

# *A Christian Approach to Literature*

## *By Jim Hendry*

Literature can play an inestimably valuable role in strengthening Christians to develop and sharpen a vision of Godly living, as well as gain inspiration. Prayerful and serious reading of selected literature can help provide Biblically sound mental images from which to draw to evaluate one's own experiences. And for those without a Godly heritage and/or training but who long to provide one for their children, literature can be a tremendous asset in their Christian growth. In short, great literature, carefully selected, can shape and mold lives for the glory of God.

Reading is a pastime enjoyed by many people. Unfortunately, in a society filled with electronic technologies such as television and computers, reading—and particularly the love of reading—is becoming less common. For the Christian, reading cannot be an option in life: God has written His Word and expects it to be read and obeyed.

The reading of Scripture should be a priority in the life of the believer. Those who love God will love to read His Word, and often this love of reading will extend to a love of reading in general. With countless books, magazines, and other types of printed material available, there is no lack of possible reading material; one could not possibly read all there is to read, so how does one decide what is best? For the Christian, whose eyes and mind belong to Christ, this question takes on special significance.

The term literature, as commonly defined, includes fiction, poetry, and drama—though other forms of writing could be included in a broad definition. Should a Christian even read literature at all? Would

not his time be better spent reading just the Bible and, possibly, other material that could aid his spiritual and personal development in more concrete ways?

“Reading offers vicarious experience. We can have the sensation of experiencing something without having to experience it firsthand. Vicarious experience can be more pleasurable than real experience. Reading about a Civil War battle may be exciting; actually being in a Civil War battle would be terrifying. Reading the novel *Moby Dick* may evoke the mystery of the sea, but actually living on a whaling boat might seem boring and brutal. Reading a medieval love poem may conjure up the beauty of hopeless love, although no one enjoys having a broken heart in real life. Extreme sensations or dangerous undertakings may be experimented with in safety. Our imaginations can launch off into hair-raising adventures or emotionally wrenching ordeals while at the same time we enjoy the security of our own easy chairs.”

(Veith, p. 31)

“ . . . Other times, we can seek out more substantial literary experiences. What would it be like to live in ancient Greece? Histories, historical novels, and literary masterpieces of the past can place us, vicariously, into another place and time. What would it be like to struggle through poverty, hopelessness, persecution, or other obstacles? What might war or atheism or missionary work feel like, and how would my own faith respond to them? Books can

provide access to all these experiences.” (Veith, p. 32)

As literature allows the reader to learn of the experiences and emotions of others, it also allows him to see that other people have similar trials and emotions.

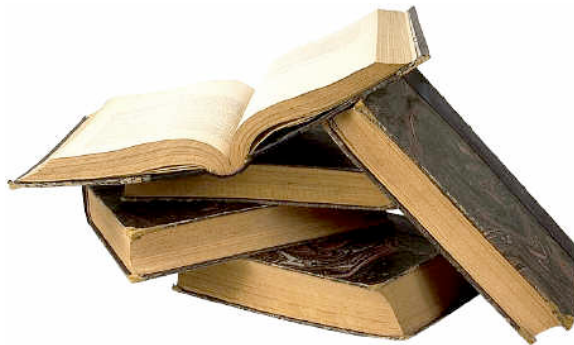
“Literature not only gives us new experiences but also has a recognized power to embody universal human experience. Much literature gives expression to experience that is common to everyone. It is a commonplace [thought] that the writer is our representative: he says what we want said, only he says it much better than we can.” (Ryken, 1979, p. 27)

Is there Scriptural evidence for the reading of literature? One primary piece of evidence is Scripture itself. Though the Bible is completely true, it uses literary devices throughout its entirety. For example, one should bear in mind that the poetic Psalms are among the best-loved portions of all Scripture, probably for the very reason that the ideas and emotions expressed therein are common to all men.

Another Scriptural evidence that literature is allowable for, and can be used by, believers is the number of ways the Lord used men who, though familiar first of all with God’s Word, also had a knowledge of literature. “Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds” (Acts 7:22). Joseph and Daniel were no doubt familiar with the literature of their respective nations of ministry. The apostle Paul is another

example, as evidenced by his address at Mars Hill in Acts 17.

“Later in the speech (v. 28), Paul quotes from the works of the Greek poets Cleanthes, Aratus, and Epimenides, drawing attention to the allusions with the comment, “As some of your poets have said.” Since Paul did not have a Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations to aid him, we would have to conclude that he had a firsthand acquaintance with Greek literature, including fiction, and knew part of it by heart. The principle that emerges is that the Bible affirms, in a variety of ways, the value of reading literature.” (Ryken, 1979, p. 23)



*To Read or Not to Read; That is the Question*

So, then, one may conclude that the reading of literature is acceptable for Christians. Literature has the advantage of being entertaining and thought-provoking, as well as educational. In contrast to the ready-made images and story-mill plots of television, reading offers one the opportunity to grow while relaxing.

Does this mean that all literature is acceptable? “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful unto me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12). Not all literature will help the Christian in his walk with Christ; indeed, some may be quite detrimental. Because literature, by its very nature, strongly influences the emotions of the reader, it has the potential to “sweep the reader up” in the story and its accompanying, though often hidden, philosophy. Consider, for example, the popular romance novels—religious or otherwise. How many women’s lives have

been damaged from the voyeurism unleashed from this kind of material? In addition, at the philosophical level, no marriage in real life can compare to these airbrushed fantasies. Therefore, these romance novels breed discontent and moral lassitude, leading to damaged and even shipwrecked marriages.

“The potential dangers fall into several categories. Literature can persuade the reader to accept an erroneous viewpoint as the truth. It can move a person to detrimental emotions, such as the despair that so much modern literature induces. And it has the potential to influence a person to immoral behavior. The affective nature of literature means that Christian readers cannot afford to be naive about what happens when they read a story or poem or attend a play. Reading literature should not be the occasion for letting down one’s guard. The persuasiveness of literature is not a reason to avoid literature, but it is a challenge to be an alert reader. We cannot afford to stop thinking when we sit down to read a book or attend a play.” (Ryken, 1985, pp. 104-105)

The Christian must continually evaluate his response to what he is reading to determine if his response is in accordance with Biblical standards. If his response is unbiblical, he must bring his response into line with Scripture, and/or if the reading material itself is a stumbling block, it must be put away. One should never underestimate the power of literature to impact one’s life for good



*With literally thousands of books available for Christians to read, how can we know which ones are best?*

or evil. The overall effect of the literature a Christian reads should be to draw him closer to Christ, to better understand Biblical principles, and to be more effective in ministering to others.

“Many experts extol the powerful impact of good literature in forming moral values, strong minds, and healthy personalities. And yet when it comes to pornography, for example, they change their tune and deny that it has any impact. If good literature can have a positive effect on the individual and society as a whole, surely bad literature can have a negative effect. The imagination is an integral facet of our inner lives; as such it can be used to degrade our minds as well as to build them up.

Does this mean Christians should not read literature that leads them into vicarious sin? I would say yes. If our Lord would have us go so far as to gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands to avoid sin, surely the limitation to our reading practices is not too severe. If His words are metaphorical, that does not diminish their force or their scope, but rather increases them.” (Veith, p. 33)

What specific guidelines should the Christian follow to help assure that he maintains “clean hands and a pure heart?” To avoid any depiction of evil would be well nigh impossible and not necessarily beneficial. The world is full of sinful men committing sinful acts—to ignore this fact completely would not be a realistic representation of

the world in which we live (for now). Scripture itself is filled with accounts of the vilest of sins; yet sin in the Bible is depicted for a reason: to contrast man's utter depravity and hopelessness with God's holiness, justice, and grace. One should beware of another extreme in literature, common in much postmodern writing, of dwelling on the perverse, macabre, chaotic, and fatalistic.

The following questions can aid the Christian in his evaluation:

1. Is the representation of evil purposeful or is it represented of its own sake? This is the criterion of *gratuitousness*.
2. Is the representation of evil, if purposeful, present in an acceptable degree? Or is it more conspicuous or vivid than the purpose warrants? This is the criterion of *explicitness*. (*Objectionable Elements*, pp. 12-13)

Part of the effectiveness of literature is its ability to absorb the reader into the narrative to the extent he seems to actually be a participant in, or a nearby spectator of the story's action. If that action is of a sinful nature, a dilemma could develop. This can be particularly true of modern writing, in which the style of writing is often more intense than that of older works. Combined with looser moral standards, this intensity can create quite an emotional stir in the reader.

Probably the most important factor in literature is the author's philosophy of life or worldview. Though not necessarily obvious in a casual skimming of the material, the author's philosophy will be evident in the details he

includes or excludes, the characters' attitudes toward the evil presented, and the consequences (if any) of the evil. This leads to the third set of questions the reader should ask himself:

3. Is evil presented from a condemning perspective? Is it made to appear both dangerous and repulsive? What is the attitude toward it? This is the criterion of moral tone (*Objectionable Elements*, p. 13).

"I said in my defense of realism that literature covers the whole spectrum of life and that we should not run away from what actually exists in our world. But if, in literature and life, we cannot completely avoid the depraved end of the spectrum, we can avoid most of it, particularly in literature. There is usually no good reason for a Christian deliberately to seek out literature that depicts human depravity. It is not (at least for the mature Christian) so much a matter of being swept into immoral behavior; it is much more likely to be a question of good use of time. If in life

no good comes from jumping into mud puddles, in the Christian's spiritual life not much good comes from jumping into the cesspool of much naturalistic literature." (Ryken, 1979, p. 187)

Considering 1 Cor. 6:12b ("I will not be brought under the power of any") and the principle of stewardship, the Christian must also be aware of the amount of time spent in his reading of literature. Certainly, believers should

rest as well as work, and reading a good book could be a profitable way to spend



*One should never underestimate the power of literature to impact one's life for evil or for good.*

one's reading time, but even *good* books can become sinful if they occupy too prominent a place in the believer's life. The Christian should be diligent to assure that his pleasure reading is kept in proper perspective.

To sum up, the reading of literature is not only permissible, but can be profitable, assuming that one determines the literature is indeed good literature. Through literature a person is able to learn of human (or other) life that would otherwise be impossible to know. The reading of literature can help *round out* a person's mind.

“Milton defines a complete and generous education as one that equips a person to perform “all offices, both private and public,” that a person might be called upon to perform in life.

Contemporary education is preoccupied with the public roles, and usually one of them, the economic one of job or vocation. But what about the private roles?

They include being a good spouse or roommate or parent or friend. And they include the most private world of all—the inner life of the mind and imagination. An education is complete and generous when—and only when—it equips people to spend a meaningful evening at home, or to fill their leisure time with enriching rather than mindless pursuits, or to adorn the mansion of the mind and imagination with noble furnishing. A love of great literature is one of the things that fulfills this idea.” (Ryken, 1979, p. 32)



... it is the pure in heart who will see God.

Christians are required by the Holy One of Israel to read only those pieces of literature that are in agreement with the principles of His Word. This may (and probably will) mean rejecting works that the world's scholars and critics declare to be *masterpieces* or *classics*. The standards of the world cannot be the standards for God's “holy nation” and “peculiar people,” for it is the pure in heart who will see God (1 Pet. 2:9, Matt. 5:8).

In evaluating literature, there are guidelines to aid in determining what is acceptable; however, each Christian must seek God's wisdom as to what is best. The believer who is in a right relationship with the Lord, and desires to please Him in all things, will be able to discern by the Spirit of God—the Holy Spirit—what literature that will most edify and equip the saints and bring ultimate glory to God.

While fiction must be approached with great caution, the following carefully-selected volumes depict worthy heroes and heroines in real life (though sometimes romanticized)

settings. Though some may not pass certain tests for being considered *classics*, they are nevertheless highly valuable. So strongly can these volumes shape lives that they should be reread several times. It was for such a noble and edifying purpose that they were written:

- *Family Classic Collection* by Horatio Alger, Mantle Ministries.
- *Hind's Feet on High Places* by Hannah Hurnard. Various publishers.
- Lamplighter books by Lamplighter Publishing. Many titles.

- *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, and for young readers, *Little Pilgrim's Progress* by Mrs. Howard Taylor, Moody Press.
- *Stepping Heavenward* and *Aunt Jane's Hero* by Elizabeth Prentiss. Barbour Publishing and Calvary Publishing, respectively.
- *Stories Worth Rereading, Choice Stories for Children, Sabbath Readings for the Home Circle, Tiger and Tom, the King's Daughter* published by Angela's Bookshelf (otherwise known as AB Publishing).
- *Sunshine Country*, Rod and Staff Publishers.
- *The Holy War* by John Bunyan (currently out of print but readily available through online used booksellers.)
- *Treasures in the Snow, Tanglewoods Secret, Star of Light, Rainbow Garden*, and other titles by Patricia St. John. Various publishers.

## **References**

*Objectionable Elements: The Biblical Approach.* (1990). Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press.

Ryken, L. (1979). *Triumphs of the Imagination.* Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity.

Ryken, L. (1985). *Windows to the World.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Veith, G. E. Jr. (1990). *Reading the Lines Between*

Copyright 2005 by His Image Ministries. Permission to reproduce the article in its entirety is granted provided the following credit line is included: *Reproduced with permission from His Image Ministries.*