

Title: Directions to Utopia: How What Is to Be Done? Was to Be Read

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Abstract:

In his 1863 novel *What Is to Be Done?* Nikolai Chernyshevsky develops an impressively multitudinous typology of readers with whom his narrator converses directly. While some are berated and others praised, all require instruction on how to read the text correctly.

Understanding this self-interpreting structure and the kind of reading it encourages in the context of Chernyshevsky's own theory of realist aesthetics, *What Is to Be Done?* offers an opportunity to test its success within its own explicitly laid out terms. Working through a range of contemporary responses to the novel, both from professional critics and casual readers, this paper will trace the ways that *What Is to Be Done?* did and did not perform its intended function. The Konstanz school theorists Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss' models for the aesthetics of reception are particularly well suited to the task of structuring a comparison between the way *What Is to Be Done?* asks to be read and contemporary readers' documented experiences of the novel. A study within this framework can grasp the social force of *What Is to Be Done?* as a complex articulation of rhetorical structure, reading practices, and social reality. Applying Iser and Jauss' theories to Chernyshevsky's novel and its reception can also offer a perspective on the functional operation of utopian fiction more broadly and how a work of literature might successfully realize the world it depicts.