Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

AN ETHICAL-THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LITERATURE:

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR ADVENTIST TEACHERS

By

Luz L. Barayuga

English Department
Northern Luzon Adventist College
Artacho, Sison, Pangasinan
Philippines

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Introduction

There are two schools of thought at war against each other concernning the nature and function of art: didacticism on one side and aestheticism on the other. Both concepts are believed to have evolved from the teachings of two famous Greek philosophers: Plato and Aristotle.

The concept of the didactic traces its inception to the doctrines of Plato which were chiefly centered on the aspirations of the human spirit and which exalted the mind above matter. Today the term Platonic criticism is used in literary circles to describe that type of criticism which finds the value of art in its extrinsic rather than in its intrinsic qualities, in its usefulness outside the province of art rather than on its aesthe-
ticity.[1]

Aestheticism, on the other hand, rests on the hedonistic credo of "art for art's sake." Although aestheticism as a literary movement started only in the late 19th century, its roots may be seen as reaching back to the poetry of John Keats ("A thing of beauty is a joy forever") and William Wordsworth ("Beauty is its own excuse for being") and Edgar Allan Poe whose "Poetic Principle" rejected the "heresy of the didactic." The term Aristotelian criticism has come to be applied to the aesthetic theory to provide a contrast for Platonic criticism.[2]

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The Roman author Horace takes a middle position, reconciling the two extremes of thought. Art, he says, has a dual function: dulce et utile. It is both delightful and useful, beautiful as well as meaningful.[3]

Is literature compatible with Christianity?

God is the author of beauty. He created a beautiful world and used the term "good" to describe the "beauty" he had created. Evidently he establishes a close kinship between the two: "goodness" and "beauty." In creation God used the medium of beauty to convey the truth about himself--which is goodness.

Because the fall had marred creation and rendered it inadequate to reveal the nature and character of God, it became necessary to resort to other means of revelation. God inspired men to write the Bible.

The Bible is literature, undoubtedly one of the greatest that has ever been produced. It is often considered to be the yardstick of all literatures. In its pages God's truths are presented through the medium of various literary forms: narrative, drama, poetry, essay. Jesus himself employed in his teachings the literary devices of parable, metaphor, symbolism, paradox, hyperbole, rhetorical question, apostrophe, etc.

Ryken vouchsafes the biblical endorsement of literature and the literary method as follows:

> The point is not simply that the Bible allows literary forms of communication. It is rather that biblical writers and Jesus found it impossible to communicate the truth of God without using literary discourse. The Bible does not merely sanction literature. It shows how indispensable literature is. / 4

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The literary method of theology is endorsed by McFague in the following words:

> There is a way to do theology, a way that runs from the gospels and Paul through Augustine and Luther to Teilhard and the Berrigans . . . which relies on various literary forms--parables, stories, poems, confessions. / 5

Wright confirms the effectiveness of the literary method of theology by saying that

> Poems, stories and plays . . . can express important theological truths. In some respects they provide a more acceptable means of talking about God than does systematic theology . . ./ 6

Literature is not only compatible with Christianity; it is the language of Christianity. In fact, Broadbent refers to Christianity as "the most literary religion in the world" whose doctrine is largely "enshrined in poetry."[7]

The Fall of Literature

Literature was primarily the vehicle for conveying religious truth not only among bibical writers but also among non-biblical authors. In addition to the Old Testament, the earliest surviving literary works are invariably religious in nature. The Bhagavad Gita, the Eddas, the myths and legends of Greece all had a religious tenor and arose out of the nature of belief and worship. Literary scribes and scholars were men of the different religious orders. Literature was regarded as the handmaiden of religion.[8]

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But as the enemy had succeeded in distorting creation, the visual revelation of God, so he succeded in tampering with literature, the mode of the written revelation. Thousands who appreciate the literary qualities of the Bible are insensitive to its truths. And as the seeds of secularization were scattered and started to take root, literature ceased to be the faithful conveyor of religious truth that it was meant to be. Wright said that "God . . . disappeared from literature in the 19th century . . . when Nietzche said that he had died."[9] By the second decade of the 20th century, literature had come to be considered as a distinctly secular activity. In the universities it became the dominant academic study, replacing the study of theology. Religion became just one of the myriad subjects of literature. If at all.

The New Critics, who believed in the objective theory of art, "tried to seal off literature from any contact with faith and history."[10] What used to be thought of as the handmaiden of theology was soon regarded as its rival. Wright confirms this when he says that

> . . . there is, in the modern period at least, a tension between the two subjects, a tension which has been exacerbated by the decline of belief in Christianity and the rise of literature as the provider of a new canon, a new set of scriptures endorsing an alternative set of liberal-humanist values. / 11

The divorce between literature and religion makes the work of integration all the more relevant and necessary. The secularist takes God out of literature; the Christian puts Him back in.

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Modern Literature and the Christian

Is modern literature compatible with Christianity?

Thorns sprouted among the roses as a result of sin, but the mere fact that roses have thorns does not make the roses bad. It is quite possible to enjoy the flowers while carefully avoiding the thorns.

While the storehouse of literary treasures has become littered with dangerous atheistic ideologies, with trash posing under the guise of literature, in there are many precious gems with which the Christian may enrich his Christian experience.

Described by Ezra Pound as "often dangerous, subversive and chaotic, an anarchic celebration of the power of language",[12] and by Wright as "either explicitly or implicitly hostile to the faith,"[13] modern literature poses grave implications for the Christian teacher. Literature can be an instrument in his hands with which he could guide his students toward salvation--or damnation. Selection and handling of material could spell the difference.

A safe guide for selection of materials by the Christian teacher is implied in Paul's injunction to the Philippians: ". . . whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report . . . think on these things." (Phil. 4:8)

The teacher would also do well to consider the age and maturity of his students. The younger in age and Christian

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experience the students are, the greater care should be exercised in the selection of materials to be presented.

The teacher, however, may "err" in the matter of his selection, but he cannot afford to err in the manner of his presentation. It would be a serious mistake to classify authors into Christian and non-Christian and adopt a "touch-not, taste-not, handle-not" stance against the second group, and a "swallow-everything-including-hook-line-and-sinker" attitude toward the first. It is quite possible for a teacher to teach a class in Biblical Literature and yet fail to make any moral or ethical impact on his students. On the other hand another teacher could teach an existentialist or naturalist novel like Sister Carrie and lead his students to contemplate matters of eternal consequences.

Gallagher says that "to confine our reading to literature written by professed Christians would significantly limit our understanding, cultivation, and enjoyment of God's creation."[14] She says further:

> . . . works of literature that do not articulate specific Christian ideas can express ideas that are congruent with our Christianity. . . . Often we will agree with and learn from part of a poem or story but disagree with other parts. A work might strike certain notes that resonate with Christianity, but also sound some discordant notes./15

We may disagree with Thoreau's pantheism and his disregard for the sinful nature of man, but we can learn from his Walden. We may not know for sure if Shakespeare had been a Christian, but we can learn the Christian values of love from his Romeo and Juliet and forgiveness from his King Lear.

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Reading texts by non-Christian authors can help us conceive of the various ideas about life.

> We can learn much from the works of the nineteenth century English and American romantics; the turn-of-the-century realists, naturalists and determinists; the mid-twentieth century existentialists, and our contemporary parodic metafictionalists. All these writers explore new ways to interpret life and employ new kinds of metaphor and narrative. / 16

The subject of literature is human experience. Modern definitions call the study of literature "the study of life." The secularist's philosophy is that literature helps man to see and better understand himself, period. The Christian teacher sees literature as a means by which man can see and better understand himself as a creature--in relation to his fellow creatures as well as to his Creator.

Fiction , which has of late dominated the literary scene, is said to be a "mirror of life." Modern secular literature portrays the chaos, the meaninglessness and hopelessness of man's life in the plotless stories, the stream-of-consciousness technique, the theater of the absurd. The Christian teacher sees the absence of God as the reason for the chaos, the lack of order and direction in man's life, the absurdity of his condition.

Gallagher expresses the same idea in the following words:

> The loss of faith in a God who creates, reveals, and redeems is no doubt a major source of the sense of meaninglessness one finds in much modern literature. / 17

The naturalist depicts man as an animal, deprived of will power, helpless against the overwhelming forces of his environment and circumstances. The Christian teacher sees man as

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negating the transforming power of God's love by refusing the hand stretched out to help him. Newman says that modern literature

> reflects the 'natural man' with all 'the leapings and the friskings, the plungings and the snortings, the sportings and the buffoonings' to be expected of the 'noble, lawless savage of God's intellectual creation' unenlightened by revelation. / 18

The teacher is the final arbiter of the morality of the text. He can choose the vantage point from which to look at the literary piece to make it, if not congruent with Christian ideals, at least reflective of Christian virtues. For example he can use the subject of revenge to teach forgiveness, or pride to teach humility, or hate to teach love. The teacher who succeeds in leading his students to an aesthetic appreciation of a literary piece but fails to sound them of its moral and ethical implications labors in vain.

T. S. Eliot says:

> Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint. . . . it is the more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading especially of works of the imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards. / 19

Wright believes in a universal theory that suggests "an underlying pattern of life, death and resurrection . . . even in literature which is not overtly Christian." [20] It is the moral duty of the Christian teacher of literature to bring the religious dimension of literature into a sharp focus for his students to see. But he should exercise great care so as not to sacrifice the integrity of the subject matter.

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An Ethical-Theological Approach to Fiction

Fiction provides an excellent window for looking at life both objectively as well as subjectively, for identifying people's values and making value judgments, for contemplating the immediate and/or eternal consequences of man's doings and undoings. Fiction provides "practice exercises" for learning how to live, for "experiencing" life in its varied aspects and grappling with its problems at a safe distance.

One way by which the teacher may engage his students in moral reflections is to have them evaluate the action of the characters of fiction against Christian or biblical standards of right and wrong. A horizontal line may be drawn to set the limits between right and wrong, salvation and damnation, life and death. At the start and at the end of the story, characters are evaluated in terms of their position with relation to the horizontal. A character, for example, could start from beneath and end up above, or he could start from above and end up under. That is, the character change could be from bad to good or from death to life, or the other way around: from good to bad or from life to death.

There are six general directions which the characters of fiction are bound to take; the first three move toward connectedness or restoration and salvation while the other three tend toward greater disconnectedness or damnation. In diagram, the character change is shown as follows:

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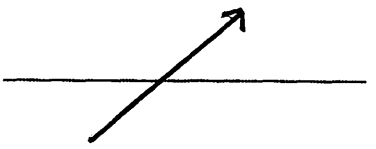
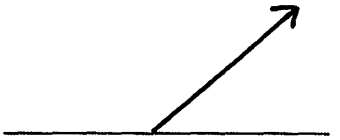
Toward Connectedness

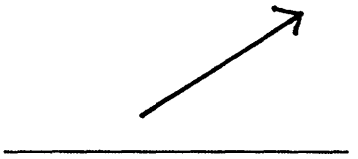
1. From BAD to GOOD



2. From NEUTRAL to GOOD

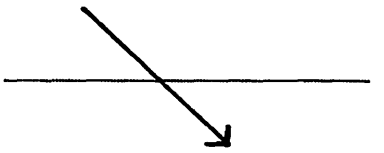


3. From GOOD to BETTER

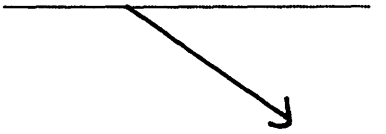


Toward Greater Disconnectedness

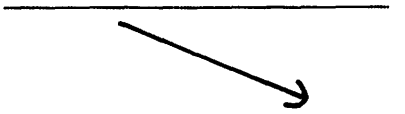
4. From GOOD to BAD



5. From NEUTRAL to BAD



6. From BAD to WORSE



The Christian teacher would do well to avoid stories where character change goes from bad to worse as in Diagram No. 6. Such stories do not have any redemptive value and will not aid in the development of Christian character.

The writer has chosen three short stories to illustrate this approach, which should be considered merely as an added touch to formal or structural criticism, instead of as a substitute.

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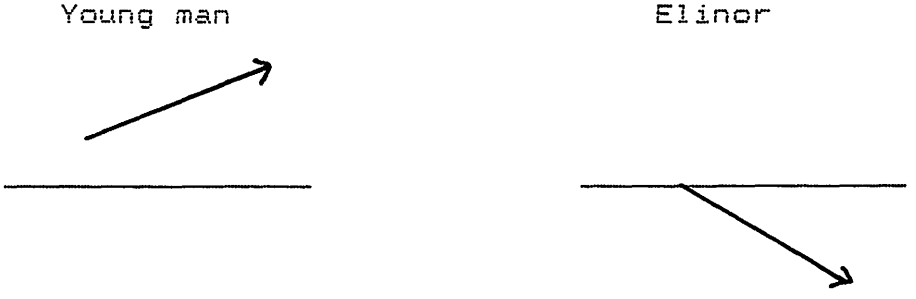
LOST AND FOUND: Roy Octavus Cohen

This short story shows two characters tending toward opposite directions. A young man picks up an expensive, eight-hundred-dollar bracelet. After trying in vain to locate its owner, he gives it to his fiancee, Elinor. About a month later, the young man sees a notice in the Lost and Found section of an out-of-town paper. The bracelet belongs to a woman from Nashville who had been vacationing in town. He tries to persuade Elinor that the jewelry must be returned, but she refuses to give it up. "You gave it to me; it is not fair to take it back," she shouts at him. Unable to have his way, the young man takes a loan, buys his fiancee a similar bracelet, and returns the first to its rightful owner. We can guess what happens to the relationship from the young man's concluding statement--"It's cheap at the price--fifteen a week for what I found out--and found out in time."

The young man may be seen as starting from above the horizontal; he rises to even greater heights. Elinor, on the other hand, takes a downward course. In diagram the change that takes place in each of the two characters is shown as follows:



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The young man's values: honesty, integrity. Elinor's: love of material things like the bracelet.

THE NECKLACE: Guy de Maupassant

The change that takes place in the protagonist of de Maupassant's story is not as obvious but no less significant. Matilde Loisel at the beginning of the story is young, beautiful, ambitious, vain and very unhappy about her deprived circumstances. Her husband, a clerk in the Bureau of Public Instruction, manages to wangle an invitation to a ball at the palace of the ministry. Matilde borrows a necklace of pearls from a friend, Madame Forestier--which she loses. Too proud to let her friend know, she persuades her husband to buy a replacement. They get one for 36,000 francs and spend the next ten years working hard to pay for the loan. At the end of the story, Matilde is a changed person. Prematurely aged by hard work, she has lost much of her original physical attractiveness. She has also become humble enough to admit to her friend the ordeal she had gone through to replace the lost necklace. She is struck by the realization that the lost necklace was made of paste. It had cost no more than 500 francs; she had replaced it with one made of pearls. The story is symbolic. The replacement of paste by pearl represents the change in the character of Matilde who from a phony had become the real thing.

In diagram the change in Matilde proceeds from beneath the horizontal to above:

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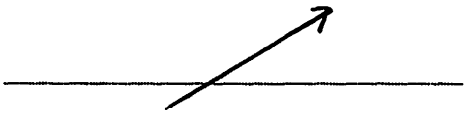

Matilde's original values: love of material things, emphasis on external appearances. Her new set of values: hard work, honesty, integrity.

LOTTERY TICKET: Anton Chekov

Ivan Dmitritch moves from above the horizontal to below. The whole story happens in no more than an hour, but the change in Dmitritch's character is spectacular. As the story opens, Dmitritch and his wife, Masha, present a picture of marital bliss, of peace and contentment, in spite of their modest surroundings. The change occurs as they fantasize that they had won 75,000 rubles in the lottery. Dmitritch's interests converge on himself as he dreams aloud what he would do with their "winnings." The first person pronouns--I, me, my, mine--dominate his conversation. His wife reminds him--not too kindly-- that it is " her" ticket, not "his". At the end of the story the picture of marital bliss is gone, replaced by one of hostility. The final blow comes when they realize that, after all, their ticket did not carry all the digits of the winning number. Suddenly the house has become too oppressive for Dmitritch, and he storms out with a pretense to hang himself in the nearest aspen tree.

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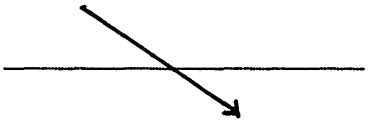
The character change in Dmitritch follows a downward course, starting from above the horizontal:



Dmitritch's original values: contentment, selflessness, peace. His new set of values: self-gratification, love of material things, personal happiness.

One of the many ways by which the teacher could help stimulate critical and creative thinking as well as engage the students in moral or ethical decisions is to ask for alternate courses of action. The question "If you were in this character's place, what would you do?" will set students thinking. It will give them a sense of active participation as well as force them to make moral decisions. They will also have the opportunity to evaluate their decisions in the light of possible consequences, both immediate and ultimate, temporal and eternal.

The alternate courses of action that students may suggest for the young man in "Lost and Found" could take the following forms:

1. I would ignore the newspaper notice, go ahead and marry Elinor and be happy.

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2. I would forget about Elinor and the jewelry. That way I take the responsibility off my shoulders.

3. I would contact the owner of the bracelet and tell her where she could get back what rightfully belongs to her.

4. I would tell Elinor that if she does not return the bracelet, our relationship is over.

5. I would buy Elinor her own bracelet just like the young man did, but I would go ahead and marry her.

As for the character of Matilde Loisel in "The Necklace" the following could be suggested:

1. I would tell my friend at once what happened and arrange a way to pay for, or replace, the lost ncklace.

2. I would buy a "fake" to replace the lost "pearls."

In the case of Dmitritch:

1. The first thing I would do is to ascertain that I have the winning ticket.

2. My wife and I together would work out a plan for spending or investing the money.

The students are, in fact, being asked to "rewrite" the ending of the story. They could do so orally, or, for variation and added activity, they may put it down on paper. A different course of action will naturally result in a different ending, a fact which should help students appreciate the importance of making the right decisions. For instance, alternate course of action No. 1 for the young man in "Lost and Found" could set him in a downward direction. Alternate course No. 2 in "The Neck-

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lace," however, would pull Matilde farther down, while alternate course No. 2 in the "Lottery Ticket" would have taken Dmitritch and wife farther up. This the teacher could use to show how values can influence decisions and how decisions can affect destiny.

Conclusion

Literature provides a way for us to interact with our world in a manner that will help in the restoration in man of the lost image of God. We can use many works of literature for multiple purposes. "Some text teach, others amuse, others give us joy in the gifts of God. All provide various ways to participate in God's world."[21] "In literature life is writ larger than life."

There are no absolutes, no hard and fast rules for the integration of faith and learning in the study of literature. For a teacher who is steeped in the principles and ethics of Christianity, integration will come easily and naturally. It is imperative, therefore, that the teacher of literature must first be a Christian in the real sense of the word, a Christian whose greatest concern is to lead his students to a oneness with Christ. Such a teacher cannot help but consciously and systematically engage Christian values throughout the reading and teaching of a text.

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NOTES

1 Hugh C. Holman, A Handbook to Literature (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merril Educayional Publishers, Inc., 1980) p. 132.

2 Op. cit., p. 6.

3 Leland Ryken, The Liberated Imagination (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1989), p. 125.

4 Op. cit., pp. 43,44.

5 Sallie McFague, Speaking in Parables: A study in Metaphor and Theology Philadelphia, 1975).

6 T. R. Wright, Theology and Literature (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1988), p. 2.

7 J. B. Broadbent, Paradise Lost: Introduction

8 G. B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson, Jr., eds. Religion and Modern Literature: Essays in Theory and Criticism (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 9.

9 Wright, op. cit., p. 6.

10 Ibid., p. 9.

11 Ibid., p. 5.

12 Ezra Pound, Literary Essays (London and New York: 1954), pp. 20-21.

13 Wright, op. cit., p. 6.

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14 Susan V. Gallagher and Roger Lundin, Literature through the Eyes of Faith (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989), p. 130.

15 Ibid., p. 131.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid. p. 4.

18 Wright, loc. cit.

19 T. S. Eliot "Religion and Literature" in Religion and Modern Literature: Essays in Theory and Criticism ed. by G. B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson, Jr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 21.

20 Wright, op. cit., p. 6.

21 Gallagher, op. cit., xxvi.

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