist within someone else's life for a while, in the form of reading, you are able to sympathise with their experiences. As you do this over and over again, with many books and stories, you begin to sympathise and care about people regardless of if we have read their stories or not.

These are the two reasons why I believe that literature will always be a force for good. When we read, we get inside a story and think deeply about the right and wrong parts of the story, which helps us to develop our own morals. Being so deeply involved in a story also allows us to relate to people personally, and to gain sympathy for everyone that we meet.

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