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Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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Literature and the Christian Imagination

What is literature, and what is its purpose?

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I. Introduction

A. *What is literature, and what is its purpose?*

1. Literature is an artistic presentation in words (spoken or written) of some aspect of human experience (real or imagined).
2. The purpose of literature is to provide enjoyment and vicarious experiences that can deepen and enrich our lives.

2. *What is our purpose here today?*

1. We will discuss the four basic types of story (narrative) literature. These four types precede the various genres; i.e., they come before the various forms in which we find literature: short story, sonnet, long poem, drama, novel, etc.
2. We will look at the similarities between the world of the literary imagination and the Christian world view. We will attempt to show that only the Christian world view is consistent with the *monomyth* (the "one story") of literature.

3. *The four basic types of literature*

1. Romance
2. Tragedy
3. Anti-Romance
4. Comedy

2. The four basic types of literature explain human experience (man's story).

A. *Romance (Idealized Existence)*{1}

The first of these four types is Romance. Romance is the story of idealized existence, the tale of bliss or happiness. Often identified with young adulthood or the summer of life, Romance stresses that which is wholly desirable, that which is longed for, that which we would choose if we could. There are three sub-types of romance: Myth, Epic, and Romance Proper.

1. Characteristics of Myth

- a. Extremely remote in time and place.
2. Vast in scope and scale.
3. A story of beginnings.
4. Heroes and characters in myth are far beyond normal humans in *kind* as well as in *degree*. They are often gods, godlike, half-gods, demigods, etc. Consequently the laws of nature often seem suspended, so powerful are these beings.
5. Time may stand still or pass very slowly.
6. Themes: the search for perfection (or truth, beauty, wholeness, repose, bliss, order, glory, courage, etc.).
7. Individual myths are like sections of a mosaic. When all the episodes are put together, a complete mythos the "story" of a people or culture is the result.

2. Characteristics of Epic

- a. Technically a long, narrative poem in elevated style, but here an epic saga.
2. Style is earnest and dignified.
3. Characters and their actions are heroic and grand; they are quite elevated in *degree* but not in *kind*. Superior to normal men but generally answerable to the laws of nature.
4. Themes: basic eternal human concerns.
5. Epic often represents a whole tribe, culture, or epoch. Individual episodes make up a whole story.
6. Begins in the middle of the action. A modern example is the Star Wars trilogy: *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and

The Return of the Jedi are really just the middle of this epic saga. The writers know how epics work.

3. Characteristics of Romance or Romance Proper

- a. Romance is difficult to define exactly; it originated in France.
{2}
2. The term does *not* refer to the literature of the Romantic Movement; it *does* refer to any literature of whatever period or movement if the work meets the formula given below.
3. Romances incline to the wonderful, the marvelous, the exaggerated, the wholly ideal.
4. Varieties of Romance
 1. Romanticized "epics"--highly didactic
 2. Romanticized religious stories--highly didactic
 3. Romances--fictional stories enjoyed for their own sake, for delight and wonder alone
5. Characterized by the idea of courtly love.
6. Hero is somewhat above normal humans in degree, but basically he is like us.
7. Setting: remote times and places, often with exotic-sounding names.
8. Concerns: wars, famous battles, knights, kings, King Arthur, Holy Grail, exploits of brave warriors, affairs of the heart, love stories, enchantments, magic powers, extraordinary adventurers, etc.
9. Prominent themes
 1. Separation and reunion themes (various)
 2. Separation and reunion of young lovers
 3. The persecuted child who runs away or the child who is kidnapped. After many adventures, the child returns and regains his inheritance.
 4. Rescue of the distressed damsel or pure virgin

5. Knight who undertakes various tasks to prove that he is worthy of his lady's love
6. Expectation of the predestined hero (redeemer)
7. Hero who has miraculous powers (healing, etc.)
Example: Sir Lancelot in *Camelot*
8. Reenactment of the Fall and Redemption (6 and 7 above are especially noticeable in Arthurian romances)

2. *Tragedy (Loss of Bliss or Happiness)*{3}

The second major type of literature is Tragedy. If Romance is the story of happiness, bliss, or idealized existence, then Tragedy is the story of the loss of happiness, bliss, or idealized existence. It is sometimes called the story of autumn or old age.

1. Characteristics of Tragedy

- a. Hero is an exalted person.
 1. He is *always* noble in his person and spirit.
 2. He is generally noble in his social station; otherwise his downfall would not be so "tragic." In modern tragedy, hero is not always noble in social station.
2. Hero faces a dilemma, ordeal, or (moral) choice.
3. Hero, though exalted, is not perfect.
 1. He usually has a flaw
 2. This flaw leads to his downfall; hence the term *tragic flaw*
4. The hero is increasingly isolated.
5. There is normally great suffering and catastrophe.
6. This suffering brings moral growth, intellectual insight, perception to those involved.

2. Significance of Tragedy as a type of literature

- a. Tragedy is a moving presentation of human suffering caused by the hero's moral flaw or wrong choice.

2. Tragedy paints human nature on a broad canvas. It vividly portrays both poles of human behavior and experience.
 1. Human greatness
 2. Human fallenness (depravity)
This is a biblical idea; human beings are great but deeply fallen.
 3. Tragedy affirms that humans can make important choices, that choices matter, that consequences follow moral choice. This idea opposes the secularistic/naturalistic view that we are in a closed system of cause and effect; that whatever is, is right.
 4. Tragedy implies cosmic justice; i.e., you reap what you sow, and pride goes before a fall. Sometimes the punishment that would normally come in the next life is evident in the tragedy. It is a type of compression of both the seen and the unseen realms into one for the audience's edification.
3. The value of Tragedy
- a. Tragedy is generally "regarded as the most profound of all literary forms, and it has proved particularly effective in moral and intellectual stimulation." {4}
 2. The Greeks believed that Tragedy led to a purgation of unhealthy emotions.
 3. The debate about "Christian Tragedy"
 1. Some have said that Christianity and Tragedy are mutually exclusive because of the possibility of redemption, forgiveness, eternal life, etc.
 2. Definition of "Tragedy" is the key
 - a. Tragedy does not simply mean "calamity," "misfortune," or "disaster."
 2. Tragedy is a narrative form of literature in which a tragic protagonist who possesses greatness of spirit commits himself to an understanding of great magnitude within a given situation and as a result comes to spiritual suffering usually followed by perception and death, and possibly redemption. {5}
 4. The first great tragedy in the Bible is the Fall. This tragedy is the source of all the other tragedies in the Bible. (Yet even the

Fall of man was turned into a comedy [see Characteristics of Comedy below]. This is especially true of Christ's death since it turned into a comedy [the Resurrection], making it possible to turn all tragedies into comedies.)

5. Other biblical tragedies are the stories of Samson, King Saul, Absalom, etc.

3. *Anti-Romance (Unideal Existence)* Anti-Romance is the third basic type of literature and is the opposite of Romance. It represents an unideal existence; a flawed, broken world of all that we hate, fear, and dread; a nightmare world. This is the literature of winter and death. {6}

1. Characteristics of Anti-Romance

- a. Any literature that is the reverse of romance
2. Un-ideal human experience, misery
3. Alienation, despair, rebellion
4. Frustration, bondage, slavery
5. That which is feared or dreaded

2. Types of Anti-Romance

- a. Any reversal of themes of romance
2. Cynical, sarcastic--destroys hope and faith
3. Literature of despair and absurdity
4. Triumph of evil
5. Anti-utopian literature--picture of terribly regimented human existence (or Hell)
6. Extremely "realistic" or "naturalistic" stories
7. Ironical or mocking literature
8. Satirical literature
 1. Satire is "an attempt at reproof or correction through humor or ridicule." {7}
 2. The focus of satire is pointing out or ridiculing evil (or good).

3. Examples of Anti-Romance

- a. Kafka: *The Castle*, *The Trial*, "Metamorphosis"
2. Huxley: *Brave New World*
3. Orwell: *Animal Farm*, 1984

4. *Comedy (Ascent or Restoration to Bliss* {8}

Comedy is the fourth basic type of literature and is the opposite of Tragedy. It represents the restoration to bliss and is the literature of youth and the season of spring.

1. Characteristics of Comedy

- a. The story is not necessarily humorous or funny.
2. The hero of Comedy
 1. Very human with faults and foibles
 2. Hero may be (or become) isolated, but as the story progresses he is increasingly welcomed into community with others.
 3. He ends up happily assimilated into society.

2. Action and plot in Comedy

- a. Action involves a series of obstacles to overcome.
2. Plot is U-shaped (or V-shaped).
 1. Begins in prosperity or tranquility
 2. Descends into calamity
 3. Rises again to end happily

3. Examples of Comedies

- a. The sublime: Dante's *The Divine Comedy*
2. The ridiculous: situation comedies (*I Love Lucy*, etc.)

4. The happy ending Comedies are normally characterized by a happy ending.

- a. A marriage
2. A feast
3. A reconciliation
4. Some combination of these

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