

# THE LITERATURE AS TREATY OF HISTORY?

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## THE LITERATURE AS TREATY OF HISTORY?

- History is the source of inspiration for literary works;
- We can say that there is no event of the history that does not find its reflection in a literary page
- Literature offers a more nuanced, complex, and often more persistent perspective on historical events.

## THE LITERATURE AS TREATY OF HISTORY?

- There are situations in which history appeals to literary works to argue its conclusions. Ex:
- Homer's Iliad contributed to the discovery of Troy, the capital of Priam
- The Bible - which contains the first great lyrical poems in human history, provided important data on an entire millennium of Middle Eastern history

LITERATURE GIVES US THE CHANCE TO  
KNOW AND FEEL HISTORY, THROUGH ITS  
EVENTS AND HEROES

- Spartacus - Raffaello Giovagnoli.
- Quo Vadis – Henryk Sienkiewicz
- The Accursed Kings, the serie of six volumes of Maurice Drouon
- Ninety – Three - Victor Hugo and Les Chouans - Honoré de Balzac
- Peace and War - Lev Tolstoy

## LITERATURE IMAGINES HISTORY

- Even when the characters are completely imaginary, the image offered by the literature is deep and persistent
- Ex. Boleslav Prus – The Pharaon (Ramses al XIII-lea)

## LITERATURE HELPS US TO HAVE A GOOD UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY

- Even using imaginary characters and events, literature helps us to have a good understanding of history. We can understand the bureaucratic absurdity and, consequently, the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire by reading:
  - Franz Kafka – The Process and The Castle
  - Jaroslav Hasek – The Good Soldier Svejk
  - Robert Musil – The Man without Qualities

## LITERATURE HELPS US TO HAVE A GOOD UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY (II)

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- We can understand the tragedy of the Stalinist dictatorship, the concentration camps and the deportations, by:
- Boris Pasternak – Doctor Jivago
- Alexandr Solzhenitsyn – The Gulag Archipelago
- Guzel Jahina – Children on the Volga; Zuleiha opens her eyes
- Herta Muller (Oskar Pastior) – Atemstraukel

## LITERATURE HELPS TO HAVE A GOOD UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY (III)

- The image of slavery is associated with Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin
- Unfortunately, the tragedy of the slavery of the gypsies is a neglected theme in literature . The characters of this ethnic group are either heroines of romantic dramas (Carmen - Prosper Merimée, Zamfira the heroine of the poem The Gypsies - Alexander Pushkin or Esmeralda from The Hunchback of Notre Dame by Victor Hugo), or eccentric characters (Melchiade the wizard from One Hundred Years of Solitude - Gabriel



LITERATURE HELPS US TO REFRESH  
MEMORIES OF SOME HISTORICAL EVENTS.

- Here are two examples from the Mario Vargas Llosa's novels:
- The War of the End of the World (the revolt of a millenarian sect in nineteenth-century Brazil)
- The Dream of the Celt (The crimes of the colonialism in Belgian Congo)

## LITERATURE AS ALTERNATIVE TO THE HISTORY

- Literature does not only evoke historical events. It refers not only to "how it was" but also to "what if ..."
- Philip Roth - Conspiracy Against America
- Dino Buzzati - The Desert of the Tartars

## LITERATURE ADDS WHAT HISTORY LACKS: THE UTOPIAN VISION

- The literature evokes not only the facts that happened, but also those that may or may not have happened yet.
- In the Middle Ages and in modern times, the vision of the future of mankind was rather bright.
- Thomas Morus - Utopia
- Thomaso Campanella - The City of the Sun.
- Francis Bacon - New Atlantis
- Jonathan Swift - Gulliver's Travels (Brobdignag Kingdom)

## LITERATURE ADDS WHAT HISTORY LACKS: THE UTOPIAN VISION (II)

- The 19th century offers a transitional travel into a land that combines utopia with dystopia:
- Samuel Butler – Erewhon
- W.H. Hudson – A Crystal Age

## LITERATURE ADDS WHAT HISTORY LACKS: THE UTOPIAN VISION (III)

In the twentieth century dystopia triumphed in literature:

- Aldoux Huxley - The New Brave World
- George Orwell - 1984 and Animal Farm
- Karel Capek - Salamander War
- Roy Bradbury - Farenheit 451
- William Gibson - The Neuromancer
- Ken Kesey – One Flow over the Cuckoo's Nest
- Albert Camus – The Plague
- Upton Sinclair - The Millennium, A Commedy of the Year 2000, a 20th Century Version for Boccaccio's Decameron
- Anthony Burgess – A Clockwork Orange
- Exception - H.G. Welles - New Utopia

## LITERATURE AND HISTORY OFFER DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ABOUT PEOPLE AND FACTS

- History speaks about the facts behind the people, literature speaks about the people behind the facts. For literature, large-scale events such as wars are just a background.
- Lev Tolstoy - War and Peace
- Eric Maria Remarque - Nothing new on the West
- Ernest Hemingway – A Farewell to Arms
- Liviu Rebreanu - The Forest of the Hanged
- Andre Malraux – Man's Hope
- Gunter Grass - Blechtrommel

HISTORY EVOKES GREAT HISTORY,  
LITERATURE EVOKES LITTLE  
HISTORY

- Gavroche – Victor Hugo – *les Miserables*
- The Convicted in The Wall - Jean-Paul Sartre
- Atticus Finch from Lee Harper – *To kill a Mockingbird*

## CONSEQUENTLY, THE CHARACTERS OF HISTORY AND LITERATURE DIFFER

- History speaks, most often, about rulers, kings, kings, army commanders, while literature speaks about ordinary people who have only their own destiny and sometimes not even that much.
- History speaks about Napoleon, literature about the reckless Fabrizio del Dongo, the hero of the Stendhal Parma Monastery,
- History speaks about Joseph Stalin, literature about Ivan Denisovich in the story of Alexander Solzhenitsyn.
- General Lee belongs to history, Scarlet O'Hara belongs to literature.



## HISTORY MOST OFTEN TALKS ABOUT WINNERS, LITERATURE ABOUT LOSERS

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- Commander Belizarie is a hero of history, Belizarie begging, is a character of art.
- Literature talks about those who have suffered history, instead of living it. Albert Camus says it in his speech after the Nobel Prize: "The writer, by definition, cannot put himself at the service of those who make history today; he serves those who endure the consequences." It is not the weapons of tyranny, adds Camus, but the silence of an unknown prisoner that brings the writer out of his loneliness.

WHEN LEADERS ARE CHARACTERS,  
LITERATURE SPEAKS NOT ABOUT THEIR  
GLORY, BUT ABOUT THEIR WEAKNESSES.

- Robert Graves, - I, Claudius
- Marguerite Yourcenar – The Memoirs of Hadrian
- Mario Vargas Llosa - The Feast of the Goat which evokes the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo.
- To be evoqued the series of historical dramas of William Shakespeare, from Anthony and Cleopatra to Richard III.

## IN HISTORY AND LITERATURE THE PERSPECTIVE ON DEATH AND SUFFERING DIFFERS

- In history, suffering is a detail that is often necessary. And death is statistic, a figure followed by many zeros.
- In literature, suffering gets its name and death has no zeros

## GREAT TRAGEDIES HAVE NO MOTHER TONGUE.

- The Holocaust had 6,000,000 victims and the genocide against Armenians 1,500,000. Figures followed by many zeros.
- If, however, you go to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial, there is a room where a voice pronounces the names of the killed children. Just hearing their names, one by one, you feel penetrated by the true horror of what happened. In literature, death, like suffering, claims its own identity.
- In history, common graves are found everywhere. In literature, even at the edge of common graves, every dead person has the right to a cross on which his name is written.

## HISTORY OFFERS EXPLANATIONS, LITERATURE CREATES EMOTIONS (I)

- The understanding of the gravity and scale of the Holocaust is a cultural phenomenon, not, first of all, a political or legal one.
- Art has done even more than the UN General Assembly Resolution that incriminates the crime of genocide (Rafael Lemkin). The role of art, through cinematography and literature) was huge. Here are some cinematographic examples: -
  - Holocaust Series, directed by Marvin Chomsky
  - Schindler's list, directed by Stephen Spielberg
  - Pianist, directed by Roman Polansk

## HISTORY OFFERS EXPLANATIONS, LITERATURE CREATES EMOTIONS (II)

- The list of literary works dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust is impressive:
- Primo Levi - *Is this a Man?*
- Imre Kertesz - *Kadis for my Son,*
- Norman Manea - *The Return of the Hooligan*
- Marcus Husak - *The Book Thief,*
- Elie Wiesel – *The Night,*
- Heather Morris - *Auschwitz Tattooist,*
- Simon Wiesenthal - *Sunflower* etc.
- Similarly, we can say that Franz Werfel's novel, *Forty Days of Musa Dagh,* facilitated the knowledge of the genocide against Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

## UNLIKE HISTORY, LITERATURE HAS THE ADVANTAGE OF IRONIC VISION

- Irony can be used to reflect historical events, even when they are particularly tragic. For example:
- Dresden's rough bombing in Kurt Vonegut - Slaughterhouse 5
- World War II murders in Jonahthan Safran Foer - It's all enlightenment

## HISTORY CONCLUDES, LITERATURE DOES NOT DRAW CONCLUSIONS

- Moreover, the conclusions kill the literature.
- A literature that draws conclusions does not need readers. The author pleads as witness, the reader judges.
- Literature is not a field of definitive things, it is interpretable
- Literature does not propose codes, including moral codes, it is not an apology for good and an ostracization of evil.
- Literature has not only white or black flaps, it has nuances and glissando, the tones are divided into an infinite number of intervals.
- Literature is like a not well-tempered instrument



## HISTORY CONCLUDES, LITERATURE DOES NOT DRAW CONCLUSIONS (II)

- In literature there is no a clear line drawn between good and evil
- Are Macbeth or Othello positive or negative characters?
- Do Ana Karennina, Emma Bovary or Terese Desqueyrous, the character of Francois Mauriac, arouse compassion or indignation?
- Does Meursault, the character of Camus in The Stranger, deserve to be sentenced to death?

## LITERATURE IS NOT POLITICALLY CORRECT (I)

- There may be a history "purified" of errors. Napoleon, as the hero of France, ignoring the massacre in Cairo. J. F. Kennedy, as a great president, ignoring his role in starting the Vietnam War.
- In literature, the only "error" is the lack of aesthetic value.
- Literary characters are not infallible and the happy ending is an exception

## LITERATURE IS NOT POLITICALLY CORRECT (II)

- Just make a brief list of banned books over time:
- - Giovanni Boccaccio – Decameron
- Geoffrey Chaucer – Canterbury Tales
- Harriet Beecher Stowe – Uncle's Tom Cabin
- Charles Baudelaire – Les Fleurs du Mal
- Mark Twain – Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
- James Joyce – Ulysses
- George Orwell – 1984 and The Animal Farm

## LITERATURE IS NOT POLITICALLY CORRECT (III)

- D. H. Lawrence – Lady Chatterley's Lover
- Boris Pasternak – Doctor Jivago
- Henry Miller – Tropic of Cancer
- Alexandr Solzhenitsyn – Gulag Archipelago
- Harper Lee – To kill a Mockbird
- William Golding – Lord of the Flies
- Roy Bradbury – Fahrenheit 451
- John Steinbeck – The Grapes of Wrath

## LITERATURE IS NOT POLITICALLY CORRECT (IV)

- Index Librorum Prohibitorum, established in 1559, included writings by Erasmus, Spinoza, Hobbes, Pascal, Descartes, Kant, Voltaire, Diderot, Bergson, Simone de Beauvoir, etc. and so on. It was not canceled until 1966;
- Censorship or reinterpretation of books was not just the prerogative of absolutism, dictatorship, theocratic or theocratic attitudes. They are still taking place in states with a consolidated democracy;
- Although only the books were burned, truncated, banned, the authorities never won in front of them. Mankind has written more than it can forget.

IN HISTORY IT MATTERS WHAT THE  
CHARACTERS DO, NOT WHAT THEY WRITE,  
IN LITERATURE IT MATTERS ESPECIALLY  
WHAT THEY WRITE, NOT WHAT THEY DO

- In history the characters are important through their biographies, in literature the work matters, not the biography.
- Gabrielle D Annunzio
- Jean Paul Sartre
- Nikos Kazantzakis
- Drieu La Rochelle
- Louis Ferdinand Celine
- Martin Heidegger

WRITERS IN THE HISTORY ARE, WITH FEW  
EXCEPTIONS, AGAINST AUTOCRACY,  
DEFENDING HUMAN DIGNITY AND  
FREEDOM

- André Chenier  
Senghor
  - Mihail Lermontov  
Mandeltam
  - Ugo Foscolo  
Mann
  - George Gordon Byron
  - Adam Miickievicz
  - Alphonse de Lamartine  
Hugo
- Léopold Sédar  
- Osip  
. Thomas  
- Victor

WRITERS IN THE HISTORY ARE, WITH FEW  
EXCEPTIONS, AGAINST AUTOCRACY,  
DEFENDING HUMAN DIGNITY AND  
FREEDOM (II)

- Sándor Petőfi
  - Hristo Botev
  - Harriet Beecher Stowe
  - Feodor Dostoievski
  - André Malraux
  - Federico Garcia Lorca
  - Miguel de Unamuno
- Emile Zola
- Jorge Luis Borges



IN TREATISES, HISTORY IS WRITTEN ON THE  
THIRD PERSON, IN LITERATURE HISTORY IS  
OFTEN WRITTEN ON THE FIRST PERSON

- Writers' correspondence is useful for knowing not only the intimate space but also the historical context. Here are some examples:
  - Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve
  - Madame de Stael
  - George Sand and Alfred de Musset
  - Saul Bellow
  - F. Scot Fitzgerald
  - Anais Nin and Henry Miller
  - Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger

## IN TREATISES HISTORY IS WRITTEN IN THE THIRD PERSON, IN LITERATURE HISTORY IS OFTEN WRITTEN IN THE FIRST PERSON (II)

- Memoirs and Journals present the historical context from a personal, unique perspective. Examples:
- Benjamin Franklin – Autobiography
- Victor Hugo – Intellectual Autobiography
- Lev Tolstoi - Jurnal
- Winston Churchill – *My early Life*
- Virginia Woolf – Agendas
- Jeni Acterian - The diary of a hard-to-please Girl
- - Important were the diaries written during the communist period and published after that. Ex. Nicolae Steinhardt – *The Journal of Happiness*
- Particularly moving are the Diary of Anne Frank and that of Robert Scott

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# JOURNALISM IS A CONTRIBUTION THAT LITERATURE MAKES TO HISTORY

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- Two edifying examples:
- Vasily Grossman - The Hell of Treblinka
- Svetlana Aleksievich - War has no woman's face
  - - Zinc boys
  - - The Chernobyl disaster

THERE ARE BOOKS THAT BELONG TO  
HISTORY AND LITERATURE AT THE SAME  
TIME

Edward Gibbon – History of the Decline and Fall of  
the Roman Empire

Arthur Weigall – The Glory of Pharaohs

Theodor Mommsen - The History of Rome

Winston Churchill – The Second World War

# WE CAN TEACH HISTORY USING ONLY LITERATURE BOOKS

- Case study: History of political economy. : The rise and fall of the bourgeoisie
- The Rise of the Bourgeoisie – Honoré de Balzac - Human Comedy
- - Charles Dickens the Great Expectations,  
David Copperfield - William Thackeray - The Vanity Fair
- The decline of the aristocracy - Giuseppe Tommaseo di Lampedusa  
- Il Gattopardo - John Galsworthy - Forsyte Saga
- Class conflicts - Emile Zola - Germinal
- The Decline of the Bourgeoisie - Thomas Mann – Buddenbrooks -  
Roger Martin du Gard - Les Thibault

## HISTORY EVOKES THE PAST, LITERATURE EVOKES MEMORY

- History refers to past events, to chronology.
- Memory refers to the past not as it happened, but as we understand it today
- Memory does not belong to the past but to the present, it is the past from the perspective of today's Weltanschauung
- Although the facts of the past are the same, the memory of them may be different at different times, even for different people at the same time.

## LITERATURE IS AN ARK OF MEMORY

- Literature provides the key by which the past becomes memory. Here are some examples
  - - Elie Shafak – The Bastard of Istanbul
  - - Antonio Lobo Antunes – Until Stones become lighter than Water
  - - Ernesto Sabato – Heroes and Tombs. Sabato says: "The present generates the past"

IF TIME WERE A BEING, HISTORY WOULD DEAL WITH  
ITS BODY, AND LITERATURE WITH ITS SOUL

History speaks about constraints, borders,  
conflicts. Literature transcends all frontier.

Empires collapsed, armies disintegrated, cities  
collapsed. Books, from the tablets of Nineveh,  
the Egyptian papyri, the scrolls of the Dead Sea,  
the incunabula of the Middle Ages, the books of  
Gutenberg, and even today's e-books remains  
with us

Literature is a history of states of consciousness.



