

How literature challenges the foundation of our beliefs

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Have you ever wanted to bring attention to a problem that needed to be addressed yet was being ignored by the masses? How does one go about doing so? Many protests or go to the government with their issues, but what about writing? Many times, throughout history writers have used literature to express their opinions on issues that affect society or to bring up controversial topics to light that society often tends to brush under the rug, such as the conditions of lower class citizens. It gives them an opportunity to touch these subjects without boundaries. Literature probes the mind and challenges people to look at life beyond their comfortability, such as our religion. If the opportunity presents itself, an individual will often turn a blind eye to those struggling if they are in a better position, despite their morals. During the peak of communism, many took the route of to challenge the religious morals of the public.

Russian writers Fyodor Dostoyveski and Leo Tolstoy lived in a dissimilar time than what modern day individuals have come to know. Majority of their lifespan was during the peak of Communism. Communism was developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848. Based on their published collaboration, " the Communist Manifesto," communism is the economic and social system where all property and resources are owned by not individual citizens but society as a whole, " common ownership." Religion was considered " the opiate of the masses," according to the founder of the Soviet state, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, or Lenin. Although religious literature became illegal either after or near the end of the two author's lives, it is interesting how they declared such religious values through their stories.

Fyodor Dostoyevski (1821-1881), was known for being a great Russian novelist, with his ability to describe the lives of the “ common people” he wrote many novels using his “ examination of the human soul through the technique of the psychological realism.” In *The Heavenly Christmas*, Dostoyevski provided various examples of how society chooses to ignore the poor. For example, as the unfortunate little boy walked the streets, it is noted that a policeman walked by him and turned away so that he did not have to face the little boy. Another example, when the little boy creeps into a store the women shout at him but one slips him some money and sends him on his way. In both examples, these people could have done more to help but because they were in their own comfort it seemed to be a burden to go out of their way and acknowledge someone in need. The young boy ends up freezing to death but awakes to his afterlife in Heaven surrounded by angels and a Christmas tree. The story ends with Dostoyevski pointing out that though it is not a true he cannot help but to imagine a similar event took place at some point.

Count Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) an author whose fascination of human behavior stimulated the psychological examination of human behavior in their work. During the 1880's he was said to have reinvented himself and thus his writing, now leading “ examinations against a rigid moral code that demanded love of others, adherence to the truth, and rejection of any type of violence, exploitation, or materialism.” These of which can be seen in his piece, *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* Tolstoy emphasizes the effect of not being content with one's possessions, treating neighbors poorly, and

becoming greedy. Pahom, the main character in the who came across fortune, dies in his efforts to obtain more land than he really needs.

So why write such contradicting material including religious values if it risks persecution? What point were Dostoyveski and Tolstoy trying to get across in their stories? In my honest opinion I believe their stories were to be used as both self-reflecting material and a challenge. A challenge to reach out and help someone in need despite what we are going through ourselves and despite the fun we may be having in our homes. It seems to be a challenge to leave our warm comfortability and selfishness and think about someone else for a change and go into the unknown, into their cold world and be a blessing. In the very ending of The Heavenly Christmas Tree, Dostoyveski questions the reader as to why he has made up such an imaginary story, he goes on to say he promised two stories with real events and that he can't help but to believe that a situation like this has occurred in life, making it real. He knew that some readers would be unable to imagine such a struggle as the one the little boy faced, so he assisted with a story but accentuated the fact that although this is just fiction to some, this is reality for many others that they wake up and face daily.

Tolstoy addresses things from a slightly different point of view. In the story How Much Land Does a Man Need? Pahom easily forgot his beginnings. He went from only needing enough to get by to wanting more than he could handle. Pahom also forgot about those who were with him when he was poor and soon began to step on many of his neighbor's toes on his way up, even having to move because of the animosity he had created amongst them. I

believe Tolstoy wanted this point of view to be seen to warn the people in society who had escaped poverty to never forget their humble beginnings. There is a numerous amount of people who come into good fortune but do not go back and help those who were with them during hard times. To think of how much change could be made if we only we gave back to our own communities.

Dostoyevski's willingness to write such novels says a lot about his character. I wonder if he had a turning point at which he chose to take no more and devote to writing about the flaws of society. He stands out among other authors because of his boldness and courage in a time where the government is prosecuting people for their religious literature. It is one thing to stand up for a situation that impacts you, but he stood up for a cause that was not his own. In 1848 he was arrested for criticizing the government in a group and escaped death, as he was about to be shot his sentence was changed to do time in Siberia.

As for Tolstoy he exhibits the same character of being bold and courageous to write in such times. Around the early 1880s Tolstoy was said to have reinvented himself with different religious views on life that in turn impacted his writing. He began to live the life of a simple peasant, leaving the life as he knew it, without notice. When he was found he was near death and it said that some of his last words were, " The serfs—How do serfs die?" To say that he devoted much of his life to putting himself in another's shoes would be an understatement. Tolstoy was passionate about his writing and the people he wrote about, his stories from this time in his life was inspired by Russian

medieval legends. In addition to the statements previously made about the two authors we can infer that literature can have the ability to alter one's life and beliefs immensely. Not just the reader but the writer as well. I realize that throughout history many have fought about the injustices within our society and one can only guess how many they have helped to make a change. The religious values challenged in these stories are to help improve our humanity and make us not just hearers of the words we read but doers. The Heavenly Christmas Tree teaches us not to turn a blind eye to those in need because you never know the battles that they are facing. One person going out of their way to help could have prolonged the little boy's life if but only for a day. How Much Land Does a Man Need? shows the evils of being too greedy, forgetting small beginnings and the fact that there is such a thing as "too much of a good thing."

In conclusion I want to emphasize the importance of literature as well as the importance of challenging our beliefs. The religious values that we claim to possess should be seen in the works that we do for others. Both Tolstoy and Dostoyevski display what it is like to put their words into actions as they represent the religious values that they write about by writing in the very environment against religious literature. They showed both courage and boldness in their attempts to make society aware of the inequalities in the government.