

the desert of the tartars

the desert of the tartars is a renowned novel written by Dino Buzzati, first published in 1940. This literary masterpiece explores themes of existentialism, human waiting, and the passage of time through the story of a young officer stationed at a remote fortress awaiting a mysterious enemy known as the Tartars. The novel's chilling atmosphere and philosophical depth have made it a significant work in 20th-century Italian literature. In addition to its literary importance, *The Desert of the Tartars* has been adapted into film and theater, influencing various cultural domains. This article delves into the novel's plot, themes, author background, and its impact on literature and culture, providing a comprehensive understanding of this iconic work.

- Overview of The Desert of the Tartars
- Plot Summary and Setting
- Main Themes and Symbolism
- Dino Buzzati: The Author's Biography
- Cultural Impact and Adaptations
- Critical Reception and Legacy

Overview of The Desert of the Tartars

The Desert of the Tartars is a novel that combines elements of existential drama and allegory. Set in an isolated fortress on the edge of an unknown desert, the story captures the monotonous and suspenseful life of a young officer named Giovanni Drogo. The narrative focuses on his anticipation of a legendary enemy invasion that never quite materializes, leading to reflections on fate, duty, and the human condition. The novel's sparse but evocative prose creates a haunting atmosphere, emphasizing the psychological tension of waiting and uncertainty.

Historical Context

Written during the turbulent pre-World War II period, the novel reflects the anxieties and existential questions prevalent in early 20th-century Europe. The looming threat of war and the sense of impending doom permeate the story, mirroring the broader societal concerns of the time. Buzzati's background as a journalist and his interest in surreal and fantastical elements also

influenced the novel's unique style.

Literary Style

The narrative style of *The Desert of the Tartars* is characterized by its simplicity and precision. Buzzati employs a detached, almost clinical tone that enhances the story's themes of alienation and suspense. The novel's structure is deliberately slow-paced, mirroring the endless waiting experienced by the protagonist, which heightens the psychological impact on the reader.

Plot Summary and Setting

The novel's plot centers on Giovanni Drogo, a young and idealistic officer assigned to a remote and desolate fortress known as Bastiani. The fortress is situated at the edge of a vast desert, believed to be the frontier of an enemy territory inhabited by the Tartars, a mysterious and possibly imaginary threat. Drogo and his fellow soldiers spend years in anticipation of an attack that never arrives, living a life marked by boredom, hope, and disillusionment.

Key Plot Events

1. Giovanni Drogo's arrival at the fortress and initial enthusiasm for military life.
2. The gradual passage of time marked by uneventful days and the soldiers' growing impatience.
3. Drogo's internal struggle with his desire for glory and the reality of his monotonous existence.
4. The brief moment when a real battle seems imminent, raising hopes and fears.
5. The ultimate realization of the futility of waiting and Drogo's confrontation with mortality.

Setting Description

The fortress of Bastiani is portrayed as an isolated and foreboding location, surrounded by the "desert" that symbolizes emptiness and the unknown. This setting serves as a powerful metaphor for the human experience of waiting and

the existential void. The harsh, barren landscape reinforces the themes of desolation and entrapment that permeate the novel.

Main Themes and Symbolism

The Desert of the Tartars is rich with themes that explore the human psyche, the passage of time, and the elusive nature of meaning and purpose. The novel uses symbolism extensively to convey its existential messages.

The Theme of Waiting

Waiting is the central motif of the novel, representing the human tendency to anticipate significant events that may never occur. The soldiers' prolonged vigil at the fortress becomes a metaphor for life itself, marked by uncertainty and unfulfilled expectations. This theme resonates deeply with readers, reflecting universal experiences of hope and disappointment.

Existentialism and Fate

The novel delves into existential questions about destiny, choice, and the search for meaning. Giovanni Drogo's journey illustrates the tension between individual desires and the indifferent forces of fate. His inability to escape the confines of the fortress mirrors humanity's struggle to find purpose in an unpredictable world.

Symbolism of the Desert and the Tartars

The desert represents a vast, empty space symbolizing the unknown and the void. The Tartars, meanwhile, symbolize an ambiguous enemy or threat, which may be real or imagined. This dual symbolism highlights the novel's exploration of fear, anticipation, and the human tendency to create meaning through external threats.

List of Key Symbols

- **The Fortress:** Isolation and stagnation.
- **The Desert:** Emptiness and existential void.
- **The Tartars:** Unknown threats and human fears.
- **Time:** The relentless passage and wasted opportunities.
- **Military Duty:** Discipline versus personal desire.

Dino Buzzati: The Author's Biography

Dino Buzzati (1906–1972) was an Italian novelist, journalist, and painter, best known for his imaginative and symbolic storytelling. His works often blend realism with fantasy, exploring deep psychological and philosophical themes. Buzzati's career as a journalist at the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* influenced his precise and economical writing style.

Early Life and Education

Born in Belluno, Italy, Buzzati studied law before turning to literature and journalism. His early exposure to various artistic disciplines shaped his multifaceted approach to storytelling. Buzzati's interest in the surreal and the mysterious is evident throughout his literary output.

Major Works

Aside from *The Desert of the Tartars*, Buzzati wrote numerous short stories, novels, and plays. Notable works include *The Seven Messengers* and *Un amore*. His writing often examines human isolation, the bizarre, and the metaphysical.

Legacy

Dino Buzzati remains a significant figure in Italian literature, with his works continuing to be studied and celebrated for their philosophical depth and unique narrative voice. His influence extends beyond literature into theater, cinema, and art.

Cultural Impact and Adaptations

The Desert of the Tartars has left a lasting mark on culture, inspiring various adaptations and interpretations in different media. Its themes of waiting and existential dread resonate across generations and cultures.

Film Adaptation

In 1976, the novel was adapted into a film directed by Valerio Zurlini. The movie captures the novel's haunting atmosphere and philosophical depth, offering a visual and emotional representation of Buzzati's vision. The film has been praised for its cinematography and faithful adherence to the source material's tone.

Theatrical and Literary Influence

The novel's themes and style have influenced numerous playwrights and authors, particularly those interested in existential and absurdist literature. Its exploration of waiting and meaning has been compared to works by Kafka and Beckett, underscoring its cross-cultural relevance.

Impact on Popular Culture

The concept of "waiting for the enemy that never arrives" introduced in the novel has permeated various cultural discussions, symbolizing procrastination, fear of the unknown, and the human condition. It remains a point of reference in philosophical and literary discourse.

Critical Reception and Legacy

Since its publication, *The Desert of the Tartars* has received critical acclaim for its innovative narrative and profound themes. Critics have highlighted its ability to evoke a sense of existential dread and its exploration of time and fate.

Critical Analysis

Scholars often analyze the novel through the lenses of existentialism, modernism, and allegory. Its ambiguous ending and open-ended symbolism invite varied interpretations, contributing to its enduring academic interest.

Enduring Popularity

The novel continues to be a staple in literary studies and remains widely read in Italy and internationally. Its universal themes and compelling narrative ensure its place as a classic of modern literature.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'The Desert of the Tartars' about?

'The Desert of the Tartars' is a novel by Dino Buzzati that tells the story of a young officer stationed at a remote fortress, waiting for an enemy invasion that may never come. It explores themes of existential waiting, isolation, and the search for meaning.

Who is the author of 'The Desert of the Tartars'?

The author of 'The Desert of the Tartars' is the Italian writer Dino Buzzati.

When was 'The Desert of the Tartars' first published?

'The Desert of the Tartars' was first published in 1940.

What are the main themes of 'The Desert of the Tartars'?

The main themes include existentialism, the absurdity of waiting, isolation, the passage of time, and the human desire for purpose and recognition.

Has 'The Desert of the Tartars' been adapted into a film?

Yes, 'The Desert of the Tartars' was adapted into a film in 1976, directed by Valerio Zurlini, starring Jacques Perrin.

Why is 'The Desert of the Tartars' considered a classic?

It is considered a classic for its profound exploration of existential themes, its haunting atmosphere, and its influence on modern literature, capturing the human condition's uncertainty and anticipation.

What is the significance of the fortress in 'The Desert of the Tartars'?

The fortress symbolizes isolation, stagnation, and the anticipation of an event that defines the protagonist's existence, representing the broader human experience of waiting for meaning or purpose.

How does 'The Desert of the Tartars' reflect existentialist philosophy?

The novel reflects existentialist philosophy through its focus on waiting, the absurdity of life, the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent world, and the protagonist's confrontation with his own existence and fate.

Additional Resources

1. *The Tartar Steppe* by Dino Buzzati

This novel is a haunting exploration of waiting and existential dread, centered on a young soldier assigned to a remote fort near a vast desert-like steppe. The story delves into themes of isolation, hope, and the passage of time as the protagonist anticipates an elusive enemy invasion. Buzzati's lyrical prose paints a vivid picture of the desolate landscape and the psychological impact on those stationed there.

2. *Desert of the Tartars: A Novel* by Dino Buzzati

Often considered the English translation of "The Tartar Steppe," this book captures the same profound narrative of a soldier's life on the frontier of an arid and barren desert. The novel examines human endurance against monotony and the yearning for meaning within a seemingly endless wait. Its allegorical depth has made it a classic in 20th-century literature.

3. *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee

This novel explores the tension between civilization and the perceived barbarism of desert-dwelling tribes. Set in a remote frontier town, the story follows a magistrate confronting moral dilemmas amid imperial paranoia and colonial oppression. Coetzee's narrative reflects on power, fear, and the human cost of conflict in harsh desert landscapes.

4. *The Sheltering Sky* by Paul Bowles

Set largely in the North African desert, this novel tells the story of an American couple whose journey into the Sahara leads to existential and cultural disorientation. Bowles explores themes of alienation, the unknown, and the fragility of human constructs when faced with the vast, indifferent desert. The book is both a travelogue and a psychological exploration.

5. *In the Desert* by John C. Van Dyke

This classic work provides vivid descriptions and reflections on the deserts of the American Southwest, capturing their stark beauty and harsh conditions. Van Dyke's essays and observations highlight the natural history and cultural significance of desert environments. The book offers insight into how deserts shape both landscape and human experience.

6. *Deserts* by Edward Abbey

A collection of essays focusing on the American deserts, Abbey celebrates the wild and untamed nature of these landscapes. His writing combines environmental advocacy with personal anecdotes, emphasizing the importance of preserving desert ecosystems. Abbey's passionate prose underscores the desert's unique allure and inherent challenges.

7. *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho

Although not directly about the Desert of the Tartars, this allegorical novel features a young shepherd's journey across the desert in search of a mystical treasure. The desert serves as a metaphor for the trials and spiritual growth encountered on the path to self-discovery. Coelho's simple yet profound storytelling has captivated readers worldwide.

8. *Across the Sahara: Tracks, Trade, and Travel* by Eamonn Gearon

This nonfiction account chronicles the author's journey across the Sahara

Desert, providing insights into the geography, cultures, and history of the vast desert region. Gearon combines adventure narrative with scholarly research, illuminating the challenges and wonders of desert travel. The book enriches understanding of desert environments similar to the Tartar Steppe.

9. *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water—A History* by Norris Hundley Jr. Focusing on the arid regions of California, this book explores the complex history of water usage and management in desert-like environments. Hundley examines how societies adapt to scarcity and the political struggles surrounding water rights. Though geographically distinct, the themes resonate with the challenges faced in desert frontiers like the Tartars' domain.

[The Desert Of The Tartars](#)

The Desert Of The Tartars

Related Articles

- [the devil that danced on the water](#)
- [the big bad wolf series](#)
- [the best christmas songs ever](#)

[Back to Home](#)