Can fiction generate social change?

Man might be one of the most successful animals on Earth, and yet he is also the most miserable. You would expect man to fight back when injustice, poverty and misery plague society. But most of the time he chooses to do nothing. Can fiction inspire man and help to bring about social change?

Few would argue that George Orwell’s 1984 has not had a lasting impact on people’s perceptions. He rightly predicted that Big Brother would be watching us. Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist is equally noteworthy. It succeeded in making the Victorian public more aware of the deplorable conditions of poor children. And Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mocking Bird helped to change people’s attitude towards racial prejudice. Other books of fiction have similarly had an impact on our views.

However, change in perception is not the same as social change. If there has ever been any social change created by fiction books, it has only been fleeting. Hence, nowadays we still have our personal data intercepted by the state. Black people are still unfairly targeted by the police. And Oliver Twist did not help to save poor children. Fiction can therefore hardly be a generator of social change. But before we write off fiction completely, it might be crucial to look back into history.

Alexander the Great, the first to conquer the known ancient world, was inspired by the spectacular and invincible hero Achilles, in Homer’s Iliad. Alexander always looked for opportunities to emulate Achilles in everything he did. As a result, his successful campaign helped to spread Greek language and ideas and set the stage for social change.

In recent times, no man has arguably had a greater impact on society than Karl Marx. Even Marx had a hero: Prometheus, the Titan god in Greek mythology. Prometheus stole fire from the gods to give to mankind and later had to endure the most excruciating suffering. Marx saw Prometheus as the embodiment of humanism. Even while Marx lived as a poor refugee in London, Prometheus made sure that he would still persevere in his philosophical ambitions to help workers.

It is true that fiction did not directly generate social change in these cases. But it helped to inspire. Two elements stand out in relation to Achilles and Prometheus: unrelenting heroism and tragedy. These are the essential ingredients that can invoke intense passion in any human being and push one beyond his limits. But equally important, there must exist in the individual a will to change or improve society. An alliance between a strong-willed individual and a fictitious hero is a power to be reckoned with.

Optimism is not fashionable these days. In times of hardship like this, humanity is in dire need of a hero. But while the spectre of apathy inevitably looms over the majority, we have to hope that somewhere in the world, a fictitious hero has finally sparked a burning fire in someone’s heart and that the alliance is ready to rise to the challenge.