

This Page:
Literature and the Christian Imagination

- | Failure of other World Views
- | Only Biblical Christianity Accounts for the Shape of Literature..
- | Notes / Further Reading

Mind Games Survival Course Manual



Table of Contents

Literature and the Christian Imagination

What is literature, and what is its purpose?

Lou Whitworth

IV. Other world views fail to account for mankind's story as seen in literature and the Bible.

This analysis revealed that there are four basic types of literature, and the Bible reveals amazing parallels with the shape of the literary imagination. Non-Christian philosophies and religions cannot account for the persistence of these literary patterns.

A. *Eastern thought*

In general, Eastern thought and Eastern religions fail to get past a shallow Romance. Because all is supposedly illusion, there can be no evil, thus no Fall, no pain, no punishment, no forgiveness. It is very unrealistic. New Age thought is very similar in most respects.

2. *Naturalism/Secular Humanism*

Naturalism/Secular Humanism rejects everything but the lower realm of man (Anti-Romance), as in Bertrand Russell's comment that life must be based on unyielding despair. The only hope is in science in order to change society and the environment. Genetic engineering is especially important in order that man himself can be changed.

3. *Existentialism*

Existentialism offers no hope for future restoration or reconciliation. In a sense, existentialism acknowledges Tragedy because it

reinforces its "reality." But it is stuck in Anti-Romance with no hope for resolution of the human dilemma (as in Sartre's play *No Exit*).

5. Only biblical Christianity can account for the shape of literature and the human story behind it.

A. *Similar patterns*

Enormous similarities exist between the shape of the literary imagination and the shape of the Bible, between the world of the literary imagination and the Bible's story of man. These four basic types of literature are entirely consistent with biblical Christianity, but not with other belief systems.

2. *Similar stories*

Biblical Christianity can account for the similarities between common stories, legends, and myths found all over the world. This is true because the Bible teaches that human beings all originated from one set of parents, Adam and Eve. Even stories, legend, and myths prior to the Flood could have been preserved through Noah and his family and then dispersed all over the world following the Tower of Babel.

3. *Created for Paradise*

Human beings were created for Paradise (not for Hell or for the sinful world). We sense the loss of Paradise; we feel that something is amiss. C. S. Lewis speaks of an "inconsolable longing" in the hearts of men. We long for something better, and this longing, Lewis claims, can lead the nonbeliever to Christ and pull the prodigal Christian back to Christ. This longing is a divine discontent that points back beyond the earthly to the heavenly and serves to remind us that nothing earthly is ultimately satisfying.

4. *Created in God's image*

We were created in God's image, and, since He is the Creator-Artist without equal, we are co- or sub-creators with Him (Gen. 1--2). We create, therefore, whether consciously or subconsciously, in imitation of Him. He is also the author of the Scriptures containing marvelous stories. Since only humans tell or write stories, literature reflects God's image in man even though this image is often greatly distorted.

5. *Innate ideas*

Romans 1:16--32 indicates that humans are born with some idea about God in our hearts and minds. Human beings know something of God but usually try to suppress that knowledge, replace it, or pervert it. Ecclesiastes 3:11 proclaims that God has set eternity in the

heart of man: the avoidance of death, the yearning for "Heaven" and eternal life, etc.

6. *Use of symbols*

Even many secularists admit that man is uniquely the symbol-making animal, especially in language. "Humans are set off from other creatures by their unique ability to symbolize thorough language." {10} Linguists tell us that there are "deep structures" in the human mind that predispose humans to language acquisition and use. Only a religion or philosophy that makes a clear distinction between men and animals can accommodate man's use of symbols, figurative language, archetypes, etc. The Christian faith recognizes these distinctions.

7. *Redemptive analogies*

Related both to the idea of inherent ideas and the use of symbols is the idea of redemptive analogies as revealed in *The Peace Child and Eternity in Their Hearts* by Don Richardson. He believes that God placed these analogies in the hearts of men to enable them to respond to the gospel. They are often stories that mirror parts of the stories or message of the Scriptures.

Conclusion

Christianity offers true hope and can account for the variety of man's experiences as presented in literature. Other religions cannot. The Scriptures give us guidelines, great freedom, and wonderful patterns for life and for enjoying and creating literature. Christians are, after all, people of the Book. Wherever the Book is honored, literature flourishes.

Notes

1. The idea for this talk and the bulk of the material for this outline in sections I and II are taken or adapted from two books by Leland Ryken. They are *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), esp. 199--253, and *Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), esp. 75--98.
2. Information on the subject of romance literature is adapted from *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1970), s.v. "Romance."
3. This section is adapted from E. Beatrice Batson, "A Christian View of Tragedy," in *Christian Imagination*, 211--26.
4. Ryken, *Christian Imagination*, 211.
5. Batson, 211.

6. This section is adapted from Harry Boonstra, "Can Satire Be Religious?", in *Christian Imagination*, 241--53.
7. *Ibid.*, 232.
8. This section is adapted from Nelvin Nos, "The Religious Meaning of Comedy," in *Christian Imagination*, 241--53.
9. The remainder of this outline is my attempt to draw out the parallels between the biblical picture of the human story and the shape of the literary imagination as presented in Ryken's books.
10. A quote from Marvin K. Mayers in Clifford Wilson and Donald McKeon, *The Language Gap* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan/Probe: 1984), 178. (For copies contact Probe Ministries, 1900 Firman Drive, Suite 100, Richardson, TX 75081, 214-480-0240.)

For Further Reading

Carnell, Corbin Scott. *Bright Shadow of Reality: C. S. Lewis and the Feeling Intellect*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974.

A fascinating look at Lewis's contributions to Christian apologetics and literary theory with special emphasis on his views concerning the significance of human longing.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957.

A foundational book on archetypal criticism by its leading proponent. A must for serious students of literature.

Gallagher, Susan V., and Roger Lundin. *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.

A good introduction to literature and to the issues Christians involved in studying literature should think through.

Gardner, John. *On Moral Fiction*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1978.

An attempt by a respected author and literature professor to establish the idea that literature, very broadly considered, has an ethical core and a life-affirming purpose. Unfortunately the late author was so vilified by his peers and the critics that he later took back or qualified much that he said.

Griffin, Bryan F. *Panic Among the Philistines*. Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1983.

A scathing expose and rebuke to the self-appointed and self-important literary establishment and all its pretentiousness and sordid little compromises. Stirred up a hornet's nest.

Hunt, Gladys. *Honey for a Child's Heart*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1969.

A wonderful book on the value of reading, especially for children. It has very helpful reading lists arranged by age.

Kirk, Russell. *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormality in Literature and Politics*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969.

The dean of the American political conservative movement writes of his first love, literature, and of the deplorable state into which it has fallen. Quite an antidote to politically correct thinking and reading.

Podhoretz, Norman. *The Bloody Crossroads: Where Literature and Politics Meet*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986.

Podhoretz, editor-in-chief of *Commentary* and a leading neoconservative thinker, "explores," as the book jacket says, "the literary and cultural dimensions of the struggle between totalitarianism and the democratic West." It is a crossroads "where writers have often bled for expressing their opinions, and where their opinions have influenced political leaders to shed the blood of others."

Ryken, Leland. *Literature of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1974.

Ryken opens up the stories of the Bible as the great literature they truly are. He also categorizes the stories as to literary types and forms used by the authors.

_____. *Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979.

This is a fantastic book and one of the three first books I recommend that interested students purchase if they want to develop a Christian world view of literature. It is a rich, rich resource, and if you want to dig deeper, start collecting the books mentioned in the endnotes.

_____. *Windows to the World: Literature in Christian Perspective*. 2d ed. Richardson, Texas: Probe Books, 1990.

This work contains some of the same material as the previous book although the discussions are briefer here. What is noteworthy in this book is the amount of discussion about reader response criticism and the rights and responsibilities of the Christian reader.

_____, ed. *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981.

This is the fourth book I would recommend for those seeking to develop a Christian world view of literature. It is chock full of great discussions by a wide variety of Christian thinkers, writers, and professors.

Sire, James W. *How to Read Slowly: A Christian Guide To Reading with the Mind*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978.

This is a helpful book for developing a Christian world view, but I recommend that students read it after they have read the book below.

_____. *The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalog*. 3d ed. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997.

This is one of the big three I urge interested students to read (or buy and read) right away. It is hard to oversell this book. It is a mini-course in "practical" philosophy and reveals clearly how literature reflects a person's world view. Read it.

Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. *Reading Between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Literature*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990.

A helpful book with an overview approach to the Christian and literature. First read Ryken's *Triumphs* if you can find it; then read this one and Gallagher and Lundin's *Literature*.



Whitworth, Louis D. *Literature Under the Microscope: A Christian Case for Reading*. Dallas: Probe Ministries, 1984.

One of the first three books a student needs to read. Packed in its fifty-eight pages is more helpful information on a Christian approach to reading literature than you'll find anywhere else. It may seem deceptively simple and straightforward, but there is a lot here. Some have gotten more out of it by reading it twice. Buy it and read it.

Williams, Duncan. *Trousered Apes: Sick Literature in a Sick Society*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1971.

Williams is superb at pointing out the abysmal state of modern literature. He dissects and displays with utmost care the literary frivolities of our age. In spite of his mastery at calling attention to these problems, he is woefully short on solutions or corrections.

©1998 Probe Ministries

 [Table of Contents](#) 



[Return to](#)  [Probe Home](#)