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Teaching Christian Readings of Secular Young Adult Literature

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TEACHING CHRISTIAN READINGS OF SECULAR
YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

By

Angela R. Lee

Honors Capstone Project

Submitted to the Faculty of

Olivet Nazarene University

for partial fulfillment of the requirements for

GRADUATION WITH UNIVERSITY HONORS

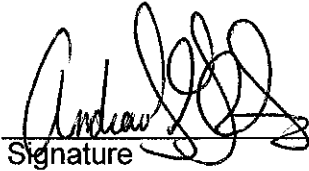
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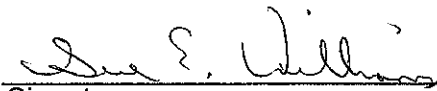
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	5
Abstract	6
Introduction.....	7
Purpose	7
Methodology	8
Case Study: Christian Reading practices.....	11
Method.....	11
Observations.....	13
Analysis	16
Conclusion.....	18
Literature Review.....	19
Practicing Discernment	19
Defense of reading with discernment.....	19
Method for reading with discernment.....	21
Searching for God's Truth in Fiction.....	23
Defense of reading for God's truth.....	23
Method for reading for God's truth.....	24
Using Story Structure	26
Defense of reading stories.....	26
Method for reading stories.....	27
Appreciating Beauty.....	28

Defense of reading for the appreciation of beauty	29
Method for reading for the appreciation of beauty.....	29
Exploring Other Worldviews	30
Defense of and method for reading literature from different worldviews..	31
Instructional Unit.....	33
Unit Overview	33
Parent/Guardian Letter	33
Lesson 1: Using Discernment	35
Teacher reflection.....	43
Lesson 2: Searching for God's Truth in Fiction.....	44
Teacher reflection.....	51
Lesson 3: Using Myth Structure	52
Teacher Reflection	61
Lesson 4: Appreciating Beauty.....	62
Teacher reflection.....	71
Lesson 5: Exploring Worldviews	72
Teacher reflection.....	77
Discussion	79
Theological Differences in Christian Reading.....	79
Implications of a Few Doctrinal Differences in Christian Reading.....	80
Next Steps	82

Works Cited83

Works Consulted88

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Parent Guardian Letter	34
Figure 2: Unit Calendar.....	39
Figure 3: Discussion Web Template	40
Figure 4: Overhead of John 8:1-11	41
Figure 5: "She Didn't Mean to Do It" Worksheet.....	42
Figure 6: Overhead of "Fix You" Lyrics	48
Figure 7: "Dream Horses" Worksheet	50
Figure 8: Overhead of Hero Cycle	56
Figure 9: "Instructions" by Neil Gaiman.....	58
Figure 10: "Boys and Girls Together" by Neil Gaiman.....	59
Figure 11: Myth Structure Handout	60
Figure 12: Overhead of "Breaking Drought"	66
Figure 13: "Sit a While" Handout.....	67
Figure 14: "Lessons from a Painting by Rothko" Handout.....	68
Figure 15: "On Lichtenstein's 'Bananas & Grapefruit'" Handout	69
Figure 16: "Introduction to Poetry" Handout.....	70
Figure 17: "Naming" Overhead	76

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to empower Christian young adults to engage with secular literature adolescent literature in a manner that encourages them to grow in their faith. The project has three main components: a case study article on Christian reading practices based on their reviews of *The Shack*, a literature review of Christian reading theory, and a five day instructional unit plan designed to teach high school freshmen Christians to engage appropriate with secular literature.

In the case study, over 400 Amazon.com reader reviews and comments on the Christian fiction novel *The Shack* were examined in order to determine a description of Christian reading practices. The analysis revealed that Christians have diverse reading practices but still share central concerns about discerning truth, determining texts' meanings, and interacting with literature in a way that pleases God.

The literature review on Christian reading theory explored the existing theories on why and how Christians should read secular literature. Five broad categories surfaced from the synthesis of the existing research. These categories included the ideas that Christians should practice discernment in what they read, look for God's truth in secular literature, analyze the structure of texts, appreciate the beauty of literature, and use literature as a means for exploring other worldviews.

The instructional unit plan was modeled after the literature review with each day of instruction representing one of the five categories covered in the literature review. The instructional unit was designed with the constructivist philosophy of education in mind, giving students the opportunity to explore the ideas presented to them but ultimately draw their own conclusions. The unit was taught in January 2011 to the Freshmen English class at Kankakee Trinity Academy. Teacher reflections are included after each lesson.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout time, Christians have debated the best way to interact with the secular world. The phrase “in the world but not of it” has prompted some to isolate themselves from non-Christians, while on the opposite extreme, some believers interpret Christian freedom as a license for hedonistic living. Christians from both extremes have voiced their opinions on literature, some outright rejecting literature and others indiscriminately indulging in whatever reading they please. The question of “what is appropriate for Christians to read” becomes an even more volatile issue when adolescents enter the equation.

Purpose

Thus, the purpose of this project is to explore ways to teach adolescent Christians how to interact with secular young adult literature. In the book *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*, the authors state that their purpose in writing “is to help students of literature understand more clearly the nature of language and literature, to acquaint them with the tools of literary study, and to introduce them to the rich history of Christian reflection on literature, language, and the reading experience” (Gallagher and Lundin xi). This project shares a similar objective, but whereas Gallagher and Lundin’s book focuses on students at the university level, this project focuses on high school aged adolescents and young adult literature (YAL).

Although some research has been done to explain how Christians in general might interact with secular literature, little or none of this research has focused specifically on the adolescent audience or on YAL. The field of Christian reading should expand to include YAL because these texts are particularly appropriate for adolescent readers. YAL experts Bushman and Parks Haas suggest that young readers “are simply unable to connect [classical literary texts] with their goals, level of development, and

experience” (3). In contrast YAL offers adolescents stories in which “conflicts are often consistent with the young adult’s experience, themes are of interest to young people, protagonists and most characters are young adults, and the language parallels that of young people” (Bushman and Parks Haas 2). Since these texts are widely regarded as more appropriate for young adult readers, it naturally follows that Christian reading theory should expand to include young readers and the texts that attract them. This is particularly important because adolescents are at an age when they “begin to critically evaluate their parents’ values and ideas, which they passively accepted as universal truths in childhood” (Bushman and Parks Haas 13). Since adolescents are in the process of making their faith their own, teaching them to interact with secular material with discernment and critical thinking could contribute to their spiritual maturation.

Methodology

If we can agree that teaching adolescent Christians to read secular literature is important and beneficial, the next step is establishing the particulars of what should be taught and how it should be taught. Thus, this project consists of three integral parts: a case study exploring Christian reading practices, a literature review of Christian reading theory and a five day instructional unit plan designed for a freshmen English class at a Christian high school.

The case study is a foundational piece for this research project because it attempts to gather information about how Christians already read and respond to texts. Before one can suggest a method for how Christians should or might be able to read, one needs to explore the Christians’ current reading practices. Through a case study on reader response to *The Shack*, this article attempts to pinpoint some of the common characteristics and concerns of Christian readers.

The literature review is modeled after Leland Ryken's assertion that those promoting Christian readings of texts must accomplish two tasks: provide a "defense of literature" and suggest a methodology or approach to literature that is unique to Christians (23). The literature integrates both these tasks under five broad categories:

- 1) Practicing Discernment
- 2) Searching for God's Truth in Fiction
- 3) Using Myth Structure
- 4) Appreciating Beauty
- 5) Exploring Worldviews

The five day instructional unit mirrors these five categories with each lesson plan reflecting the research in the literature review.

The methodology for the instructional unit is largely grounded in the constructivist approach to teaching. Leila Christenbury describes this framework as teaching for discovery. One description she gives of this model is "teaching where the students are, not where the book is or where the teacher is" (Christenbury 70). Recognizing where students are—spiritually, academically, socially, culturally, linguistically—is essential in teaching for discovery. Much educational research suggests that students learn best when they are constructing their own understanding of new concepts rather than having the pre-fabricated structures handed to them. This model of teaching requires both "[a]ctivating prior knowledge and generating interest" because these practices "create an instructional context in which students will read with purpose and anticipation" (Vacca and Vacca 208). Additionally, both the activities and the assessments should be varied and meaningful in order to capture student interest, engage their prior knowledge, and authentically measure what the students know and think.

In terms of the actual instruction, the constructivist approach to teaching involves a focus on reader response. This is a favorable approach because as Bushman and

Parks Haas suggest, it changes the focus of the curriculum “from text to reader” (60). Reader response is an especially appropriate way to teach YAL because it gives students the opportunity to engage actively with the texts rather than simply swallowing and regurgitating regimented facts about the reading. Reader response expert Louise Rosenblatt suggests, “The really important things in the education of youth cannot be taught in the formal didactic manner; they are things which are experienced, absorbed, accepted, incorporated, in the personality through emotional and aesthetic experiences” (qtd. in Bushman and Parks Haas 59). Using the constructivist model and reader response are especially appropriate when teaching on spiritual issues because the goal is to help students take ownership of their faith rather than handing them a pre-packaged set of beliefs and expecting total conformity.

Though the literature review deals primarily with how Christians interact with fiction, the instructional unit actually focuses on young adult poetry. Though the concepts of Christian reading can be applied to young adult novels, poetry works well in the context of this unit because it can be taught in the time period allotted for this unit, and, according to Don Gallo, short texts appeal more than novels to struggling readers (109). The texts chosen for the unit come from reputable sources for YAL. One text is from Poet Laureate Billy Collins *Poetry 180* project, which was designed as a way to incorporate poetry into the everyday routine of high school students. Two poems were written by Newberry Award winner Neil Gaiman, and the remainder of the poems come from a collection called *Heart to Heart*, which was a Michael L. Printz honor book in 2002. Both the Newberry and the Michael L. Printz awards are presented by the American Library Association, and they are widely considered some of the highest achievements in children’s and adolescent literature respectively.

CASE STUDY: CHRISTIAN READING PRACTICES

Various studies have advocated how Christians should read; yet, the proposed methods and theories are only marginally useful unless they align with the actual reading practices of the Christian community. A case study of how Christian readers have responded to *The Shack* may offer insight into many Christians' reading practices. First published in the U.S. in 2007, William Paul Young's Christian fiction novel *The Shack* quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller. In *The Shack*, protagonist Mack Phillips copes with the loss of his six-year-old daughter to a serial rapist/murderer. One day, Mack receives a letter from God inviting him to visit the shack where his daughter was sexually abused and killed. Mack goes to the shack and meets all three members of the Trinity: a middle-aged African American woman named Papa (God the Father), a Middle-Eastern Jewish carpenter (Jesus), and an ethereal Asian girl named Sarayu (the Holy Spirit). Throughout his weekend at the shack with God, Mack learns to better cope with his daughter's death, heals old emotional wounds from his abusive father, and deepens his relationship with God (Young). This text serves as a basis for this study because it elicited a wide spectrum of responses from its Christian readers. Through an analysis of reader reviews of *The Shack* on Amazon.com, this study endeavors not to describe how Christians should read but how they already read.

Method

The design of this study is loosely modeled after Paul Gutjahr's research on the popularity of the *Left Behind* novels, a Christian fiction series in the 1990s. Gutjahr read the Amazon.com reader book reviews about *Left Behind* and emailed a survey to reviewers asking about their responses to the books and requesting demographic information. At the time of Gutjahr's study, Amazon allowed reviewers to display their email addresses. This is no longer permitted. Gutjahr then analyzed the responses and

drew conclusions about why the *Left Behind* books achieved such remarkable popularity (218-219).

For this study on Christian reading practices, three Amazon.com reader book reviews of *The Shack* (one five-star, one three-star, and one one-star rating) were selected based on the large number of views and comments each review had merited. The three reviews and over 400 reader comments were examined and analyzed in order to determine common characteristics of Christian reading practices.¹

The model of this study does carry certain limitations, the main one being that one the respondents' demographic information cannot be conclusively identified. Since Amazon is a website, the respondents were limited to those readers with internet access and computer literacy. As Gutjahr points out in his study, "Those who write reviews tend to have strong opinions about the book on which they are commenting" (218); thus, the reviews and comments likely only reflect the opinions of those readers who reacted strongly to the text while those with more mild reactions are less represented. The study is also based on the assumption that because *The Shack* is Christian fiction, the majority of readers and respondents are Christians. Given that a large number if not a majority of commenters made references to their Christian beliefs or faith practices, this does not seem to be an unreasonable assumption to make. Of course, the faith background of all respondents is still impossible to determine; however, any comments in which the writer explicitly states that he or she is not a Christian were not considered as part of this study.

¹ Although the reader comments are by authors other than the authors of the reviews, they are not cited separately in the Works Cited. To distinguish between material drawn from the comments and material drawn from the review itself, the comment author's screen name is given in the in-text citation along with a reference to the review from which it was taken and the page number on which the comment was listed as of 13 April 2010 (Note: the pages were sorted oldest to newest).

Observations

While many of the respondents certainly fell in the middle ground, the interpretive community participating on Amazon.com seems to be comprised of two polarized groups. The groups might aptly be described as the “Heretics” and the “Pharisees” as these are the terms that the commenters themselves often use to label one another. The Heretics generally take a more liberal approach to the novel, permitting subjectivity and appreciating nonbiblical representations of God as fresh and helpful. The Pharisees largely tout *The Shack* as unorthodox and dangerous, suggesting that its faulty theology and deviation from scripture have the power to lead people away from truth.

Regardless of their stance on the book, the respondents frequently attempt to establish their personal authority in order to add validity to their opinions. These sources of authority vary considerably but include education, profession, personal faith, reaction to the novel, knowledge of theology or the Bible, or discrediting the authority of other respondents. In terms of establishing educational or professional authority, respondents cite their degrees in Bible, claim to be church librarians, mention their work experience as pastors, missionaries, or even pastor’s children. Far more often, however, the commenters mention the quality of their relationship with God, the firmness of their beliefs, or the length of time they have been Christians. A. Haag, for example, establishes his or her authority on the basis of being a “womb to tomb Christian” (in Ross 2). As debates flow about whether or not *The Shack* was a helpful or harmful resource for Christians, some respondents establish the validity of their comments on their behavioral or spiritual reactions to the book. D. Hazel wrote, “My son excepted [sic] Christ into his heart after reading this book and to me that is worth more than its weight in gold.....I give it 100 stars!!!!!!!!!!!!” (in Ross 16). Knowledge of the Bible and/or theology is often cited as a source of authority. In a small debate between Eric Wilson

(the author of one of the reviews) and Steve Taylor (a commenter), Wilson mentions his Bible degree and experience as a missionary, pastor, and pastor's son (Eric Wilson in Wilson 1). Taylor discredits Wilson's academic authority saying "you don't need to have a Bible college degree to know a lie when you hear it" and goes on to cite a passage from scripture about false prophets and heresy (in Wilson 1).

Beyond establishing authority, distinguishing truth becomes an especially central topic in the readers' debates. With a few exceptions, the respondents seem to recognize the Bible as the transcendent anchor of truth. Beyond the authority of scripture, they stop agreeing. Many respondents feel that *The Shack* does not represent the Bible accurately and thus conclude that it is unorthodox, or in extreme instances Satanic. As one respondent claims, "No good can come from this sugarcoated work of Satan" (Richard D'Ippolito in Stilson 2). Other respondents recognize that reactions to *The Shack* likely vary from person to person, and thus the truthfulness of the book is subjective. As one respondent writes, "I wouldn't recommend this book....However, the book seems to have helped some people and if The Shack has led or leads anyone to God through Jesus Christ and the Word Of God then it can't be all that bad I suppose." (I.J. Lewis in Ross 15). Another commenter seems to claim that truth is entirely subjective saying: "Everyone has the option to form their own view of God or a higher spirit based on their experience and feelings" (Maggie in Stilson 5).

One of the main issues in establishing the novel's truthfulness or lack thereof relates to the book's representation of God. In his review, Drew Ross asserts that people should not create unbiblical representations of God to suit their own needs. Other respondents disagree with comments like "[t]he fact that [God] gave us so many illustrations tells me that helping us to understand who He is is very important to Him and NOT limited to only these" (J. Davis in Ross 15). The gender of God as represented in *The Shack* is a source of scrutiny for many readers. Theresa Freeman, like many

other respondents, dislikes seeing God represented as a woman: "I firmly believe God is a man" (in Ross 3). Others claim that the gender of God is not a problem pointing to the use of both feminine and masculine language in the original Hebrew and Greek versions of the Bible. *The Shack's* ethnic representation of God is also a contested issue, though substantially less so than gender. One commenter notes, "I have a real hard time picturing my Lord as Aunt Gemima, and I still can't pronounce the name this guy gave to the Holy Spirit" to which another responded, "Why do you find it so absurd that God could appear as a black woman cook? Do you believe that God is a white man?" (Lora B. Pfister in Ross 16; Skeptical Shopper in Ross 21).

Some of the debate centers around establishing an understanding of what fiction should mean to the Christian community. Is it helpful or harmful? While at first some respondents seem to be dismissing fiction as evil, their views on its dangers actually highlight the genre's power. As K. Wilson writes, "Fiction is what leads people astray because they perceive it as truth" (in Ross 14). Not all commenters view fiction and truth as mutually exclusive, however, and they suggest that the novel is both Biblical and truthful. J.M. Young, for example, suggests that *The Shack* is a tool to help readers better understand God and the Bible (in Ross 4). In terms of the fictional writing style, a majority of respondents do not find the novel literarily excellent, but they disagree on whether or not this detracts from the overall quality. Some suggest that the poor writing is distracting, while others claim that story is effective despite the style (M. Mushala in Ross 15; J. Davis in Ross 15).

The readers certainly suggest myriad meanings for the book. Some lament that the book leaves some questions unanswered while others believe that the unanswered questions are intentional and that "the point is to make us think" (Tracy in Stilson 2). Many conclude that *The Shack* was about Mack's suffering and the relief he found in a relationship with God. Others consider the book's major attribute its alternative

representation of God and applaud the book's description of "non-performance based and non-legalistic approaches to understanding faith" (P. Rutten in Ross 1). Many commenters include highly personal responses to the book, claiming it did or did not help them through a time of suffering or the loss of a family member (Lynn Ellen Mccarthy in Ross 16). Many of the respondents seem to base their assessments of the book's significance on the assumption that the meaning of the text is fixed, while dontcallmejosh asks, "Isn't the purpose of fiction to get your own meaning out of it[?]" (in Ross 13). Thus, the debate over the meaning of the book considers not only what the meaning is but how one should go about determining the meaning of a work.

Analysis

Despite the polarization, one can still distinguish a number of characteristics that seemed to apply to both the "heretic" and "Pharisee" facets of the Christian reader-response community. Perhaps the community's most distinctive element is the fact that authority is based on both knowledge and faith. Distinct from the mainstream scholarly community that values the epistemic benefits of knowledge, belief is just as important if not more important for Christian readers. In this community, Spencer's suggestion that faith might be an "epistemic advantage" is upheld (274). When respondents viewed their debate competitors as lacking faith, they tended to dismiss or discredit their comments. Belief alone, however, was not enough to support weak statements. For example, when one respondent claimed she believed God was a man, others used academic knowledge of Hebrew and Greek scripture to show that masculine and feminine language is used to represent God. This is consistent with Christian critic Donald Williams' assertion that Christians must use both faith and reason in reading. He says, "When God gave you a new heart, did he not give you a new mind as well? That is part of the package!"

(Williams 249). Williams, along with many of the respondents on Amazon, demand that authority of interpretation be based on both faith and knowledge.

Discerning truth also seems to be a major concern for Christian readers. Respondents were clearly not united as to whether or not fiction could be a source of truth. Some, particularly the Pharisees, were skeptical of elements of *The Shack* that did not seem to align with scripture while others, usually the Heretics, appreciated Young's use of creative license. In some ways, the Pharisees held a higher opinion of the power of fiction because they believed it had the potential to lead followers astray. The Heretics often dismissed the Pharisees arguments by claiming that the book was "only fiction." In doing so, however, the Heretics may have inadvertently suggested that readers are impervious to the power of fiction or that fiction and truth are mutually exclusive. Other respondents claimed that fiction contains some truth or is an alternative representation of truth. Barratt and Pooley applaud this more integrated approach to literature suggesting that "Literature is not a substitute for life but a part of life" (1). In response to Christians who, like the Pharisees, view literature as a danger to be avoided, they assert that the worse stance Christians can take on literature "is not enthusiastic participation, but ignorance and inaction" (Barratt and Pooley 1).

In determining the meaning of the text, the Pharisees usually dismissed the idea of subjective interpretation but still demonstrated subjectivity in their myriad responses. In general, the Pharisees based the meaning of the text on the purity of truth it represented and on how well they believed it aligned with the Bible. Other respondents determined the meaning of the text to be the personal applications they were able to derive from it while others still suggested that the text provided insights into pre-existing beliefs. This set of respondents support VanderMey's assertion that one can explore the desires of faith through reading literature (82).

Conclusion

As this study demonstrates, Christian reading practices vary considerably. While some approach literature with fear and suspicion, others dismiss its potential impact. Discerning the truth and texts' meanings seem to be central concerns for most of the readers in this study, though their methods for discerning truth and determining meaning differ. Since Christians hold such diverse opinions on reading practices, a proposed method for how Christians should read must endeavor to address the entire spectrum of Christian reading practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Practicing Discernment

Christians have not always held a high opinion of literature. In Bushman and Haas' chapter on censorship, they list thirteen groups/organizations that are especially known for their involvement in censoring books in schools. Over half of the groups on the list are Christian organizations such as Focus on the Family and the Christian Coalition (Bushman and Haas 258). Christians have even been known to ban the Bible. When Martin Luther and John Wycliffe translated the Bible into common languages, they caused a stir in the church because ordinary lay people were not supposed to have access to the Bible (Wallace). What the church leaders who banned Bibles in vernacular languages knew and what Christian organizations that actively censor books now know is that literature is powerful. Without proper training, Christian readers can be swayed indiscriminately by literature.

Defense of reading with discernment

Most often, Christians advocate banning books because they contain explicit content or sinful behavior; however, Christian readers should keep in mind that topics like sexuality and violence are not off limits to them. Jesus himself mentions these topics. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus directly addresses issues of sexuality and murder. The crucial element is not the recognition of the topic itself but discerning whether a text is treating moral evil as evil or condoning improper sexuality or violence (Veith 33). Denying outright that books can provoke sinful behavior would be erroneous, but what leads one reader astray may have a very different impact on another. As Veith writes of books with sexual content, "One reader may experience lust when he reads a particular novel...And yet, another reader may be morally unaffected by a passage that is a serious moral stumbling block to someone else" (33). Williams suggests that even if

texts contain faults or lies, Christian readers are better off discerning those lies than ignoring the texts altogether. Texts that contain faults can still grow us, and if they fail to do so, “the fault lies not in the book but in the reader” (Williams 62).

When Christians read or forbid the reading of books without discernment, they often close themselves off from opportunities to learn or expose themselves to negative ideas, falsely believing that certain books are safe. T.S. Eliot suggests that censorship of books for moral purposes is ineffective because “it gives people a false sense of security in leading them to believe that books which are not suppressed are harmless. Whether there *is* such a thing as a harmless book, I am not sure” (201). Furthermore, Gallagher and Lundin suggest that sex and profanity are not the content elements that should concern Christians the most. The real dangerous themes in modern literature deal with “the acceptance of materialism, the encouragement of egotism, and the glorification of violence” (Gallagher and Lundin 141). They cite as examples texts that “impl[y] that a woman will never be completely fulfilled unless she has a man, or that true masculinity involves mowing down thousands of Asian people with a machine gun” (Gallagher and Lundin 141). According to these guidelines, even books categorized as “Christian fiction” could plant dangerous ideas in the undiscerning reader’s mind.

Reading books that challenge their beliefs may actually open Christians up to spiritual growth and learning. Madeline L’Engle suggests that academic discoveries frequently disturb Christian communities, and rather than sticking ardently to what we believe, perhaps what we should do is continually question the religious establishment. This does not mean doubting God, but rather being skeptical about what people declare about God (L’Engle 133). Leithart encourages this open-minded attitude, suggesting that Christians to read for the whole picture rather than finding themselves stuck on small offensive parts. He uses the example of books with sexual content. An undiscerning reader may write the book off as pornographic “without ever realizing that the sexy

passages are in a book that challenges cheap sex” (Leithart 214). Thus, books that seem contrary to Christian principles on the surface, may actually promote similar ethics upon further examination.

Method for reading with discernment

The most important method for reading literature with discernment is to consider context. As Gallagher and Lundin firmly assert at the beginning of their book, “To understand a text, we must see its context” (xxvi). Christian readers have at times rejected entire pieces of literature because they take offense to small passages, but discerning readers should consider such passages in the context of the whole piece because “part of our responsibility as readers...is to deal with texts fairly, considering the author’s intentions and the meaning of the work as a whole” (Gallagher and Lundin 140). Failure to discern an author’s purpose can result in gross misinterpretations of texts. Leithart cites an example of an article that claimed that J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series was intended to promote Satanism among children. This often quoted article was, in fact, originally published in an online satire newspaper, but readers failed to discern the writer’s purpose ended up taking the text literally (Leithart 212-213).

When dealing with issues of obscenity in literature, understanding the text’s purpose remains important. Part of being a discerning reader means understanding “we must decide what kind of action the text is encouraging us to take” (Gallagher and Lundin 139). Whether or not a passage should be labeled obscene has much more to do with its purpose than its literal content. Gallagher and Lundin suggest that “[t]ruly obscene literature...depicts human sin in order to encourage its practice” (139). They cite use of swear words as an example. Discerning readers should ask themselves whether the offensive words are included for the sake of developing characters and setting or whether the text seems to be swearing simply for the sake of swearing.

The presence of obscene or sinful behaviors alone is usually not adequate grounds to avoid a text. As Brian Godawa points out, the Bible contains all the elements—sex, violence, drug/alcohol use, etc.—that people typically condemn in movies and literature; however, it uses these elements in a way that exposes and condemns them. Godawa describes patterns in how the Bible deals with descriptions of sin. First, the Bible simply records what people do, and it does not attempt to hide or embellish real human actions. Rather, the Biblical writers show human evils for didactic purposes. Second, the text does not go into the gory details. We learn of murders, rapes, and other atrocities without detailed imagery. Third, the evil in the Bible is never treated as anything but evil. As Godawa writes, “Sin leads to destruction, not to freedom unfettered by moral restraint” (437). Fourth, evil acts in the Bible are not glorified. The structure of the stories encourages us to turn away from evil behaviors (Godawa 437-8). Literature that follows similar guidelines is acceptable and quite possibly beneficial to discerning Christian readers.

Of course, occasions may arise when the discerning reader might choose not to read a text. Exercising discernment in what entertainment we consume is not just a good idea; it is a Christian responsibility according to Romans 12:2, which tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Godawa 440). Christians, of course, must be aware that books can affect them negatively, and sometimes the right decision *might* be not to read if submitting to the text will cause more harm than good for the individual reader (Leithart 218-219). Although the idea of creating one-size-fits-all guidelines for what is and is not acceptable for Christians to read sounds easy and attractive, it does not work. What causes one reader to stumble may not have the same effect on another. What one Christian can read without any problems may lead another astray. The process of deciding what to read and not to read is thus highly individual. Pooley suggests that Christians “[f]ollow the Biblical principle that whatever might cause the

weakest group member to stumble is a greater concern than anyone else's Christian, artistic or creative freedom" ("What does Literature Do?" 31). Yet Christians must also follow the command of Philippians 4:8 to think about "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable" and when secular literature "meets any of these qualifications, it deserves our consideration and attention" ("What Does Literature Do?" 31).

Searching for God's Truth in Fiction

A fundamental question Christians defending or working against literature encounter is whether or not fiction can contain truth. Historically, Christians have taken two common approaches to literature. On one hand, they may dismiss literature entirely as "untruthful, frivolous, a waste of time" or childish, but on the other hand, they may believe the imaginary world is "a direct replica of everyday life, ignoring all that is unlikelike about it" (Ryken 25).

Defense of reading for God's truth

The middle ground between these two arguments may be the most viable stance. St. Augustine's approach to literature aptly summarizes this middle ground argument. He writes, "[L]et everyone who is a good and true Christian understand that truth belongs to his Master, wherever it is found. And while he recognizes and acknowledges truth, even in the pagans' religious literature, let him reject their superstitious imaginings at the same time" (Augustine 351). In other words, Christians may be able to find God's truth in secular literature, but they should still exercise discernment in interpreting that truth.

Of course, neither the argument that literature can lead people astray nor the assertion that literature benefits readers is false. The fact that literature can be harmful, however, is not an excuse not to read but rather a call for Christians to practice

discernment as they read (Ryken 29). Ryken suggests that the adamant Christian adherence to histories, biographies or other non-fiction over imaginative literature represents a misperception of the function of fiction. Both non-fiction and fiction are concerned with truth, but histories “tell us what *happened*, while literature tells us what *happens*” (Ryken 25). In response to the argument that stories are not reality, Daniel Taylor compares the experiences of going to a shopping mall and reading Tolstoy. He poses the question, “Which engages us most fully as thinking, feeling, believing, questioning creatures?” (Taylor 422). While going to the mall may be a real experience, reading Tolstoy is more likely to touch on our humanity.

As Taylor’s comment suggests, Christians might use literature as a way to experience new ideas and open themselves up to different perspectives. Often Christians feel threatened by alternative viewpoints, but as Madeleine L’Engle writes, when we feel to keep an open mind, and “feel that we already know something in its totality, then we fail to keep our ears and eyes open to that which may expand or even change that which we so zealously think we know” (L’Engle 46). Gallagher and Lundin reiterate this point, suggesting that “[c]onflicting views of the truth do not deter us from finding the real truth; in fact, out of conflict a more refined view of the truth arises” (Gallagher and Lundin 99).

Method for reading for God’s truth

If literature contains truth, how might Christians read to discover that truth. The first step is recognizing that although the world is fallen, “few Christians would argue that sin has completely destroyed the goodness that God poured into creation and continues to impart to his world” (Gallagher and Lundin xxii). Literature, as a created entity, still contains some of the good of God’s original design. Granted, creation is certainly subject to the distortion of sin, but one might argue that it can also be subject to the redemption

of God worked out through His Church. As Augustine writes, “[T]he pagans gave their gold, silver and garments to the people of God as they were going out of Egypt, not knowing how the thing they were giving would come into the service of Christ” (Augustine 364). Williams cites this quote from Augustine suggesting that God’s creation can be corrupted and distorted when God’s created materials are formed into pagan idols. Likewise with literature, secular authors may use divine gifts for holy or unholy purposes, but the raw materials can still be reshaped and reformed for the glory of God (*Inklings* 56).

This “reshaping” of literature takes place in the Christian’s reading process. Leithart describes reading as a creative process, likening it to a musical performance. While the notes of the composition limit musicians’ performance, the musicians still have a great range of interpretation in how they play the piece. The same is true with readers. While the words on the page are fixed, how the reader chooses to interpret or apply them involves a degree of freedom (Leithart 220). With modern reading theory in mind, but also our Christian roots, Gallagher and Lundin suggest that Christians cannot claim that texts contain only a single meaning nor can they claim that the text means whatever the reader wants it to mean. Instead, Christian readers can seek after truth by comparing the text’s views with what they already know or believe (Gallagher and Lundin 98-99).

Essentially reading for truth in literature is both a recognition of truth in the literature and an awareness of one’s own understanding of the truth. Readers do not start into a text without a set of initial biases; however, these “biases do not block our path to understanding; instead they show us where to begin our journey” (Gallagher and Lundin 83). Initial biases are not a barrier to successful reading. Thus, our goal is not to eliminate these biases but to test them out through the process of reading. Some of our ideas may be upheld by the text while others may be challenged and new ideas may be introduced (Gallagher and Lundin 85). Promoting Christian reading theory does not

suggest that Christians are inherently better or more insightful than other readers. Instead, “what Christianity provides is an agenda of concerns and working premises” (Ryken 31). Just as the feminist reader is particularly aware of the roles of women in texts, Christian readers can develop a keen awareness of issues in the text that concern them, such as truth or eternity.

Using Story Structure

One especially apt argument on behalf of Christian reading is “[i]f God did not wish us to have literature in our lives, he would not have given us a literary Bible” (Lyken 151). By understanding the essence and universal structures of literature, Christians can better relate secular reading to the Christian narrative.

Defense of reading stories

Literature and stories are important to Christians. After all, “Why did Jesus address his disciples in parables as well as commands and propositions?” (“What Does Literature Do?” 16). Humans rely on stories and narratives to convey complex truths and ideas because stories cannot be boiled down to essential abstract elements. As poet Robert Siegel writes, “[A]ll story points to the inexpressible” (344). Symbols and stories are used in place of inexpressible ideas. Siegel explains suggests that trying to convert a story into a list of objective facts would be like trying to explain color to someone who cannot see (354). Stories do not simply stand in place of truths. They express truths more completely. Why otherwise, would a symbol be preferable to what it represents? (Siegel 353). The Gospel is told as a story rather than a list of abstract commandments or ideas because the narrative can cover both the expressible and the inexpressible.

Christians might also consider that the common elements in the themes and creation of stories have an apologetic function. In fiction, one of the primary thematic goals is often to elaborate on the big questions of life (Siegel 352). This is a quality that

fiction and the gospel have in common—concern for those ultimate questions. Rather than addressing the questions in their abstract form, however, stories and indeed the Gospel itself use narrative. Williams further poses the idea that one function of literature is a response to the fallen world. As an act of creation itself, the composition of literature can highlight some truths of creation. Thus, “An eye that knows where to look should then be able to find in the recurring themes and structures of human literature (whether written by believers or not) an apology for and an elucidation of biblical motifs” (*Inklings* 63). In sort, humans demonstrate their creative capacity through literature, inventing worlds and people to inhabit them. Williams argues that this means that literature, “even when it is abused, is a powerful apology for the Christian doctrine of humanity and its creation in the image of God” (*Inklings* 59).

Method for reading stories

One way to become a discerning reader is to understand the basic structures of story-telling (Godawa 435). This process begins with a firm understanding of the Bible. Literary Theorist Northrop Frye considers the Bible “[a] grammar of archetypes – the place where we can find them in their most systematic and complete form” (Lyken 149). With the background knowledge of Biblical forms and archetypes, readers can learn to identify these motifs elsewhere in literature (Lyken 150).

Perhaps the most basic literary structure is myth. Myth refers to the anonymous stories or collection of stories that cultural groups use to identify themselves or their society’s beliefs and values (Murfin and Ray 284). Howard suggests that myth points to the fact that humans have a sense that the world is not as it should be. By using myth, humans create versions of reality that explain the current state of affairs and hope for a revival of original perfections (Howard 337). While archetypal experts Northrop Frye and Carl Jung assume that myth patterns develop in the human psyche, C.S. Lewis “believes

that...mythic patterns are based on God's absolute truth" (Gallagher and Lundin 155). Christians believe that the Bible contains these absolute truths, and although Frye and Jung consider the Bible just another story that follows the mythic pattern, C.S. Lewis claims that the Bible contains all the original mythic structures "even for those myths that predate its history, which foreshadow the Christian reality" (Gallagher and Lundin 156). Thus, Christians can interpret myths or myth structures within literature as evidence of humans longing for God.

Willimon provides an apt example of how secular literature can be compared to a Biblical "myth" or basic story structure. He suggests that the father-son relationship in *The Odyssey* might be compared to the father-son relationship in the parable of the prodigal son (Willimon 19). We can examine these parallel relationships for similarities and differences, both of which can be beneficial to identify. Through the similarities, we see the truths of the Bible reflected in creation. Through the differences, we can sometimes identify either elaborations on the truth or distortions of the truth that cloud our understanding of God's creative intent.

Appreciating Beauty

Christians would agree that all that God created was good, but is it good merely because it is practical? Sunsets are beautiful, but the earth could just as easily spin around without all the magnificent color in the sky if God's sole purpose in creation was practicality. Philosopher Immanuel Kant differentiates between the terms agreeable, beautiful, and good, claiming that "[w]e call *agreeable* what GRATIFIES us, *beautiful* what we just LIKE, good what we ESTEEM, or *endorse*" (508). Whereas objects or ideas are assigned the labels agreeable and good when people desire them or find them morally upright, "the beautiful is disinterested and *free*" (Kant 509). What Kant's ideas

might suggest to Christians is that while God's creation is certainly useful (agreeable or good), it is also beautiful, and humans may take pleasure in it.

Defense of reading for the appreciation of beauty

Christian defenses of literature have traditionally been grounded in the assertion that literature teaches us; however, another valid argument is simply that literature is beautiful and enjoyable. Ryken claims it is possible to glorify God by reading simply by recognizing that the beauty of this creation, and indeed all of creation, are of God (27). As Ecclesiastes points out, Christians are not simply to concern themselves with the pursuit of knowledge. They must also enjoy life ("Words of Delight" 135).

Perhaps the best way for Christians to appreciate the beauty of literature is to keep in mind that literature should have a dual purpose. It "not only delights but teaches" (Willimon 11). Although the "reading for pleasure" argument deserves some merit, Christians do not read solely for pleasure. Indeed, "The beauty of a text...honors God," but "it is not an independent cosmos created only for pleasure" (Gallagher and Lundin 59). A strictly hedonistic view of literature does not fit the Christian worldview, and if the "pleasure" derived from the text is sinful, it is not appropriate. With the Kantian definition of beauty in mind, Christians can read and should read beautiful works to the glory of God.

Method for reading for the appreciation of beauty

How might Christians read works that teach and delight? In some cases, it might mean choosing a secular text over a piece of Christian fiction. Madeleine L'Engle reflects that "[i]f it's bad art, it's bad religion, no matter how pious the subject" (14). One Christian movement in literature is the demand for more positive stories. The Bible, however, does often depict negative views of humanity, and the "stories filled with 'good people' overcoming all odds may create the dangerous impression that human beings are, in

fact, 'good' and capable of saving themselves through their own moral actions" (*Reading* 76). Veith even makes the claim that "such stories in their own way may be more spiritually dangerous than a blatantly immoral paperback" (*Reading* 76). L'Engle points out that a well-intended Christian who wants to write and glorify God may still be talentless. A non-believer on the other hand, may be extremely gifted. This seems unjust to us, but it is often reality (L'Engle 30). The beauty in secular literature is not off limits to Christians; indeed, they should seek to enjoy it to the glory of God.

Ryken suggests that Christians can also enjoy reading by searching for literature that provides pleasure through emotional outlets, the opportunity to live vicariously, aesthetic pleasure, intellectual stimulation, contemplation, and imagination ("Words of Delight" 143-147). The impact literature has on readers' emotions can make texts particularly useful and delightful. Reading awakens a sense of empathy (*Reading* 31, "What Does Literature Do?" 21). The imagination gives us the ability think about "what it would be like to experience what someone else is experiencing, to project ourselves into someone else's point of view" and this "can be crucial to moral sensitivity" (*Reading* 31). We cannot empathize with abstract ideas, but we can empathize with other human beings—real or fictional ("What Does Literature Do?" 21). Beauty and teaching work together in literature. The story inspires and moves us with its beauty and through this emotional appeal it may also speak wisdom into our receptive hearts. Learning is always easier when the process is enjoyable.

Exploring Other Worldviews

A final mode of Christian reading is seeking to understand different worldviews through reading diverse literature. Discerning how to interact with different worldviews is sometimes a challenge for Christians. Believers sometimes polarize themselves into two groups based, in part, on how they interact with non-Christian ways of thinking. Lesslie

Newbigin refers to these two groups as “fundamentalists” and “liberals” (1). According to the liberals, “the mind of the fundamentalist is closed shuttered against the possibility of doubt and therefore against the recognition of hitherto unrecognized truth” (Newbigin 1). The fundamentalists separate themselves from interacting with opposing worldviews. The fundamentalists’ critique of the liberals is that they “are so open to new ideas that they have no firm commitments at all [and] that every affirmation of faith must be held only tentatively” (Newbigin 1). In other words, liberal Christians are so accepting of non-Christian worldviews that the essence of their own faith is open to corruption. If the extremities of both the fundamentalist and liberal views lay outside the bounds of orthodoxy, perhaps the best approach for Christian readers interacting with texts from different worldviews is to ground their method in the middle of the two extremes.

Defense of and method for reading literature from different worldviews

A primary reason to read literature from different worldviews is to increase one’s understanding of another culture, people, or way of thinking. Daniel Taylor suggests that inventing stories is the natural method humans use to understand life and experiences: “[T]hey create a story, and we use those stories to answer all the big questions of life” (409). He goes on to suggest that stories are the glue of communities because “[e]very story defines a community—at the least a community of two, teller and listener, at the most the community of all humanity. A community, a family, is a group of people who share common stories” (Taylor 410). By this way of thinking, one of the easiest ways for Christians to discern what a group—be it British atheists, Cambodian villagers, or skateboarding teens—is about is to access that group’s stories.

The importance of understanding opposing worldviews is underscored by the Gospel imperative “to spread the Good News to all four corners of the world, not limiting the giving of light to people who already have seen the light” (L’Engle 122). Although

some Christians strive to separate themselves from the secular world, the simple fact of the matter is, Christians cannot effectively spread the Gospel unless they interact with non-Christians. Furthermore, these interactions and relationships must be grounded in some level of mutual understanding between participants. Veith encourages Christians to read literature from opposing worldviews in order to understand opposing viewpoints because we “must understand error and vice in order to do battle against it. Reading enables Christians to ‘scout’ the territory of the enemy” (*Reading* 223). Yet, Christians must also not appear entirely antagonistic to opposing worldviews. Veith cautions that “Worldview criticism does not mean simply ‘criticizing worldviews’; rather, for Christians, it is a way to engage constructively the whole range of human expression from a Christian perspective” (Veith 119). In short, understanding opposing worldviews enables Christians to have more positive interactions with non-Christians.

A final thought for Christians to bear in mind when reading literature from opposing worldviews is that believers “are not necessarily contaminated by being exposed to a viewpoint they disagree with” (Veith 73). Encountering different worldviews may help Christians understand their non-Christian friends better and may help them empathize with their friends’ struggles and perceptions. Willimon asserts that “through another’s art, we get to try on another’s being, get to look at the world through another’s eyes, which aids our moral imagination, which leads to good” (Willimon 12). Reading stories from different worldviews—provided the reader exercises discernment—is not only acceptable behavior for Christians, but it may aid them in advancing the Kingdom of God.

INSTRUCTIONAL UNIT

Unit Overview

- Unit Length: 5 50-minute class periods
- Grade: Freshmen
- School: This unit was originally taught at Kankakee Trinity Academy, a private non-denominational Christian school with about 200 students in its Pre-K through 12 program.

Parent/Guardian Letter

The following letter (Figure 1) was sent out to parents/guardians via Sycamore (an internet grade/communication system) at the beginning of the unit to keep them informed about what is going on in the class. Kankakee Trinity Academy has the luxury of strong parental support, so I wanted to keep the parents informed and involved in their children's learning. Particularly since this unit deals with Christian values, I wanted parents to be able to offer their own input on the ideas when the students were at home.

Freshman English Newsletter

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am excited to inform you that the freshman English class is beginning a new unit on reading secular literature from a Christian perspective. In addition to equipping students with standards-based skills, the purpose of this unit is to help students use their Christian worldview to find God's truth in what they read. My hope is that this unit will not only help the students build academic skills, but it will help them deepen and own their faith. Below is the schedule for the unit to help you and your student keep track of homework assignments and due dates. I will try to post any changes to the schedule on Sycamore.

Monday, January 10

Topic: How can Christians read with discernment?

Homework Assigned: Grammar exercises with Mrs. Bennett

Homework Due: Anything assigned by Mrs. Bennett from last week.

Wednesday, January 12

Topic: Is God's truth in fiction?

Homework Assigned: Grammar exercises with Mrs. Bennett

Homework Due: Grammar exercises

Friday, January 14

Topic: Christ-figures in fiction

Homework Assigned: Grammar exercises with Mrs. Bennett

Homework Due: Grammar exercises

Tuesday, January 18

Topic: Appreciating beauty in literature

Homework Assigned: Grammar exercises with Mrs. Bennett

Homework Due: Grammar exercises

Thursday, January 20

Topic: Understanding other worldview through literature

Homework Assigned: Grammar exercises with Mrs. Bennett

Homework Due: Grammar exercises

Feel free to contact me via Sycamore or email (alee2@live.olivet.edu) if you have any questions, comments, or concerns.

Sincerely,

Angela Lee

English Student Teacher, Kankakee Trinity Academy
Professional Teacher Candidate, Olivet Nazarene University

Figure 1: Parent Guardian Letter

Lesson 1: Using Discernment

Resources

- Whiteboard and Marker
- Unit Calendar Handouts (Figure 2)
- Index cards
- Overhead of Bible passage (Figure 4)
- Copies of “She Didn’t Mean to Do It” Worksheet (Figure 5)

Preparation

- Make copies of unit calendars
- Make copies of “She Didn’t Mean to Do It”
- Arrange the desks in a manner that enables small and large group discussion and allows all students to see the board.
- Make seating chart and draw it on the board so students can find their seats when they come in.

Student Objectives

1. The learner will be able to discuss the pros and cons of reading secular literature as a Christian.
 - Standard: SL.9-10.1c
2. The learner will be able to analyze how themes of sin are represented in the Bible and in a secular poem
 - Standard: L.9-10.7
3. The learner will be able to articulate a personal rule for reading secular literature with discernment.
 - Standard: W.9-10.10

Assessment

1. Objective 1 will be assessed through the completion of a discussion web in groups
2. Objective 2 will be assessed through the completion of a handout with a rubric and through class discussion.
3. Objective 3 will be assessed through an “index card essay.”

Accommodations/Enrichment

- The lesson includes active learning opportunities so the students in the class with ADHD will be able to stay engaged with the lesson. Group work will also help these students stay on task.
- The activities include a fair amount of open-ended discussion, which will give advanced students the opportunity to think more critically about the concepts.

Divergent Questions

- Should Christians read secular literature?
- How do we deal with themes about sin in the Bible? In other literature?
- What reading guideline would you recommend to Christians to help them read with discernment?

Time/Section	Activity Description
Introduction 2-3 min.	I will introduce the unit and handout the unit calendars. I will also show students that the calendar is posted on the wall in the classroom so they can check with this calendar for due dates, etc. Talk about how this unit will be an opportunity for us to explore literature as Christians. It will also be a chance for us to form our own

	<p>opinions and grow and learn from one another. We will be having a lot of discussion, and we must make sure that all responses are respected. Having different opinions will help us understand the issue better and help us grow.</p>
<p>15 min. Guided Practice</p>	<p>Discussion Web: "Should Christians read secular literature?"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will draw the discussion web on the board and have students replicate it on a piece of paper. (See figure 3) • I will explain how the web works. • I will make sure students understand the word "secular." • I will have them work in pairs or small groups (this will depend on how I am able to set up the classroom; we have a small room with many desks, so I will need to experiment with room arrangements) to fill out the charts. • Then we will fill out the chart on the board as a whole class discussing our ideas.
<p>10 min. Guided practice</p>	<p>Discuss how one of the major concerns Christians have as readers is dealing with themes of sin in literature. Ask students how the Bible represents sin. Read John 8:1-11 (see figure 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does this passage suggest about the rightness or wrongness of sin? • What are the consequences of the woman's sin? • What is Jesus' response to the woman's sin? • When you are reading secular literature, what difference does it make how sin is represented?
<p>20 min.</p>	<p>Students will receive a copy of "She Didn't Mean to Do It." (see</p>

Independent Practice	<p>figure 5) We will read through the poem together and briefly discuss it to ensure that the students grasp the general meaning of the poem.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you think the woman did?• How does she feel about what she did?• Etc. <p>Then, students will work in pairs or small groups to answer the questions on the handout.</p> <p>At the end, we will discuss the poem again as a class and students will turn in their handouts.</p>
5 min. Closure	<p>Should we read any and all secular literature?</p> <p>On index cards, have students write out a guideline based on today's lesson about how we should read secular literature.</p>

Christian Reader Response Unit Calendar**Monday, January 10**

Topic: How can Christians read with discernment?

Homework Assigned: Grammar exercises with Mrs. Bennett

Homework Due: Anything assigned by Mrs. Bennett from last week.

Wednesday, January 12

Topic: Is God's truth in fiction?

Homework Assigned: Grammar exercises with Mrs. Bennett

Homework Due: Grammar exercises

Friday, January 14

Topic: Christ-figures in fiction

Homework Assigned: Grammar exercises with Mrs. Bennett

Homework Due: Grammar exercises

Tuesday, January 18

Topic: Appreciating beauty in literature

Homework Assigned: Grammar exercises with Mrs. Bennett

Homework Due: Grammar exercises

Thursday, January 20

Topic: Understanding other worldview through literature

Homework Assigned: Grammar exercises with Mrs. Bennett

Homework Due: Grammar exercises

Figure 2: Unit Calendar

Should Christians read secular literature?

Yes	No
↓	↓
Reason	Reason
↓	↓
Reason	Reason
↓	↓
Reason	Reason
↓	↓
Reason	Reason

Your Conclusion and Rationale:

Figure 3: Discussion Web Template

John 8:1-11

¹ but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Figure 4: Overhead of John 8:1-11

Group Members' Names:

She Didn't Mean to Do It

Daisy Fried

[The text of the poem was inserted here]

Answer the following questions as a group. Please write **2-3 thoughtful sentences** in response to each question. Be sure to refer to specific examples from the poem to support your ideas.

1. Is sin represented positively or negatively in the poem? Explain your answer.

2. What are the consequences of the woman's sin?

3. How is sin represented similarly/differently than the passage from John that we just read?

4. What message do you take away from the poem?

Assignment Rubric:

12 points possible

10-12 Points

- All questions are answered in *at least* 2-3 sentences
- Responses are well thought-out
- Responses refer to specific examples in the poem
- Responses are generally free from grammatical errors

7-9 Points

- Responses lack critical thinking
- Some questions are answered in less than 2-3 sentences
- Responses include no specific examples from the poem
- Responses include several spelling/grammar errors

6 Points or less

- Assignment is incomplete

Figure 5: "She Didn't Mean to Do It" Worksheet

Teacher reflection

Starting out with the discussion web worked great. It is a very active learning strategy because students must think critically about their responses. I think the activity also helped the students recognize right from the start that the unit was meant to challenge their thinking but not threaten their beliefs. Having the students feel open to the subject matter is an essential starting point for this unit.

Discussing how the Bible represents sin went moderately well. The students brought up several insightful points such as the idea that the Bible does not glorify sin and that sin has consequences. They were especially focused on the fact that Jesus forgave the woman in the story, which was not a direction I had anticipated the conversation leading. Although I thought the idea was insightful, I think it distracted some students from making the connection between Biblical representations of sin and similarities in certain secular representations of sinful behavior.

This especially became evident when they were working on the worksheet in groups. While the higher achieving students seemed to make strong connections between the Biblical text and the poem, the struggling learners had difficulty drawing inferences from the text. I think the students have been conditioned to expect questions to have a single right answer, so I should have included more direct reader-response instruction to help them conceptualize what I was looking for.

The index card assessment worked great. It was a quick way to see what each student took out of the lesson. About half the students made the connection to discernment that I was emphasizing throughout the lesson. A handful of others did not finish their note cards, and the rest seemed to focus their note card on the discussion web conversation more so than the information specific to discernment.

Lesson 2: Searching for God's Truth in Fiction

Resources

- White board and marker
- Mini play dough pack for each student
- Recording of "Fix You"
- Overhead of "Fix You" Lyrics (Figure 6)
- Copies of Dream Horses Worksheet (Figure 7)

Preparation

- Make copies of the handout
- Get mini play dough packs
- Write the Augustine quote on the board
- Make overhead of "Fix You" lyrics

Student Objectives

1. The learner will be able to form Christian interpretations of secular texts.
 - Standard: RL.9-10.7
2. The learner will be able to suggest possible meanings for symbols in a poem.
 - Standard: RL.9-10.4
3. The learner will be able to articulate his or her own personal rule about looking for God's truth in texts.
 - Standard: W.9-10.10

Assessment

1. Objective 1 will be assessed through class discussion and the completion of a handout in pairs. The rubric is attached to the handout.

2. Objective 2 will be assessed through the completion of a handout. The rubric is attached to the handout.
3. Objective 3 will be assessed through the completion of an index card rule.

Accommodations/Enrichment

- The instructional plan includes a variety of activities to keep the students with ADHD engaged.
- The play-dough activity is designed to engage kinesthetic learners.
- The song activity will be especially engaging for auditory learners and those with musical intelligence.
- The handout includes pictures to help students visualize the poem.
- The divergent questions can challenge the more advanced students to answer creatively and take the topic to whatever depth they choose.

Divergent Questions

- What is fiction?
- Can fiction be truthful? Why/why not?
- Can fiction not written for God still contain truth about God? Why/why not?

Time/Section	Activity Description
Introduction 5 minutes	<p>Students will pick up a mini play dough pack as they walk into the room. The following Augustine quote will be on the board:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">“But the pagans gave their gold, silver and garments to the people of God as they were going out of Egypt, not knowing how the thing they were giving would come into the service of Christ” –St. Augustine</p> <p>I will introduce the lesson telling students that today we will be</p>

	<p>continuing our study of reading as Christians and we will be trying to answer the question “Can we find God’s truth in fiction?”</p> <p>I will have students read the quote on the board and tell them that we are going to do an activity with the clay to represent this.</p> <p>First, they should take their clay out and move it around it their hands. As they do this, I will tell them to consider the idea that God made everything—nothing was created that God didn’t create. For today, the clay represents gold. I will ask: Does creation honor God? Why/How?</p> <p>Then I will ask them the students to make their clay into a small statue (1 minute). I will then tell them that the statue represents an Egyptian idol. Does the clay honor God? Why or why not?</p> <p>Then I will ask students to make a spoon out of the clay (1 minute). Does the spoon honor God?</p> <p>Then I will ask the students to reshape the clay into an alter. I will tell them that the alter represents the altar that the Israelites built for the tabernacle out of the gold they got in Egypt. Does the clay honor God now? Why or why not?</p> <p>Consider the Augustine quote again: can something not made to honor God be made into something that does honor God? If so, how and why?</p> <p>Collect clay.</p>
<p>10 minutes</p> <p>Guided practice</p>	<p>Discuss these questions using “Think-pair-share”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is fiction? • Can fiction be truthful? Why/why not?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can fiction not written for God still contain truth about God? Why/why not?
10 minutes Guided practice	<p>Listen to half of “Fix You” by Coldplay with the lyrics on the overhead (Figure 6)</p> <p>Ask students what the song seems to be about initially.</p> <p>Then tell the students to listen to the song again imagining that God is singing the song to them.</p> <p>What is the song about to you now?</p> <p>Can we apply this technique to other literature? How?</p>
20 minutes Independent Practice	<p>Have students work in pairs and read “Dream Horses” and Romans 7, completing the corresponding handout (Figure 7).</p>
5 minutes Closure	<p>Discuss another Augustine quote: “Truth belongs to [the] Master, wherever it is found.”</p> <p>Have students create an index card guideline for reading secular literature based on today’s lesson.</p> <p>Tell students that tomorrow we will be looking at a different way to find God’s truth in secular literature.</p>

Fix You lyrics

Songwriters: "Coldplay" (Berryman, Guy; Buckland, Jon; Champion, Will; Martin, Chris)

When you try your best but you don't succeed
When you get what you want but not what you need
When you feel so tired but you can't sleep
Stuck in reverse

And the tears come streaming down your face
When you lose something you can't replace
When you love someone but it goes to waste
Could it be worse?

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you

And high up above or down below
When you're too in love to let it go
But if you never try you'll never know
Just what you're worth

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you

Tears stream down your face
When you lose something you cannot replace
Tears stream down your face
And I

Tears stream down your face
I promise you I will learn from my mistakes
Tears stream down your face
And I

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you

Figure 6: Overhead of "Fix You" Lyrics

Names of group members:

Step 1: Read the poem!

DREAM HORSES

By Nancy Willard

[The Text of the poem was inserted here]



A few questions:

What do you think the two horses might represent? Explain your answers!

What do you think the last two stanzas might mean? (Note: “stanzas” are like the paragraphs of poetry).

Step 2: Read this passage by Paul from Romans 7

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. ¹⁹ For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ²⁰ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in my sinful nature ²⁶ a slave to the law of sin.

A few questions

Can you sum up what Paul is talking about in your own words?

Re-read the DREAM HORSES poem with this passage in mind.

Can you make any connections between the two texts? Explain what similarities you see.

Assignment Rubric:

8 Points possible

7-8 Points

- Responses are thorough
- Responses are well thought out

5-6 Points

- Responses are not very thorough
- Responses do not demonstrate deep thinking

4 Points or less

- Assignment is incomplete

Figure 7: "Dream Horses" Worksheet

Teacher reflection

Starting with the playdough activity was wonderful. It hooked the students on the lesson and made the Augustine quote more concrete for them. The activity also served as an effective transition into the discussion of truth in fiction. Students recognized that humans can use creation to glorify God or they can distort creation so it distracts from God. At one point, I posed the question, "Can fiction be truthful even if it is not factual?" This seemed to challenge the students. Many of them come from theological backgrounds that take a very literal interpretation of the Bible (ex: The earth was created in seven literal days). Thus, I think differentiating between facts and truth was a bit of stretch for some of them.

Students certainly seemed engaged when we listened to the Coldplay song, but I found that the exercise did not actually stimulate much discussion. I think the questions in that section of the lesson may have been too much of a repeat of what we had already discussed, so in the future, I would still keep this song in the lesson, but I would re-write the questions.

Although we had some in-class time to work on the worksheet, I ended up assigning it for homework so students would have sufficient time to finish. Before assigning the worksheet, I reviewed my expectations for their work, explaining that none of the questions had a single right answer. Instead, I told them I was looking for well-thought out and supported responses. Good answers were well-supported answers, and poor answers were answers without good support. I was pleased with how the students did on the worksheet and the connections they made between the two passages. I also appreciated the variety of responses to the poem. The students seemed to find the poem especially accessible, and this allowed even struggling learners to develop well-thought out responses since they were not struggling with comprehension issues.

Lesson 3: Using Myth Structure

Resources

- White board and marker
- Overhead of quest myth structure for each group (Figure 8)
- Overhead markers
- Overhead projector
- Copies of “Instructions” (Figure 9)
- Copies of “Boys and Girls Together” (Figure 10)
- Copies of handout (Figure 11)

Preparation

- Make copies of overheads
- Copy poems and handout

Student Objectives

1. The learner will be able to identify the quest myth structure in various types of stories.
 - Standard: RL.9-10.5
2. The learner will be able to analyze which parts of a poem fit into the quest myth.
 - Standard: RL.9-10.1
3. The learner will be able to articulate a personal rule for how using myth structure in interpreting texts is useful for Christians.
 - Standard: W.9-10.10

Assessment

1. The first objective will be assessed through class discussion and the completion of an overhead in groups.
2. The second objective will be assessed through the completion of a handout.
3. The third objective will be completed through the completion of an index card handout.

Accommodations/Enrichment

- Students who seem to be struggling with the concept may work in pairs for completing the handout.
- The lesson includes a fair amount of activity to keep the students with ADHD engaged.
- Giving students a choice of poems allows gifted students the option of looking at a longer, more complicated poem.

Divergent Questions

- What features do stories about heroes seem to have in common?
- Why do you think these patterns recur in so many stories?
- As Christians, what might we gain from recognizing these patterns in stories we read?

Time/Segment	Activity Description
5 minutes Introduction	As students come into class, the following prompt will be on the board: What is the basic plot of your favorite story about a hero? Please write down your answer. You have about five minutes. Have a few students share their responses. Ask if students see

	any similar elements between the plots.
10 minutes Guided Practice	<p>Tell the students that today we are going to learn to explore secular literature by looking at patterns that occur throughout literature. We are specifically going to be focusing on the heroic quest myth (I will define myth as a basic plot structure that occurs in lots of cultures in lots of places in lots of different times). The basic elements of this myth include the following (write on board):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Miraculous birth • Call to adventure • Supernatural Helper • Talisman or special weapon • Crossing the threshold (entering into the world of adventure) • Trials (difficulties, tests, etc.) • Triumph • Reuniting with father figure • Return home <p>I will write the elements on the board and briefly explain each.</p> <p>Then, I will have the students brainstorm with me how the life of Christ fits this model.</p>
10 minutes Independent Practice	<p>I will then have students work in small groups (4 to 5 students) to brainstorm how another story fits the myth structure. I will tell them that not all the stories they are working with will necessarily contain all the elements. They will select a story from the following list and fill out the diagram on an overhead (Figure 8):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Lion King

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mulan • Narnia • Star Wars • Lord of the Rings • Finding Nemo • Hercules • Pirates of the Caribbean • National Treasure <p>After they are done, they will share their ideas with the class on the overhead projector.</p>
5 minutes Guided Practice	<p>Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think these patterns recur in so many stories? • As Christians, what might we gain from recognizing these patterns in stories we read?
15 minutes Independent Practice	<p>Students will choose between 2 Neil Gaiman poems and complete the handout individually (Figures 9-11). If the students seem to be struggling at this point in the lesson, I will give them the option of working in pairs instead of working individually.</p>
5 minutes Closure	<p>Students will create a rule about how Christians can use the myth structure in reading secular literature and turn it in on an index card.</p> <p>I will tell students that tomorrow we will be talking about enjoying stories.</p>

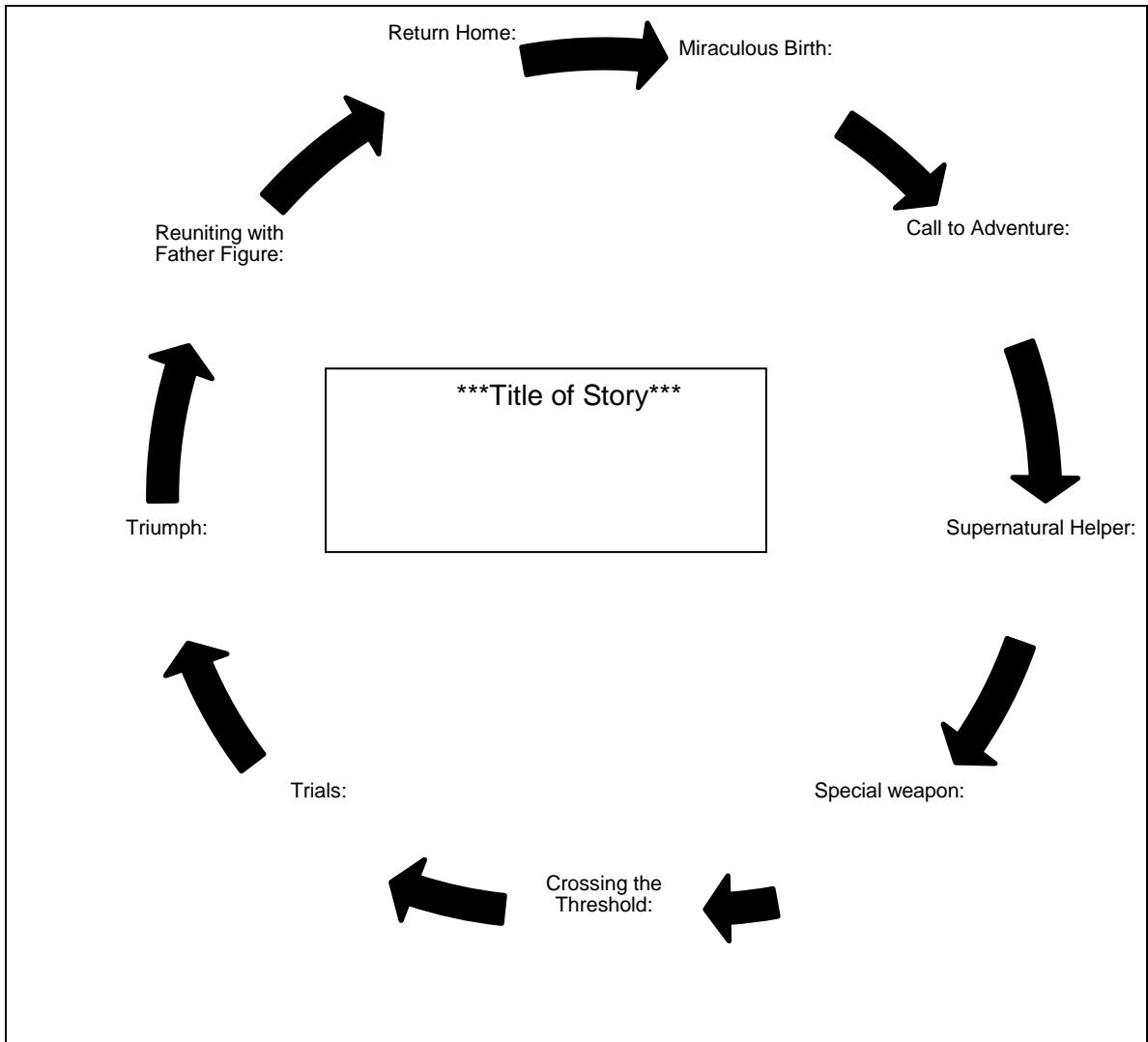


Figure 8: Overhead of Hero Cycle

**Instructions
by Neil Gaiman**

Touch the wooden gate in the wall you never
saw before.

Say "please" before you open the latch,
go through,
walk down the path.

A red metal imp hangs from the green-painted
front door,
as a knocker,
do not touch it; it will bite your fingers.

Walk through the house. Take nothing. Eat
nothing.

However, if any creature tells you that it hungers,
feed it.

If it tells you that it is dirty,
clean it.

If it cries to you that it hurts,
if you can,
ease its pain.

From the back garden you will be able to see the
wild wood.

The deep well you walk past leads to Winter's
realm;

there is another land at the bottom of it.

If you turn around here,
you can walk back, safely;
you will lose no face. I will think no less of you.

Once through the garden you will be in the
wood.

The trees are old. Eyes peer from the under-
growth.

Beneath a twisted oak sits an old woman. She
may ask for something;

give it to her. She
will point the way to the castle.

Inside it are three princesses.

Do not trust the youngest. Walk on.

In the clearing beyond the castle the twelve
months sit about a fire,
warming their feet, exchanging tales.

They may do favors for you, if you are polite.

You may pick strawberries in December's frost.

Trust the wolves, but do not tell them where
you are going.

The river can be crossed by the ferry. The ferry-

man will take you.
(The answer to his question is this:
If he hands the oar to his passenger, he will be free to
leave the boat.
Only tell him this from a safe distance.)

If an eagle gives you a feather, keep it safe.
Remember: that giants sleep too soundly; that
witches are often betrayed by their appetites;
dragons have one soft spot, somewhere, always;
hearts can be well-hidden,
and you betray them with your tongue.

Do not be jealous of your sister.
Know that diamonds and roses
are as uncomfortable when they tumble from
one's lips as toads and frogs:
colder, too, and sharper, and they cut.

Remember your name.
Do not lose hope — what you seek will be found.
Trust ghosts. Trust those that you have helped
to help you in their turn.
Trust dreams.
Trust your heart, and trust your story.
When you come back, return the way you came.
Favors will be returned, debts will be repaid.
Do not forget your manners.
Do not look back.
Ride the wise eagle (you shall not fall).
Ride the silver fish (you will not drown).
Ride the grey wolf (hold tightly to his fur).

There is a worm at the heart of the tower; that is
why it will not stand.

When you reach the little house, the place your
journey started,
you will recognize it, although it will seem
much smaller than you remember.
Walk up the path, and through the garden gate
you never saw before but once.
And then go home. Or make a home.
And rest.

Figure 9: "Instructions" by Neil Gaiman

Boys and Girls Together
By Neil Gaiman

Boys don't want to be princes.
Boys want to be shepherds who slay dragons,
maybe someone gives you half a kingdom and a princess,
but that's just what comes of being a shepherd boy
and slaying a dragon. Or a giant. And you don't really
even have to be a shepherd. Just not a prince.
In stories, even princes don't want to be princes,
disguising themselves as beggars or as shepherd boys,
leaving the kingdom for another kingdom,
princehood only of use once the ogre's dead, the tasks are done,
and the reluctant king, her father, needing to be convinced.

Boys do not dream of princesses who will come for them.
Boys would prefer not to be princes,
and many boys would happily kiss the village girls,
out on the sheep-moors, of an evening,
over the princess, if she didn't come with the territory.

Princesses sometimes disguise themselves as well,
to escape the kings' advances, make themselves ugly,
soot and cinders and donkey girls,
with only their dead mothers' ghosts to aid them,
a voice from a dried tree or from a pumpkin patch.
And then they undisguise, when their time is upon them,
gleam and shine in all their finery. Being princesses.
Girls are secretly princesses.

None of them know that one day, in their turn,
Boys and girls will find themselves become bad kings
or wicked stepmothers,
aged woodcutters, ancient shepherds, mad crones and wise-women,
to stand in shadows, see with cunning eyes:
The girl, still waiting calmly for her prince.
The boy, lost in the night, out on the moors.

Figure 10: "Boys and Girls Together" by Neil Gaiman

Name:	Poem:
<p>Instructions: Copy lines from your poem under the appropriate category in the hero's quest. You may not have any lines under some categories and you may have multiple lines under other categories.</p>	
Miraculous Birth	
Call to Adventure	
Supernatural Helper	
Special Weapon	
Crossing the Threshold	
Trials	
Triumph	
Reuniting with Father figure	
Return Home	
<p>Points Possible: 10 Grading based on number of lines included (10+ would be the ideal) and the placement of lines in the appropriate categories.</p>	

Figure 11: Myth Structure Handout

Teacher Reflection

The introductory writing activity did not go especially well. Students were confused by the instructions, unsure if they were supposed to write about a superhero or just any real-life hero. Several students also delayed getting started because they claimed they had no favorite hero. The activity ended up taking longer than anticipated. In part, I think this is because the students were not accustomed to having any sort of “bell-work.” The school does not have any sort of bell system so the beginnings and endings of class periods are a little indefinite. Students are accustomed to coming into class and talking until they receive verbal instructions from the teacher.

Once I introduced and explained the myth cycle, however, the lesson went smoother. Students did well brainstorming the elements of Christ’s life that fit the cycle, coming up with several possible events for a few of the items. The one element that the students seemed to struggle with was the idea of “crossing the threshold.” We discussed the meaning of the word threshold and explored the concept of crossing the threshold, but based on their work later in the lesson, I do not think they ever moved beyond a concrete understanding of the concept.

The activity with brainstorming how different movie plots fit the myth cycle went well. Students worked well in their groups together and they seemed excited about exploring the plot structures of Disney movies. They also enjoyed being allowed to use the overhead projector, and they did well presenting their ideas to the class.

The homework assignment was not especially successful. The jump between identifying the myth cycle in movies with linear plots and identifying it in poems without clear plot lines was difficult for the students. I ended up giving all the students the poem “Boys and Girls Together,” thinking they would prefer it because it was shorter. In hindsight, I should have given them the “Instructions” poem instead because it had a

clearer plotline. Many of the students simply did not turn in their homework assignment, either out of confusion or forgetfulness, and those who did turn it in still seemed confused. I do not necessarily think the homework assignment was a bad idea, but I should have modeled similar interaction with a poem before expecting students to do it independently.

Lesson 4: Appreciating Beauty

Resources

- Copies of poetry handouts (Figures 13 – 16)
- Black overheads
- Overhead markers
- Overhead projector
- Transparency of “Concordia”
- Transparency of “Breaking Drought” (Figure 12)
- White board/Marker

Preparation

- Make overheads
- Make copies of poems

Student Objectives

- The learner will be able to analyze the impact small literary details have on the overall aesthetics of a poem.
 - Standard: RL.9-10.4
- The learner will be able to use art to supplement their understanding of a poem.
 - Standard: RL.9-10.7

- The learner will be able to articulate a personal rule about reading texts for beauty as a Christian.
 - Standard: W.9-10.10

Assessment

- The first objective will be assessed by informal presentations.
- The second objective will be assessed by informal presentations.
- The third objective will be assessed by the completion of an index card essay.

Accommodations/Enrichment

- The lesson includes plenty of visuals for visual learners
- The group work will help students with ADHD stay involved on their task
- The divergent questions can challenge gifted learners to think outside the box.

Divergent Questions

- What is beauty?
- What is pleasure?
- Does God want us to experience beauty and pleasure?
- What do we enjoy about reading/stories or looking at art?
- What techniques do authors/artists use to create beauty?

Time/Segment	Activity Description
Introduction 10 minutes	As the students enter the room, the following writing prompt will be on the board: Create a list of things/ideas/etc. you consider beautiful. Create a separate list of things/ideas/etc. that you enjoy. After students create their lists, we will discuss: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is beauty?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is pleasure? • Does God want us to experience beauty and enjoyment?
<p>Guided Practice</p> <p>15 minutes</p>	<p>We will then move into talking about appreciating beauty in art and literature.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we enjoy about reading/stories or looking at art? <p>Then we will talk about what techniques writers/artists use to create beauty.</p> <p>We will use look at an art transparency of “Concordia” and discuss what techniques the artist uses to create the beautiful scene. Some questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you consider this picture beautiful? Why/Why not? • What stood out to you first? • What smaller details did you notice the more you looked at it? • What art techniques did the painter seem to use to catch our attention in this picture? • Were his techniques effective? <p>Next we will consider a poem from <i>Out of the Dust</i> (Figure 12) and discuss the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the overall impact of the poem • What smaller literary details about the poem give us that big impact?
<p>20 minutes</p> <p>Independent Practice</p>	<p>Students will work in 4 groups studying one of 4 different poems (Figures 13-16). They will write down on an overhead what they consider to be the big impact of the poem and then they will list several literary details that contribute to the big impact. The students should</p>

	<p>consider the corresponding art piece's impact on their understanding of the poem.</p> <p>When the students are done, they will read their poems aloud to the class and show their overheads of details.</p>
5 minutes Closure	<p>What might be some limitations for Christians in experiencing the pleasure/beauty of literature?</p> <p>Students will create a personal rule for reading for pleasure/beauty in an index card essay.</p>

Breaking Drought

[The text of the poem
Was inserted here]



Figure 12: Overhead of "Breaking Drought"

Sit a While
By Siv Cedering

[The text of the poem was
Inserted here]

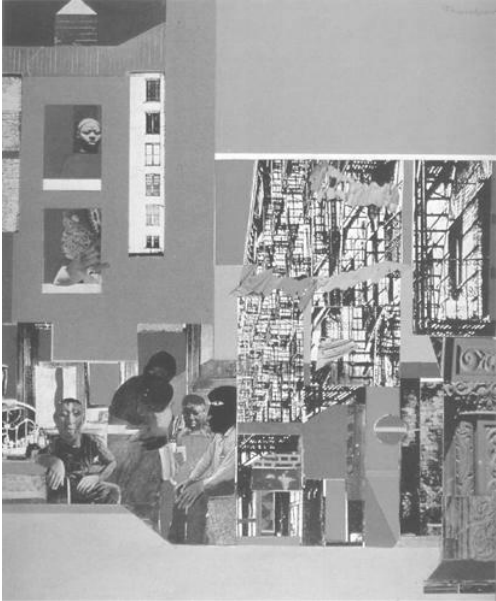


Figure 13: "Sit a While" Handout

Lessons from a Painting by Rothko
By Bobbi Katz

[The text of the poem was inserted here]




Figure 14: "Lessons from a Painting by Rothko" Handout

On Lichtenstein's "Bananas & Grapefruit"

By Deborah Pope

[The text of the poem was
inserted here]

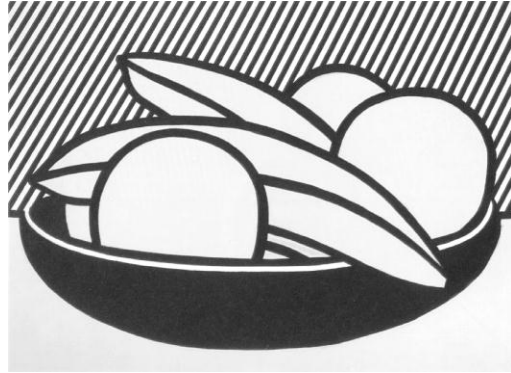


Figure 15: "On Lichtenstein's 'Bananas & Grapefruit'" Handout

Introduction to Poetry
By Billy Collins

[The text of the poem was inserted here]


A black and white illustration of a person in a small boat on water. The person is wearing a dark vest and shorts, and is holding a long pole or oar. The boat is on a calm surface of water, with a large, stylized splash or wave behind it. The splash is rendered with many small, overlapping shapes, giving it a textured appearance. The person's reflection is visible in the water.

Figure 16: "Introduction to Poetry" Handout

Teacher reflection

The main setback of this lesson was that it was focused on beauty/enjoyment and the students neither found the poetry selections beautiful nor enjoyable. Based on our initial discussions at the beginning of the lesson, the students seemed to agree with the idea that God wants humans to enjoy the beauty of creation. The connection with enjoying literature may or may not have happened, however, since the students did not enjoy the materials I selected.

The lack of enjoyment began with the picture of "Concordia." Students did not like the picture. This did not inhibit them from analyzing it though. In fact, they may have been more inclined to analyze the artist's technique because they found it ineffective. The students discussed the coloring, the placement of objects in the painting, and the artist's possible intention/meaning. While the lesson might have improved if I had picked a picture they had enjoyed, I do not think their lack of enjoyment necessarily inhibited their learning.

The poem "Breaking Drought" was slightly better received than "Concordia." I asked students to rate the poem as "beautiful" "ugly" or "meh" (in the middle), and most of them chose "meh." They did well analyzing the elements of the poem, discovering meaning in the shape of the stanza, the repetition, and the build and release of tension.

Before splitting into groups to analyze the last set of poems, we reviewed literary devices that the students might be able to search for in their pieces. This may have been helpful or harmful. It certainly gave students a starting point for their analysis, but it may have caused some groups to limit themselves, only exploring the terms and concepts we listed on the board. The only group that seemed to even mildly enjoy their poem was the one with "Bananas and Grapefruit." Those studying "Lessons from a Painting by Rothko" claimed they could not understand the poem. The group reading "Introduction to Poetry"

were turned off by the violence at the end of the poem, and the students reading “Sit A While” claimed that the poem was not meaningful to them because they did not live in the city and therefore could not relate to the material.

I think teaching aesthetics is difficult because finding a single piece of music, art, or literature that a whole room of people will enjoy is nearly impossible. The students mentioned at one point in the lesson that they *do* enjoy Shel Silverstein’s poetry, so if I were to teach this lesson again, I might include some of his materials even though they are generally classified as children’s literature. Although most of materials selected for this lesson came from a book that won a YAL award, this lesson served as a reminder to me that the decisions of what is “good” in YAL is still often decided by adults rather than teens. Authors, editors, and award committees may have deemed a work good for young adults, but if the adolescent readers still do not enjoy reading it, these YAL selections do not meet students’ needs any better than canonical works.

Lesson 5: Exploring Worldviews

Resources

- Agree and Disagree signs
- Construction Paper
- Markers
- Whiteboard/Marker
- Overhead of “Naming” (Figure 17)
- Overhead projector

Preparation

- Hang up Agree and Disagree signs
- Create overhead of “Naming”

Student Objectives

1. The learner will be able to express their opinions about reading literature from different worldviews.
 - Standard: SL.9-10.1d
2. The learner will be able to discuss the similarities and differences in their worldview and the worldview of a poem.
 - Standard: RL.9-10.6
3. The learner will be able to synthesize ideas about guidelines for Christian reading and make their ideas presentable to an audience.
 - Standard: W.9-10.10

Assessment

1. The first objective will be assessed through the opinion walk exercise
2. The second objective will be assessed through class discussion
3. The third objective will be assessed through the creation of class-wide guidelines for Christian reading.

Accommodations/Enrichment

- The opinion walk exercise is specifically geared towards kinesthetic learners. It will also give the students with ADHD the chance to move around.
- We will be reading a poem by a Native American author to encourage multiculturalism.
- The picking out key guidelines for reading as Christians activity is enriching for gifted learners because it gives them the opportunity to synthesize and present their real-life audience.

Divergent Questions

- How can reading literature from different worldviews be useful to Christians?
- How can Christians use literature to explore their own faith?
- What are the basic guidelines for reading secular literature as a Christian?

Time/Segment	Activity Description
Introduction 10 minutes	<p>Students will take part in an opinion walk based on the following questions. After each question, I will call on a few students to defend their ideas.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Christians should read secular literature. 2. Christians should learn about worldviews different from their own. 3. There is some literature that Christians should not read. 4. Christians can explore their own faith by reading literature. 5. It is okay for Christians to read about other religions. 6. Christians can connect with their non-Christian friends by reading the same books or watching the same movies. 7. I feel comfortable learning about other worldviews. 8. I feel comfortable interacting with people whose worldviews differ from my own.
Guided Practice 15 minutes	<p>We will discuss the usefulness or non-usefulness of reading secular literature from different worldviews and cultures. These questions and the opinion walk will be the springboard to our discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can reading literature from different worldviews be useful to Christians?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can Christians use literature to explore their own faith? <p>After the discussion, we will look at the Joy Harjo poem (Figure 17). I will explain a few of the cultural background elements about pow-wows, and then I will ask students how the worldview in the poem is similar/different to their own. I will also ask them how these similarities and differences can be useful to them as Christian readers.</p>
<p>Independent Practice 5 minutes</p>	<p>Students will write index card essays creating guidelines for Christian readers who are looking at texts with different worldviews.</p>
<p>Collaboration and Closure 20 minutes</p>	<p>Students will work in five groups. Each group will receive all the index card essays from one of the days of the unit. The group will use the cards to come up with one overall guideline for Christians reading secular literature. Each group will write their rule on a piece of construction paper (with decorations), and the rules from each group will be hung on the classroom wall for all the other English classes to see.</p>

Naming: Or, There is no such thing as an Indian

By Joy Harjo

[The text of the poem was inserted here]



Figure 17: "Naming" Overhead

Teacher reflection

The opinion walk activity seemed to work well save for a few issues. The classroom space was not very large, so students were a little “wedged in” at times. Particularly towards the beginning, students did not seem to have varied opinions. The girls in particular seemed to travel in a herd, afraid of having a deviant opinion. I think this could be attributed to a number of factors. One is simply that fourteen and fifteen-year-old students are concerned with others’ perception of them, and standing up for a different viewpoint takes courage. I have also noticed, however, that free thinking is not always completely encouraged by the school climate. Obedience and respect for authority are emphasized almost to an extreme, and as a result, I think the students may view differing opinions as potentially punishable deviance. Conformity to the established way of thinking is simply safer.

To my surprise, however, most of the students claimed they were comfortable spending time with people from different worldviews. The examples they brought up were at times extreme. One student mentioned that he would not mind meeting a terrorist, yet no one mentioned their comfort level spending time with atheists or other worldviews they were more likely to actually encounter. In part, this could have been because I did not clearly define worldview. If I were to teach this lesson again, I might ask more specific questions, such as “Would you spend time with someone who did drugs or drank? Are you comfortable being friends with atheists or people of other religions? etc.” These sorts of questions might encourage students to truly evaluate how well they already interact with people of other worldviews rather than keeping the exercise completely hypothetical.

The students did fairly well interacting with the Joy Harjo poem and discussing the points where their worldviews differed. One especially positive part of the discussion

came when students began considering what Christians can learn from other worldviews. A student brought up that the speaker in the poem seemed proud of her people, and Christians might learn to be more proud of the Church. This part of the lesson might have improved if students had hard copies of the poem to work with. Some struggled to see it on the overhead, and being able to write on a copy of the poem might have increased their level of interaction with the text.

The final activity of compiling five rules for Christian readers went well overall. Each group took a different approach to synthesizing the material on the notecards. Some created separate piles of good and bad responses. Others, picked two or three cards and combined all the information from them. Unfortunately, time was an issue, and I do not think students had quite as much time as they would have liked to work on the assignment. Ideally, I also would have liked the groups to share their final products to the class in mini-presentations, but we did not have time. I did, however, hang the students' "posters" on the wall of the classroom so they had the opportunity to see what the other groups produced.

DISCUSSION

As this project consisted of three distinct parts—a case study, a literature review, and a unit plan—a synthesis of these three elements is necessary in order to draw conclusions. By comparing the theoretical material in the literature review with the practical case study and instructional unit, one can better define Christian reader response to YAL and identify future venues for investigation.

Theological Differences in Christian Reading

What quickly became apparent in all three sections of the project is that theological and doctrinal differences seem to have an impact on how individual Christians read. In the case study, the polarized groups (the “Pharisees” and the “Heretics”) both seemed interested in pursuing truth, but they represented very different ideas on how and where truth can be portrayed. The polarized groups may serve as apt representatives of the fundamentalists and liberals described by Leslie Newbigin in the literature review. The fundamentalist “Pharisees” resist representations of God that do not directly align with the Bible, while the liberal “Heretics” are open to extra-biblical representations of truth and God (Newbigin 1). To an extent, the Pharisee/Heretic or fundamentalist/liberal dynamic even came into play in the unit plan. I, the teacher, came from a more liberal background whereas the school as a whole and many of the students represented a more fundamentalist background. Concerning truth, for example, my faith background insists that truth can be found in all of creation, including the Bible, reason, personal experience, and Christian tradition; the Holy Spirit governs over all sources of truth making discernment possible. Many of my students came from a *sola scriptura* background, which suggests that truth comes from the Bible exclusively.

What do doctrinal and theological differences mean for Christian Reader Response? Much like the Body of Christ as described in Romans 12, the Christian

reading community is multi-faceted. Christian readers approach secular texts with different lenses and different functions. Particularly since the Word is so central to the Christian faith, instruction in reading and interpretation are part of most Christians' backgrounds. Thus, the variations in this instruction and the particulars of the hermeneutics stressed in individual doctrines inform how individual Christians read. If, for example, a reader comes from a doctrinal background that emphasizes a very literal interpretation of the text and suggests that no truth can be found outside the text, that reader may struggle to find truth in secular literature. On the other hand, a reader whose faith background emphasizes a more dynamic interpretation of the text and suggests that truth can be found in all of creation may not be challenged by the idea that secular literature contains truth.

Theological and doctrinal differences in reading have especially important implications in teaching Christian Reader Response to adolescents. Schools should strive not to turn students against their home faith traditions. As adolescents are at an age when they are "critically evaluat[ing] their parents' values and ideas," affirming students' faith traditions is especially important (Bushman and Parks Haas 13). Schools have the power and potential to alienate students from their families' faith traditions. While some may seek to have students challenge what their home congregations teach them, I would strongly recommend that the schools support students' home traditions. Students will only be in school for a short time. Their greater networks of support in their faith throughout their lives will likely come from their families or home congregations.

Implications of a Few Doctrinal Differences in Christian Reading

Affirming students' home faith traditions while still teaching open-minded readings of secular literature can be a challenge. One solution may involve investigating ways to tailor the Christian Reader Response theory to individual faith traditions.

This step could be particularly vital for teaching Christian students to discern truth and appreciate different worldviews in secular literature.

As revealed in the case study, finding truth in literature is a concern for most Christian readers; however, the particulars of discerning that truth are largely informed by a reader's individual faith tradition. One doctrine that especially seems to inform some Christian reader's understanding of truth in secular literature is *sola scriptura*, a doctrine that suggests truth is revealed by scripture alone. For some of its adherents, the *sola scriptura* doctrine means that anything outside of scriptures or contrary to scriptures is false. Some of the respondents in the case study, particularly the "Pharisees," demonstrated this viewpoint when they claimed that since *The Shack* was fiction, it was entirely comprised of lies. Some of the students during the instructional unit seemed to share this view, initially defining fiction as stories that are "made up" or "lies."

Of course, not all adherents to the *sola scriptura* doctrine oppose fiction; even the students who initially suggested that fiction was made up of lies later added that it can still be beneficial if it contains themes and ideas consistent with Christian morals. Another important implication of the *sola scriptura* doctrine is the priesthood of all believers, which suggests that all Christians have the ability and authority to read and preach the Word. When a view of scripture that allows for decentralized authority is applied to fiction, the result is essentially Christian Reader Response. In other words, all readers have the ability and authority to decide the meaning of a text; they do not need to rely on a literature expert to declare a definitive, authoritative interpretation of the truth in a text. For adolescent readers, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* could be empowering. Many students struggle with reading because they believe texts have fixed meanings that they are expected to decode. Students might be encouraged by the assurance that their interpretations of texts are valid, particularly if they are accustomed to a teaching style the follows the new critical idea that all texts have a single, definitive meaning.

Another aspect of Christian Reader Response that merits further investigation is worldview criticism. Christians disagree about the extent to which they should interact with people from other worldviews. This discrepancy may have less to do with theological traditions and more to do with cultural experience. Some of the respondents in the case study suggested that they struggled with the African American, Asian, and Middle-Eastern representation of God. These sorts of responses align with Madeline L'Engle's comment that some find the famous blonde-hair blue-eyed portrait of Jesus representative of their God while others do not (L'Engle 49). For Christians with limited multi-cultural experience, the conflict created by literature from different worldviews may have less to do with theological and truth-based differences and more to do with cultural misunderstanding. Were I to teach the unit plan over again, I would probably juxtapose the lesson on myth structure with the lesson on worldviews. This change might emphasize that Christian truth manifests itself in a variety of worldviews, and our failure to recognize it is in part due to our lack of understanding of a culture.

Next Steps

Where should Christian Reader Response go from here? In the adolescent context in particular, schools and researchers need to investigate ways to tailor secular literature instruction to students' faith traditions. Considering how students' home churches interact with scriptures and define truth could help us understand students' prior knowledge of textual interpretation. Researchers may also want to investigate ways to incorporate cultural understanding into Christian Reader Response. This adjustment would be particularly useful when teaching worldview criticism to those from culturally homogenous backgrounds.

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