

## Why Study Literature?

Steve R. Hake, Ph.D. Professor of English Literature, Patrick Henry College

When there are so many things to study today, why study literature?

Traditionally, at least two answers have been given to this question.

One is that literature is fun. It's delightful. One of the basic purposes of literature has always been to entertain, and anything that is genuinely entertaining has value. The other answer is that literature teaches us many things. It not only delights, it instructs. Those two answers are as old, or older than the Roman poet Horace. Let us first look more closely at the second of these two answers and see what literature teaches us.

### What is literature?

Let us begin by asking the question, "What is literature?" First of all, what is literature all about? What is its subject? Its subject is nothing less than human life, human experience. Every poem, play or story deals with some aspect of human life and experience. It has sometimes been said that literature is like a mirror that reflects life for us. What, by contrast, is the subject of linguistics? Language. In linguistics, we look at language itself, but in literature, we use language to look at life. Literature, as one of the humanities, thus parts company with the sciences. The sciences, like linguistics, all specialize (and analyze), looking only at one aspect of reality, whereas the humanities generalize (and synthesize), looking at the whole of life.

How then, does literature deal with life? Does it deal with life in a *concrete* or an *abstract* way? In a *concrete* way. We can say that literature *presents* human experience; it doesn't *discuss* it. It shows; it doesn't tell. It appeals to our senses and to our feelings as well as to our minds. It enables us to see, hear and feel characters in action. In a sense, it recreates experience. Philosophy also takes human life or experience as its subject, but it deals with life in a theoretical rather than a concrete way. To cite just one example, a philosopher might write a

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book explaining to us the defects of the philosophy called "utilitarianism"; but Charles Dickens, as a writer, wrote a novel, *Hard Times*, in which he exposed concretely, through a story, the problems with utilitarianism. He enables us, in this way, not only to understand the problems with our minds, but also to see and hear them with our senses and feel them with our hearts as well.

We have said that literature *reflects* life. How then is a novel about a twenty-four hour period (such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*) different from a book that merely records everything that happened in twenty four hours? Or how is a movie different from someone with a movie camera who simply walks around at random for two or three hours and shoots whatever he sees? Don't both "reflect" life? But literature doesn't simply *record* life—it *interprets* it. It doesn't simply *reflect* life—it *focuses* it. It's a mirror, but a special kind of mirror. It's a mirror in which we can see ourselves even more clearly, more vividly than in an ordinary mirror. Through a process sometimes called "artistic selection" the writer or poet or movie maker simplifies experience, yet at the same time he clarifies and deepens it. He selects that which is most important, most basic. In other words, he tries to *make sense* out of life. He reflects on the *meaning* of life. So there is implicit in every poem or play or story a "worldview," a set of values. Literature (as well as philosophy) asks and answers the "big questions": 1) Where have we come from? 2) Where are we going? 3) What is the meaning of our existence? Literature not only asks these questions in a searching and eloquent way, but also provides us with a wide variety of possible answers.

How then does literature differ from history? The controlling purpose of history is to record or reconstruct human life. The controlling purpose of literature is to simplify, clarify, deepen and focus, e.g. to *interpret* human life. So Byron in *Don Juan* speaks of past heroes who "shone not on the poet's page, and so have been forgotten." Poetry makes the deeds of past heroes more clear and vivid and so more memorable. It has been said that journalism (history) tells you what happened yesterday, whereas literature tells you what always happens, e. g. what is most characteristic of human nature in its deepest reaches. We might summarize this part of our discussion with the following table:

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|          | Universal  | Particular                             |
|----------|------------|--|
| Abstract | Philosophy | Social Sciences?<br>Physical Sciences! |
| Concrete | Literature | History                                |

Note also the relationship of the three basic “sisters” of the humanities to the trivium. History corresponds most closely to “grammar” insofar as it is primarily concerned with the basic facts of a circumstance. Philosophy corresponds most closely to “logic” insofar as it is primarily concerned with connections and meaning within and between circumstances. Literature most closely resembles “rhetoric” insofar as it is primarily concerned with the powerful communication of the meaning of a circumstance.

So what is literature? So far we have said that literature is an *interpretive presentation of human experience*. But our definition is not quite complete.

How is literature related to art, to beauty? Let us first ask the question, "What is a work of art?" If I took a famous novel and tore out a few pages at random, are those few torn pages a work of art? If I took a canvas, blindfolded myself and threw paint at it, would the resulting "painting" be a work of art? If not, why not? The essence of all art and beauty is form or order. Art, by definition, is *not* the product of chance, but of intelligent creativity.<sup>1</sup> In a painting art takes a *visual* form. In a poem, story or play art takes a *verbal* form. Any work of art contains the following aspects of artistic form (among others): pattern or design, unity, theme or centrality, balance, contrast, recurrence, variation, intricacy or complexity, and progression. So the writer or poet as an artist asks himself not only *what* he wants to say, but also *how* he wants

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<sup>1</sup> Of course many nihilistic artists today deny this, yet in their very act of denial they contradict themselves. Art can never really be nihilistic. It depends for its very life on both meaning and form.

to say it. Beauty of form is just as important in literature as truth of content. Artistic form is the powder that drives the bullet of content or truth into our hearts where it can explode with great force. So then, we can define literature as an *interpretive presentation of human experience in an artistic form* (Ryken 13-14).<sup>2</sup>

### **What, then, can we learn from literature?**

Let us now go back to the question we asked earlier (What can we learn from literature?) and attempt an answer based on our definition. First of all, because literature is concrete and appeals to our senses, literature can help *wake up* our senses. It can help us to *really look* at and *see* the things around us. It can help us to really listen and hear, smell, taste and touch. In Robert Frost's, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the poet takes a few moments to appreciate the quiet beauty of a wooded field slowly filling with snow. My wife once mentioned to a friend as they sat outdoors that the clouds were particularly beautiful that day. Her friend looked up and said, "Just clouds"--her senses were sleeping. My wife's family, as she grew up, would often take a few minutes during a rainstorm to simply sit and listen to the sound of the falling rain. Literature can encourage us in the midst of our frantic twentieth century lives to *slow down*. It can teach us to savor our experience, to take in, reflect on and appreciate the beauty around us. God has given us both our senses and a beautiful world full of "all things richly to enjoy." Christ said He came that we might have life, and have it to the full.

Has literature woken up your senses? Surely this honors God and has great value!

Since literature appeals to our feelings as well as our senses, it can enrich our emotional life. Lyric poetry in particular celebrates such great lyric subjects as love and friendship. The emotional high points in our lives are thus captured and explored. But also our feelings at low points such as separation and death can find relief through expression in literature. The Psalms, the Song of Solomon, Lamentations and the book of Job are all excellent examples of this. My former classmate and long-time professor of Old Testament, Tremper Longman, has co-authored

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<sup>2</sup> A friend of mine observed parallels between this definition and John 1, in which Christ as the Word reveals the Father. I don't want to push this, but I mention it for you to think about.

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a book with Dan Allender, *The Cry of the Soul*, exploring the emotional depth and honesty of Biblical poetry (Navpress). Literature can make our senses more alert, our feelings more sensitive.

## Building Blocks

Literature can deepen our thoughts as well. Because literature interprets, simplifies and focuses our experience it helps us realize what is *most important*, most *basic*, in that experience. These most basic aspects of our experience are called literary archetypes. These archetypes might be thought of as the basic building blocks of all meaningful human experience. Our experience can be broken down into a wide variety of different aspects, such as the supernatural, human characters, human relationships, clothing, the human body, food, etc. In all these different aspects there is both an ideal and an un-ideal dimension. There are archetypes in each of these different areas. Some examples might include archetypes of an ideal landscape like a garden, grove or park or an ideal building such as a rustic cottage with a bright hearth, as well as archetypes of an un-ideal landscape such as a sinister or dark forest or an un-ideal building such as a prison or dungeon. The Bible, it should not surprise us, is widely recognized as the great treasure-trove of literary archetypes. God Himself focuses life for us most clearly in His Word. Literature can thus deepen and make more vivid our experience by sensitizing us to what is most important and precious in it (Ryken 85-89).

## Ultimate Context

In addition to alerting us to the *basic building blocks* of human experience, literature also shows us the *ultimate context* of our experience. It does this by concretely embodying a worldview or set of values. We have said that literature asks and answers the big questions. These might also be called the worldview questions: What is prime reality--the really real? Who is man? What happens to man at death? What is the basis of morality? What is the meaning of human history? (Sire 18) Each one of us as a human being has a set of values on which we base all our decisions. In Taiwan, people would often knock on my door in the evening and ask if I could teach them English. I would tell them that I worked in the day and so liked to spend my

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evenings with my family. They would say, "But you're not doing anything and could earn more money!" I would say, "I'm sorry, but spending time with my family is even more important to me than making extra money." The person would often walk away shaking his head thinking, "What a strange fellow!" But my response was based on my values, and this is true of all of us. The person asking me the question divided human activity into watching television and making money. Since I was not watching television, I must be available to make money. Each one of us has a worldview. We may never have thought too much about it, but still we have one. We have all assumed certain answers to the worldview questions above and these assumptions control the way we look at life and our experience. They form what we could call the *ultimate context* of our experience, the parameters or outside edges of it. Literature can deepen our thinking by helping us to become not only more aware of our own values and worldview, but also those of others throughout the world and throughout history. Because literature embodies these things in a concrete and vivid way, we can see values and worldviews *in action*. We can see what happens when we adopt a certain set of values or look at life in a certain way. We can explore, almost experimentally, the implications of various values and worldviews. Literature can thus be thought of as a laboratory in which you can put human experience in a test tube and examine it from different angles. Literature gives us truth *digested*. This is exceedingly valuable. Literature gives us an excellent opportunity to examine our own ultimate assumptions about life and to compare them with those of others.

## A Brief Worldview History

Historically in the West the earliest major worldview was that of the Greeks and Romans in which a host of personal yet finite gods were dominated by an impersonal, infinite Fate. This was a man-centered worldview in which man was "the measure of all things." This was completely superseded by Christian theism in which an infinite-personal God created us and all things. This worldview is of course definitely God-centered and remained the dominant view for many centuries. In the 1700's it was gradually replaced by a worldview called Deism in which God could be said to be shrinking and becoming more remote. This in turn gave way to what is still the dominant worldview in the West (and indeed in much of the rest of the modern world): naturalism. In this worldview, God has completely disappeared ("died" as Nietzsche said) and

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we are left with only finite-personal man in an impersonal, material universe. This worldview is of course definitely man-centered. This in turn led in the minds of many thoughtful people to despair and the negation of all worldviews: nihilism. As Dostoevsky said, "If God is dead, everything is permitted."

Much of the twentieth century can be thought of as a (vain) attempt to transcend, in a variety of ways, the despair of nihilistic naturalism. One of the major efforts in this direction has been existentialism as represented by such writers as Sartre and Camus. The heart of existentialism is an attempt to create values out of nothing, as it were, in an absurd universe. Many in the West have also turned to the East for answers and adopted eastern pantheistic monism as their worldview. In this worldview (lying behind Hinduism and Buddhism) ultimate reality is seen as an infinite-impersonal God (the Cosmos) into which we are absorbed like a drop of water into a river. The biggest stumbling block for many in the West, though, that prevents them from adopting this worldview whole-heartedly is that it says that neither personality nor individuality are ultimate in the universe.

Finally, there are many in the West today who are turning to a relatively new worldview. This has been called the new consciousness, or new age, but is actually very similar to ancient animism, a belief in the existence of many powerful spiritual forces in the world. All of these worldviews are variations on the basic non-Christian worldview in which man is at the center and thinks he does not need God. Another way to view this is through the seven eras of literary history. In Western Lit I we cover the first three: Classical (classical worldview), Medieval and Renaissance (Christian theism). These three eras can also be thought of as "pre-modern" as they all assume the reality of a supernatural world. In Western Lit II we cover the last four: Neo-classical (Deism), Romantic (moving towards Naturalism), Nineteenth Century Realism and Naturalism (Naturalism and Nihilism) and The Twentieth Century (Nihilism, Existentialism, Eastern Pantheistic Monism, New Age). The first three of these correspond roughly with what we call "Modernism" (no longer believe in God or the supernatural, but still believe in truth, reason, and man's ability to save himself—the Enlightenment mentality). The last ushers in the full-blown postmodernism that is so much with us today (an irrational, usually despairing but sometimes "playful" relativism in which we construct our own realities).

So literature, then, vividly embodies and portrays these various worldviews. It enables us to see and feel them and to understand their implications. We can feel the despair of the nihilist in reading Kafka. We can see life with God at the center in Gerard Manley Hopkins. We can become more aware of our own values and worldview and compare them with other major alternatives. We can also very clearly see how true is the Biblical claim that only God's way leads to life while all other ways lead to death.<sup>3</sup>

### Shape Over Time

But literature does more than show us the basic building blocks and the ultimate context of human experience. It also shows us what we could call the *shape of experience over time*. This has been called the monomyth or "one story" of all literature (Ryken 77-81). It seems very simple; yet dwelling on its implications both for life and for literature is very fruitful:

Romance

(The story of summer)

Tragedy

(The story of fall)

Comedy

(The story of spring)

Anti-Romance

(The story of winter)

This basic pattern, from the ideal to the un-ideal and then back to the ideal, is repeated each day (dawn, noon, evening, night), each year and in ever bigger ways in our lives (birth, maturity, old age, death) and in history (creation, fall, redemption). This is also the most basic pattern in literature. This is the shape that the human imagination gives to experience over time. It also alerts us to what has been called the deepest theme in all literature, the "paradise lost" theme. There seems to be a very deep conviction buried in each human breast that we have lost

something very precious and there is a correspondingly great desire to somehow regain it. This we see again and again in literature as it answers to something very deep in our own experience. This is a remarkable example of how a deep study of literature, as of philosophy and all the humanities, points us toward God and the Bible as meeting our greatest needs. Truly God has not left himself without a witness!<sup>4</sup>

### **Christians Should Be More Interested in Literature Than Anyone Else**

As Christians we should have a special interest in literature.

Christianity is a profoundly *literary* religion. We might not realize this, being in the middle of it, but consider the following:

The greatest of all literary classics are found in the Bible. This is widely recognized by prominent literary critics even if they are not Christians themselves. This makes sense. God is the great Artist and has revealed His truth in a variety of beautiful literary forms. Christianity has also inspired a rich abundance of literary and artistic effort, from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel to Handel's *Messiah*.

We usually think of Christ as a great Teacher, the Great Physician, but seldom as a great Poet, yet he was the greatest of all poets. His teaching effectively used a profusion of figures of speech and literary devices. The essence of the poet's gift is his ability to make connections between the natural world and the spiritual world, or the outer world and the inner. Christ did this constantly, in describing His followers as salt and light, for example. This is at least one reason why the common people heard Him gladly. His teaching had the qualities of great literature, it was vivid, clear, interesting and memorable.

Christ's use of parables alone is enough to convince us as Christians of the power of

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<sup>3</sup> This entire discussion of worldviews is heavily indebted to James Sire.

<sup>4</sup> *Triumphs of the Imagination* (Leland Ryken) and *The Universe Next Door* (James Sire) have together aided me greatly in finding my bearings as a Christian in the world of the literary

literature to teach. Jesus clearly believed this and demonstrated it throughout His public ministry.

Finally, insofar as many parts of the Bible are specifically literary in nature, a literary approach to them is both valid and very helpful. Approaching the psalms as poetry, for example, aids both in understanding and appreciating them.

## **Literature Invites us to Look at Life**

So literature can help us live thoughtfully, deliberately. It can help us examine our lives. What is the alternative? To live mindlessly as so many do today! It is to live like a vegetable or a stick or a stone. Is the study of literature useful? Yes! All the outward "busyness" of our daily lives loses meaning if we never look at the *foundation* under all that busyness. Literature helps us do this. We can learn how to make money in a business course. We can learn of the wonders of the human body in a biology course. All of these are valuable studies. But only literature gives us a concrete and vivid look at our lives themselves and what is most basic and ultimate in them. Are you interested in literature? I hope at least you are interested in life! I hope you haven't already given up all hope and settled for a mindless life: a life in which your senses, feelings and thoughts are all deadened or dying, and you are simply caught up in a whirl of meaningless activity. If you haven't, literature has a lot to offer you.

## **The Best Literature Should Be Most Exciting to Read**

Let us, finally, go all the way back to the beginning. We have spent a long time looking at what literature can *teach* us. It can wake up our senses, enrich our feelings, and deepen our thoughts by showing us the basic building blocks, ultimate context and shape in time of human experience. But that was just one reason to study it. The other was that it's fun. It's *delightful*. Is it? Television, movies, videos, comic books and pop music are all very closely related to literature and are all very popular. But what about "great" literature, the "classics"? I hope that in studying them you can experience even *greater* delight, have even *more* fun and find them

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imagination.

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actually *even much more* exciting. Studying literature is like going on a journey, an adventure. You can find both exquisite beauty and profound truth. Literature can change your life. Look beneath the rush and many pressures of your everyday life at its foundations.