

Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**DEVELOPING CHRISTIAN VALUES THROUGH THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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Prepared for the  
Faith and Learning Seminar

Held at  
Southern Asia Division of SDA  
Hosur, Tamil Nadu, India  
May 1990

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"True education does not ignore the value of scientific knowledge or literary requirements; but above information it values power, goodness; above intellectual requirements, character. The world does not so much need men of great intellect as of noble character. It needs men in whom ability is controlled by steadfast principles."  
(Education, p. 225)

Can Christian values be taught and developed through the teaching of Literature? If so, how can a teacher do this in the classroom? It has now become evident for most English teachers that teaching literature the way we always do--studying the genre, structure, language style, character sketch and themes, etc., is not satisfactory because the works are based on certain theories which conflict with the biblical worldview. As Christian teachers how do we approach the teaching of literature, as authors Gallagher and Lundin state, "How does literature look when seen through the eyes of faith by someone informed on the theoretical issues?"<sup>1</sup> Here the teacher has a double duty in interpreting literature. The secular themes on which the work stands as written by the author, which the teacher cannot ignore nor avoid discussion on, and at the same time interpreting the same work bringing in Christian values--the "message" of the work. For unless we understand the thought and value systems of our age and also the biblical revelation, we will be limited in our efforts in bringing an integration of Christian values into the subject matter.

W H Auden called the modern century 'an age of anxiety.' This is true, we live in an age of information explosion. Human horizons are expanding and modern science is becoming a religion. We see life moving towards materialism and there is a decrease in all aspects of spiritual and non-material life. Ellen White aptly predicted this in her own time when she wrote:

"Throughout the world all aspects of religion were losing their hold on mind and soul. Disgusted with fable and falsehood to drown thought, men turned to fidelity and materialism. Leaving eternity out of

reckoning they lived for the present, wealth power and ease and self-indulgence were thought of as the highest good, physical degeneracy, mental stupor and spiritual death characterized the age."<sup>2</sup>

If Adventist education is to fulfill its purpose and accomplish its objectives, its "educative process" must transmit the Adventist value system of education through the teacher to the student through the subject matter. For the purpose of education is not to make a scholar but a man.<sup>3</sup>

At this point it will be appropriate to define values. Values are estimates of worth or merit placed on various aspects of our experience. They are not things, but standards of conduct, beauty, efficiency or worth that we may try to live up to or maintain. (Fraenkal 1973) points out that values don't exist in and of themselves, but rather are reflected in value judgments and claims we make and gives an example. When we agree that certain ideas, individuals, objects, acts, policies or ways of behaving are good, right, ought to be supported, or should be carried out, our standards (or values) are revealed in the reasons we give for our claims. And there are many ways to impart values. These approaches range from the direct to the indirect.

How are values and religion linked? Our values form a central component of our religious faith. John Fowler (1987) has explained in length how this is so. According to the above definition of a value, we value when we ascribe worth or value to something. Fowler echoes this definition by explaining that the causes, concerns, and person which consciously have the most worth to us, draw our loyalty and commitment, and these clusters become basis for our faith. This means that to acquire a centre of values, and ultimately faith, we have repeatedly gone through the process of valuing: identifying, judging, prizing, and cherishing various aspects of experience.

Dr. Barry Hill in his paper, "Teaching Values in Adventist Education" states the various methods of imparting values such as: Identifying Values; Explaining Value Positions (such as why shouldn't we smoke); Using transmission, by helping

the students think and affirm to certain values; Clarifying Values, as points of reference to the values discussed; Analysing Values, decision making and problem solving--critical thinking; Value Dilemmas; Making Value Judgments; Acting out Values, student action; Combination of Methods.<sup>4</sup>

What is the relationship, if any, of religion to literature, especially modern literature? For the reader of contemporary literature is not like the reader of the established great literature of all times. For the whole of modern literature is mostly secular that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life.

The earliest forms of writings that come down to us from any language are almost invariably religious. The earliest Greek Dramas, for instance, are believed to have risen out of religious and religio-cultural activities. Later in the Middle Ages, we still see the dramas arise out of the celebrations of rituals of the church. And in the 17th and 18th centuries we still have Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress and Milton's Paradise Lost. Literature is a field in which the possibilities of integration are as numerous as they are obvious. The Bible itself is literature--the master piece of literature. The dominant genre of the Old Testament is the narrative, although, about one-third of the Old Testament is poetry. Other genres in the Bible include the parable, the letter, the chronicle, the sermon--all genres with their own set of literary characteristics.<sup>5</sup> The Bible also contains some of the oldest short stories.

We read literature because of a hunger for information, amusement, solace and an appetite for truth. To live as a man is to think, to think is to wonder, to wonder is to read, and men read to discover themselves and their world, to learn the meaning of their personal struggles in the universe. In literature man has learned to admire Homer's heroes and sympathize with Sophocles' slaughtered gaints, to laugh with Chaucer at human folly, to scorn evil with Milton, to sigh with Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, to jeer with fools with Pope, to reason passionately

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with Dr. Johnson, to idle profitably with Charles Lamb. Literature compels our response because it presents feelings, perceptions and understanding in language that is exceptionally powerful, vivid and clear. But much contemporary literature like much earlier literature does have a religious dimension, and it cannot be understood or perhaps even appreciated fully without serious attention to that religious dimension. Literature is seen to have an intellectual and moral and even religious content. The problem today is how to approach the question of literature and religion without doing violence to one or the other.

As Christians, we can begin by thinking about literature by accepting the fact that the world has beauty and an underlying order to which God has called us to respond. God is the author of all creation, and we are His creatures. And God has created our capacity for aesthetic enjoyment, He made the world and that delights and awes us, and He made us artistically creative. In this sense, then, all beauty and creativity is God's, to be enjoyed and dedicated to Him.<sup>6</sup> Thus, giving all power for man's creative ability, we would be violating the first commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3).

In my college literature classes I often ask my students to write an essay on the 'Relevance of Literature to Adventist Students,' and without an exception, all of them have positive "value-developing" views on the student of literature such as: Literature depicts man's past life and is a lesson for the modern man; it helps us to study and appreciate the Bible as literature and also develops an interest in reading the Bible; helps appreciate God's creation and its beauty; makes one realize that there is a divine and supernatural power behind the wonder of nature; helps us understand and appreciate other cultures and literature; gives harmless entertainment; and helps one to be a creative thinker. This helps me to get the students involved in bringing out the positive values from the subject matter.

The most vital factors in bringing values in the classroom are: 1. The aims and objectives of the subject, 2. The Methods of teaching Values, 3. The Teacher. We shall consider these three very briefly.

**Aims and Objectives:** what are the objectives of teaching a literature course?

1. To develop and refine student values.
2. To develop the students' sense of judgment and discrimination.
3. To develop an ability to apprehend the full potential of different kinds of texts.
4. To develop students' aesthetic sensibilities.
5. To develop the creative potential of students and appreciation of creativity in others.
6. To develop receptivity to others' views and experience. (Intention: openness to ideas/experience as recorded).
7. To develop in the students an ability to identify Christian values and also be able to identify values in contrast.
8. To develop in the students an ability to critique a work of art.

There are numerous ways and methods for teaching these values in the classroom.

I quote here some of the methods as stated in Dr. Hill's paper.

1. Select those texts which illustrate the value priorities of Adventists.
2. Build a classroom atmosphere which is warm and caring, and which conveys a distinct set of values by its appearance, display material, style of government, and organization.
3. Use all opportunities of interacting with students to illustrate values. your reaction to their responses is particularly important.
4. Think about creative ways to elicit values from texts.
5. Consciously think about your model as a teacher. Think about your use of language, and your influence as a speaker, writer, listener and reader. Be conscious of dress, ethical decisions, course organization, preparation of materials and professionalism.
6. Use an array of tactics directed exclusively; at teaching value. Some of these are illustrated below:
  - a. Constantly examine and identify the values expressed in the text.
  - b. Help students clarify the value positions.
  - c. Create opportunities for students to apply value to their own lives.

**The Christian Teacher:** To achieve integration of faith and learning demands a particular type of instructor who really becomes the catalyst in the learning process as well as the facilitator for activating a merger of faith. There can be no effective way to teach Christian values through the subject matter without Christian teachers with Christian worldview. Modeling is potentially the most powerful way to impart values. However, the process is subtle, and teachers need to be aware of both the

negative and positive effects of their model. Students take notice of expert teachers and those who are warm, caring, friendly, business-like, and enthusiastic. Good models create interest in subject matter, and they communicate that they can meet student needs. Students not only imitate, they identify with good models in manner and life style.<sup>7</sup>

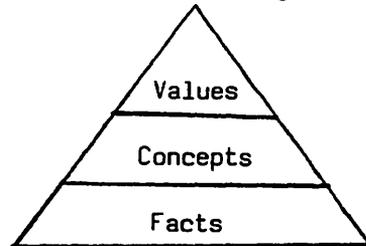
Biblical values can be expressed by the teacher through his attitude, his intellectual integrity and also the content of the course which he teaches. As Frank Gaebelein points out:

"But the most effective way to integrate the subject of study with Christainity is through the teacher who has a genuine worldview. The fact is inescapable; the worldview of the teacher, insofar as he is effective, gradually conditions the worldview of the students. No man teaches out of a philosophical vacuum. In one way or another every teacher expresses the convictions he lives by whether they be spiritually positive or negative."<sup>8</sup>

Mryl Manley states, "If a teacher does not accept, internalize or have faith in the Adventist values, he will be most unlikely to even attempt to integrate them with the subject matter he teaches."<sup>9</sup> Thus we see the important role of the Christian teacher in the classroom.

In teaching poetry, short story, novel and the drama, first of all selection of the text should be made by the teacher on the basis of moral content and aesthetic value of the work. At the same time, the teacher should never aim at indoctrinating through the subject matter, and never attempt to teach Bible doctrines through literature. The "Three-Level Teaching" suggested by Hermin et. al., illustrates how a teacher can teach the subject to bring out values from the contents of work--the factual details, the secular themes and various concepts in the subject. In this approach teachers are encouraged to see the subject as consisting of facts or knowledge first. From these facts, students can be led to discover the concepts involved in the subject matter. Finally, the students by being made to consider

appropriate questions, may be taken to the third level, the values in the subject matter. This method is shown in the diagram below:

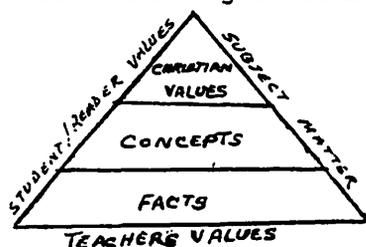


Most students of literature today would agree that the aim of their discipline is elucidation of the intrinsic meanings of poems, plays and novels. They want to know exactly what a poem by T S Eliot or a play by Osborn or a novel by D H Lawrence means. Poetic language they tend to assume, is self-contained or self-referential, whatever meanings a poem has are there on the page, shining forth from the words and their relations. The extrinsic (form) and the intrinsic (theme) are integrated. The form is the genre and structure of the poem. The content (theme) is brought out through the figurative language (imagery, metaphor, symbols). Both form and the content fuse together to bring out the meaning.

Thematic study can also be effectively applied in contrast to the Christian values. To teach students and illuminate how the values are not Christian values. Modern literature has been influenced by many humanistic schools of thought, for example, Existentialism. These concepts have become the value system for modern literature. And thus students read in literature themes that reflect the Existentialist Philosophy: Man suffers alienation, man is filled with anxiety; man searches for meaning in life, and man marches inevitably towards death -- the lost condition of man. Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy "essence precedes existence" that there is no built-in value for man has influenced much of modern literature. Here is a wonderful opportunity to bring in Christian values into the classroom because some analogy between Existentialist Philosophy and modern students exists. This is a generation

of students for whom much in life has no meaning. For whom morality has lost its meaning, for whom education has lost its attraction.<sup>10</sup>

Here the teacher can talk of Christianity being based on a completely different set of presuppositions from those of Existentialism. That man has been created in the image of God and with a purpose and meaning. Encourage students to discuss and bring out their opinions and express their values. For though the teacher is the meaning-maker, the learning process should be from both sides of the table in the classroom. I have sketched out a diagram which illustrates this:



However, teachers should be very careful in teaching values in absolute contrast to students in the subject matter, because this will remove fences for teaching any text in the classroom.

### The Teaching of Poetry

We come to the classroom with a body of poems. The literary analysis of poems apart from giving an opportunity for studying its form and theme gives an opportunity to bring out values. For example the poem The Old Woman by Joseph Campbell:

As a white candle  
In a holy place  
So is beauty  
Of an aged face.

The images, 'White candle,' and 'Holy place' portray the brevity of life and the character of the old woman - her purity. The poem also teaches us to be sympathetic to our grandparents and elders.

Teaching modern poetry is difficult, but very challenging. The discussion of the background, literary characteristics and the themes become inevitable here. A comparison can be made here by bringing in the prevalence of poetry in the Bible,

the Old Testament. Ellen White writes, "There is a poetry which has called forth the wonder and admiration of the world. In glowing beauty, in sublime and solemn majesty, in touching pathos. It is unequalled by the most brilliant productions of human genius."<sup>11</sup> And the earliest as well as the most sublime of poetic utterances known to man are found in the Scriptures.

The themes of modern poetry are built around the loss of faith and religious belief in a scientific world, because this is an age which threw God and religion off board, and believed that 'man is the measure of all things.' This picture of spiritual decay, barrenness, rootlessness, identify crisis and loss of moral values are seen in the works of almost all modern poets. William Butler Yeats' Sailing to Byzantium and The Second Coming, T S Eliot The Wasteland and Gerontion are a few to mention. These poems bring out the futility of life and spiritual degeneration. Although, Yeats spent a great deal of time immersing himself in magical, mystical and philosophical studies, as he claimed to devise a personal system of thought, "That would have (his)...imagination free to create as it chooses and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of one history, and that is the soul's"<sup>12</sup> The Old Testament begins with creation, "In the beginning God created the Heaven and the earth." And Yeats begins with the boundless darkness which is the source of creation. He formulated the gyre or cones, a symbol, which represents the ceaseless, whirling, ever-changing motion of the cycles of life and death. Yet, his poem, Sailing to Byzantium, contains some very religious themes on man:

An aged man is but a paltry thing.  
A shattered coat upon a stick.

O sages of God's holy fire  
Be the singing masters of my soul  
Consume my heart away, sick with desire  
And gather me into the artifice of eternity.

For Yeats eternity and salvation are through the creation of arts. But he does echo the Psalmist's words: "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?"

T S Eliot bases his works out of his vision of life in general. He has aroused

considerable interest in the futility and frustration that urge the mind to be conscious of the spiritual realities. For in Gerontion, the old man is symbolic of the spiritual decay of the modern man and also the yearning for the mercy of God.

I have lost my passion: why should I need to  
keep it. I have lost my sight, smell, hearing  
taste and touch: How should I use them for your  
closer contact?

The teacher should make every possible effort to arrive at the bottomline questions: What is the theme of the poem? What are some of the values that are brought out in the poem? Positive and negative? Compare and contrast values in the poem with Christian values. The study of the aesthetics of the text, such as the imagery, symbol and the mood. Make the students aware of God's creation; the love and beauty of nature, and also the beauty of human nature, as a contrast to the setting and atmosphere in some of the modern poems.

#### **The Study of the Short Story and Novel**

Any study in imaginative literature is a study in discovery. As you read a short story, in particular, you discover how it unmask a rich, new world; how it intensifies your response to life around you; how it quickens your awareness of other people. Through this discovery you find that the total meaning of a story is not just what happens, but also that it has a lesson or a moral. You find the author's insight into human human problems, his understanding of human suffering, his search for lasting values and truth. In the teaching of the short story or novel, the teacher is ready to express his or her own ideas and also get the students to express theirs. How do you do this? How do you develop literary analysis to bring values?

You can learn to express your own interpretation of the story or the novel by discovering how the author uses the elements such as: point of view, conflict, character and theme in the work to mould the meaning of the story. Only this way can you move through discovery to appreciation. Basically, the goal all literary study is appreciation - the ability to place some kind of value on the work. And

a Christian teacher, you can begin by placing emphasis on the moral values along with the aesthetic values of the text.

The short story The Apple Tree by John Galsworthy is a good example. In the story, Frank Ashurst, an English college student on a summer walking tour suffers an injury and is carried to a nearby farm house, where he is nursed and cared for by Megan, the niece of the farmer. Megan is beautiful but almost illiterate. She soon falls in love with Frank and he with her. Almost every night they meet in the apple orchard beside a brook. When he realises that he is desperately in love with Megan, Frank decides to marry her despite the disparity in education and family background. He goes to town to buy her some wedding clothes. There he meets a college friend and three girls from his own social circle. Suddenly another part of Frank, the part of him that is conventional and realistic, begin to loom in his thoughts, struggling against that part of himself which he had irrevocably in love with Megan. After leaving his college friends, Frank walks along the beach in a mood of despair. When he sees Megan looking eagerly for him, he lies down on the beach, hiding his face, struggling to resolve his perplexity. At last, when he decides to look for Megan, she has disappeared. He lets her go, does not seek her at their house, cannot bear to return even to tell her good-bye. Many years later, when he is married to a conventionally educated woman, Frank discovers that Megan had drowned herself in the brook under the apple tree.

The principle of a short story is that essentially a crisis in which two parts of the same person is at war with each other. The greater the story, the more profound the dilemma in which the hero finds himself.

In the above story, depending on one's sense of values, we may say that neither part of Frank's personality is evil or hateful. The part of him that is in love with Megan has the sympathy of almost every reader. The part of him which rejects Megan has the sympathy of many readers too. I have discussed this story with many of my college students in the class and to my amazement I have found only a few young men who felt that Frank did the wrong thing in leaving Megan.

The protagonist has a conflict within himself, the conflict intensifies as it builds to a moment of decision. And this builds the moral structure of the character. How does he face the struggle? Here lies the moral centre of the story. Character study reveals the theme in the story. Know the values, the attitudes of the character, his actions, speech, reactions, his thoughts and the author's own comment on the protagonist. This inevitably leads to the bottomline question: The theme.

### Class Activities

1. Make the students write a character sketch of Frank.
2. Ask the students to place themselves in Frank's place and state how as a Christian they would have reacted in a similar situation?
3. How would you interpret Megan's character?
4. What Christian values does the story teach? (both positive and negative)
5. Write a moral theme for the story.
6. Critique the story. Your ability to interpret the theme and to pass judgments on the story's moral worth.

This method can be applied to the teaching of the novel also.

### The Teaching of Drama

In the teaching of Dramas, again thematic and character study can help students develop Christian values in the classroom. For example the Play Murder in the Cathedral, a religious play, can be taught in class bringing out Christian values through its themes and character study, as some themes lend themselves to the discussion of values as we have seen in the teaching of poetry and short story. What are some of the themes in the play?

1. The nature of evil and temptation. Evil is an inseparable part of human nature. Becket is tempted to do the right deed for the wrong reason.
2. Spiritual pride - the glory of becoming a martyr.
3. Accepting the Divine will of God, and surrendering one's will to God's - To serve God rather than man.
4. Good to overcome evil.

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5. Tension between spiritual and temporal powers - man and his conscience.
6. The evil influence of politics.
7. The virtues and qualities of a church pastor.

A study of the symbol, imagery, and language can also reflect the themes listed and thus help in the discussion of positive values in the play. Questions and discussion will also help and lead to the emphasis of the values mentioned.

The teacher can have a lively class discussion with the following questions:

1. At what point of the play does Thomas Becket become aware that he was doing the right thing for the wrong reason?
2. What is Becket's reaction to the false accusation of Henry II?
3. Make a study of the imagery pattern in the play (the wheel, seasons, birds and animals) which bring out the moral corruption.
4. How does this play portray the will of God and submission to it? Compare and contrast it with what we Adventists believe.
5. Where are the positive values in this play? And the negative?
6. Explain the imagery of the seasons and light and darkness.

I have tried to illustrate very briefly in this paper how Christian values can be taught and developed through the teaching of literature, for "No teacher need force literature into concern with moral pattern; literature will force that concern on him, without the tension of alternate choice there can be no literature."<sup>13</sup>

Thus it is evident that the integration of moral values and literature are not two diverse sections, but of the same field. But the integration is not of equals, because it should not be mistaken that Scriptures are more than a human book. As Christians in the non-Christian world, we alternately define the gospel (Acts 2:14-39). Literature will never replace religion, as Mathew Arnold hoped, for it is not powerful enough or truthful to change people on its own. However, literature can develop Christian values as we have seen. Only the Holy Spirit can transform an understanding of literature and the moral values.

### III

A teacher of literature has all the opportunity for integrating Christian values into the subject matter. In fact, the subject matter cannot really be divorced from moral values. Gaebelien puts it beautifully, "But for every teacher of literature whose mind and heart are rooted and grounded in the Word of God, the secret of integrating Christianity and literature is an open one."<sup>14</sup>

I believe that a Christian teacher has a vision and a challenge in his or her profession and should make every effort to meet this challenge.

## END NOTES

- 1 Susan V Gallagher and Roger Lundin, Literature Through the Eyes of Faith, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers), 1989, p. ixv.
- 2 Ellen G White, Education, (Mountain View California: Pacific Press Publishing Association), 1952, p. 75.
- 3 Myrl Manley, "The Integration of Faith and Learning Separable or Inseparable?" (Unpublished), p. 15.
- 4 Barry Hill, "Teaching Values in Adventist Education," (Unpublished), pp. 4-7.
- 5 Wilma Mc Clarty, "The Book of Esther as Literature," Dialogue, Vol. I, No. 2, 1989, p. 9.
- 6 Arthur E Holmes, The Idea of A Christian College, (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company), 1987, p. 19.
- 7 Barry Hill, Op. cit., p. 7.
- 8 Frank E Gaebeliien, The Patterns of God's Truth, (Chicago: Moody Press), 1976, pp. 36,37.
- 9 Myrl Manley, Op. cit., p. 14.
- 10 Arthur E Holmes, Op. cit., p. 4.
- 11 Ellen G White, Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students, (Mountain View California: Pacific Press Association), 1943, p. 429.
- 12 Heather C Martin, W B Yeats Metaphysician as Dramatist, (Buckinghamshire: Collin Symethe Ltd.), 1986, p. 11.
- 13 Frank E Gaebeliien, Op. cit., p. 67.
- 14 Frank E: Gabelien, Op. cit., p. 69.

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