

'Is Literature Always a Force for Good?'

A crucial role in the development of humanity is literature, for better or for worse. The power that literature has over us is near impossible to comprehend. As claimed by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn 'Literature becomes the living memory of a nation'.ⁱ It can provoke mass destruction yet simultaneously it has the potential to bring light into a world of darkness. Although literature has brought humanity joy and pleasure, there are some pieces that have inspired the greatest evils in history. The question at the root of these horrific ideals: is it the fault of the novelist themselves or the reader and their interpretation of the writing that inspires people to commit some of the worst atrocities known to humanity? However, these horrific acts also lead to some of the greatest works in literature; as argued by Alexander Dumas: 'Misfortune is needed to bring to light the treasures of human intellect'ⁱⁱ. For this reason, the focus, here, will be on literature in relation to the immoral acts of Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler in the 20th century in their respective totalitarian states.

The 'Man of Steel' himself expressed an appreciation for literature and was rumoured to have read around 500 pages dailyⁱⁱⁱ. He was fascinated by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, especially by 'The Brothers Karamazov'. From his rereading of the novel and annotations in the 1930s, it is evident that it inspired some of his ideas. Historians suggest that he only reread parts of the novel, mainly featuring the Elder Zossima. Stalin noted the words 'punishment and disbelief' in response to Zossima's theory that Hell is 'the sufferings of a being no longer able to love'. Stalin's definition of Hell links to his punishment theories in his Gulags. His aim was for prisoners to have crushed spirits and no sense of hope through the use of a variety of torture methods. Removing an enemy's potential to love anything except Stalin's ideals exemplifies how Stalin has manipulated Dostoyevsky's words to fit his beliefs. Dostoyevsky's intention was to reflect on the complexities of human psychology; Stalin uses this idea to exploit those he perceives as enemies. He has twisted these words to justify himself, which encourages him to believe that he has the approval of a writer who has the love of Russian people. Dostoyevsky's words, however, are not the only one's manipulated by Stalin. During the Great Patriotic War, Stalin ordered the distribution of passages from Tolstoy's 'War and Peace', attempting to boost morale. Although this may appear as noble, the depth and complexity in Tolstoy's arguments have been undermined in order for Stalin to win the war. Perhaps it is the writer's fault that someone could take dark messages from their works and use their words to justify immoral acts, however, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy didn't intend for their novels to be perceived in that way, therefore it is fairer to claim that Stalin is to blame, as he interpreted their writings in a way that they clearly did not intend for people to do. This overall shows that literature is clearly not always a force for good- even if it is created with good intentions, misinterpretations can inspire terrible things.

Although some literature had inspired Stalin, the atrocities he committed within the Soviet Union led to a light in literature in response to the Red Tsar's rule. Notably, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's 'A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich' exposes the truth on life in the gulags, introducing a story of hope where there was none. This sense of hope does not stem from a desire to overthrow the government but instead from a belief that the system will destroy itself from within. This is evident in his presentation of the character Alyoshka The Baptist, who does not appear often but his presence leaves a mark. He expresses a different attitude towards life in the gulag, viewing it as an opportunity for spiritual cleansing. He asks Ivan 'what good is freedom to' him and argues that if Ivan is free, his 'faith will soon be choked by thorns'; concluding that imprisonment is a good chance to focus on faith. His belief keeps him content and yet he still has a deep understanding of the reality that he is living. His arguments echo Dostoyevsky's Alyosha in 'The Brothers Karamazov' who also has an unwavering sense of faith, therefore suffering less than those around him. In relation to the feelings of the people in the Soviet Union, Alyoshka's character highlights that having faith and hope

reduces suffering, even in the vilest of places. His connections to Dostoyevsky's Alyosha introduce a heroism that Russian people were already familiar with. Furthermore, Solzhenitsyn also wrote 'The Gulag Archipelago', focusing on experiences in the gulags, including his own. Solzhenitsyn clarifies that his work is not an exposé but instead a piece that questions the root of evil. He argues that in order 'to do evil [,] a human being must first of all believe that what he is doing is good' displaying how he wants his readers to understand that there are evils in the world but they are not as simple as first perceived. His message seems to echo the concept in 'A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich' that the best solution is to wait until the State destroys itself. This message is crucial for Soviet people as it introduces hope yet warns them not to outwardly act on it as that can only end in their demise, thus proving that literature is a force for good.

The twisting of past writing to justify terrible idealism was also done by the Nazis. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's writings were twisted by his sister, Elizabeth, who struggled to understand his ideas and was influenced by her antisemitic husband. Nietzsche claimed that she lacked 'any sense for fine, and even for crude, logical distinctions; her thinking is void of even the least logical consistency; and she lacks any sense of objectivity'.^{iv} After he went mad, she took over his estate and selectively edited his book 'A Will to Power'. Elizabeth's changes fit with Nazi ideals and justified their beliefs to German people. Notably, they twisted Nietzsche's comments on the Jews. Nietzsche claimed that the Jews were powerful and had a nice culture, however, he did attack some of their ideas. His works were intentionally difficult to understand, implying that perhaps someone who has difficulty understanding complex concepts, such as Elizabeth, can perceive his work in a different way. Nietzsche's writings were respected amongst Germans therefore Hitler's links with him solidified his control. In this case, a simple misconception has provoked one of the most terrible wars and horrific events in human history. Perhaps, if Nietzsche made his opinions clearer, the world could be a different place. However, it was his sister who twisted his words and published them under his name. The fact that he aimed to express his philosophy showed that he had good intentions but failed to acknowledge the possibility that someone, like Elizabeth, could manipulate his words to fit horrible ideals, therefore, literature is not always a force for good.

In light of these unthinkable acts, literature helps people understand different perspectives during world-changing events. Remarque's novel 'All Quiet on the Western Front', changed perceptions towards Germany in the Great War and he wrote a similar novel 'A Time to Love and a Time to Die' in response to German suffering in World War II. It highlights an alternative view to the people who were bitter at the Germans; telling the story of Ernst Graeber, a soldier who has been granted leave from the Eastern Front. He returns to find his house bombed displaying how ordinary Germans were also suffering from war as well as from the lies and deceit of Hitler. Furthermore, Graeber throughout the novel questions why he is fighting for the Nazis as he knows that what they have done is immoral. Graeber poses this question to his teacher: 'How far shall I be an accomplice if I know not only that the war is lost but also that we have to lose it so that slavery, murder, concentration camps, S.S. and S.D., mass extermination and humanity shall cease-if I know that and in two weeks I have to go out and fight for it again?' And reveals that if he refuses to fight, he 'would be hanged or shot' and his parents and wife could be punished too. This perspective shows the reader that Germans were threatened if they didn't fight for the Nazi cause. Remarque despised the Nazis and fled when they came to power. His novels were also destroyed in the Nazi's book burning, therefore, it is clear that he had no sympathy for the Nazis and wasn't trying to justify their actions, instead focusing on German suffering, as he had previously done in response to the Great War. His work on understanding the humanity of others thus proves that literature is a force for good, introducing new perspectives that are fundamental to consider.

Although literature has brought good into the world, it has also led to unspeakable events. It would be fair to claim that works such as 'Mao's Little Red Book' and 'Mein Kampf' are written with the

intention to harm and therefore are destructive, however, some texts, such as Nietzsche's writings, 'The Brothers Karamazov' and 'War and Peace', have all been manipulated by dictators who use the writers' names to justify their actions and remove the original meaning of the works. In response to these events, however, new writings have shed light to crucial issues that the world needs to address yet overall, it is clear that literature is not always a force for good as words can always be twisted to justify even the most immoral acts.

ⁱ Solzhenitsyn's essay 'The One Great Heart'

ⁱⁱ 'The Count of Monte Cristo' said by Abbe Faria

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/joseph-stalin-bloody-tyrant-and-bookworm-1.2798051>

^{iv} <https://bigthink.com/scotty-hendricks/how-the-nazis-hijacked-nietzsche-and-how-it-can-happen-to-anybody>