



## Research Question

Is immoral fiction truly dangerous? What are the effects of immoral fiction, and should librarians censor materials to protect their patrons?

## Background

This study examines historic and modern theories of the effects of immoral fiction, both from the 1830s and today, and offers a comparative analysis of two contested novels from these time periods, including *Eugene Aram* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton and *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell. Specifically, the reception and content of the novels were compared and analyzed. The study is intended to shed light on today's debates on the effects of immoral literature, and to demonstrate how theories have changed or remained the same since the 1830s.

“Even the criminal is not all evil; the angel within us is not easily expelled . . . And leaves us sometimes in amaze and marvel at the good that lingers round the heart even of the hardest offender.” – Bulwer-Lytton



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## Fiction in the 1800s

In 1800s England, the question of the effects of immoral fiction was defined by the following:

- **The Newgate Novels:** Novels with sympathetic main characters based off of real criminals from the Newgate Calendar; typically targeted towards working class readers.
- **Distanced Reading:** The higher class's response to the above. Encouraged detached or unsympathetic readings of a text.

## Summaries of the Novels

*Eugene Aram:*

Published in 1832. Details the love interest and trial of Eugene Aram, a kindly scholar who was found **guilty of committing murder**. Based on the **real** Eugene Aram, who was executed for murder in 1759 and was featured in the Newgate Calendar.

*The Kindly Ones:*

Published in 2006. Follows the fictitious memoirs of Max Aue, an **unrepentant, former Nazi officer** during World War II. Contains **well-researched** and graphic descriptions of war and genocide, in addition to explicit sexual content.

## Reception

*Eugene Aram:*

- **Wildly popular** upon publication
- Made an **immoral character** too sympathetic
- Went **against the conventions** of literature
- Meant to invoke **cognitive dissonance** in readers

*The Kindly Ones:*

- Won **two French literary awards**; however, unsuccessful in the U.S.
- **Unrelatable, unrepentant main character**
- **Doesn't fit into conventions** of Holocaust literature
- **Aesthetics of Excess**

## Content Analysis

Themes

- Nothing is fully good nor wholly evil
- Disillusionment
- Cognitive dissonance
- Victims of circumstance
- “I am just like you!” (Littell 24)

Structure:

- Historical fiction
- Unconventional protagonists
- Meant to encourage cognitive dissonance in readers

## Fiction Today

Just as in the 1800s, scholars are still debating about the possible effects of fiction on readers. Some of the more prominent theories include:

- **Moral Disengagement Theory:** The audience pardons immoral behaviors so that they may continue to like a character.
- **Social Comparison Theory:** The audience compares themselves to similar others in a text (with a decided favoring for morally ambiguous characters).
- **Affective Disposition Theory:** Audiences want to see liked characters succeed and disliked characters fail.

“I would never get anywhere by sticking with classic fictional recreation . . . The only option was to put myself in the perpetrators' shoes.”  
-Littell



[http://img.lemde.fr/2016/05/14/0/0/3543/2656/534/0/60/0/ea12923\\_4886-hvpkgn.jpg](http://img.lemde.fr/2016/05/14/0/0/3543/2656/534/0/60/0/ea12923_4886-hvpkgn.jpg)

## Discussion: Implications for Librarianship

Libraries today address intellectual freedom in a number of ways. Some of the key theories include:

- **Marketplace of ideas:** The most truthful materials will be more popular than non truthful or immoral materials.
- **Democracy:** Freedom of speech supports democracy.
- **Individual utility/autonomy:** Freedom of speech empowers individuals and encourages critical thinking.
- **Paternalism/censorship:** Encourages censorship of materials that do not enlighten or are positively correlated with mischievous acts.

Fiction is known to be an important method of exploring and extending our worldviews. Librarians considering censorship need to ask themselves: Is the material truly dangerous, or perhaps just a challenge to current ideologies?