
Pro Rege

Volume 2 | Number 2

Article 2

December 1973

Stuff that Literature is Made Of

Larry Reynolds

Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Larry (1973) "Stuff that Literature is Made Of," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 2:

No. 2, 2 - 6.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol2/iss2/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

THE STUFF THAT LITERATURE IS MADE OF

by Larry Reynolds
Assistant Professor of English



Mr. Larry Reynolds received his A.B. from Calvin College, his M.A.T. in English from Seattle University, and is presently enrolled in a doctoral program in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Northern Colorado. Prior to his appointment to the Dordt faculty in 1961, Mr. Reynolds taught at Bellevue Christian High School and Watson Groen Christian High School.

Changes in the high school English curriculum in the last ten years have plunged many experienced English teachers into a state of "future shock." While they long for the "good ol' days" when Shakespeare was a basic part of the high school curriculum and students knew the difference between the subjunctive and indicative mood, others are cynically observing that schools are merely going through the "progressive-Dewey stuff" all over again. Student-centered programs, individualized reading courses, and self-tailored electives confirm such suspicions. Colleges have not been immune to this process of change either. Some instructors of freshman English have complained that the programs in their colleges have become a combination of light shows and sensitivity sessions with perhaps a unit on the media thrown in. I also noticed the other day that one of our fellow

colleges in northwest Iowa is now offering an elective in pornography. The teaching of literature is taking place under various guises, and the whole area of futuristics promises even more dramatic changes.

In this article I would like to deal with the teaching of literature and the basis for the structuring of a literature curriculum. English teachers, of course, soon discover that being an English teacher is more than just teaching literature. Even though most English majors on the undergraduate level spend the majority of their time taking literature courses, they will teach grammar, composition, the mass media, journalism, speech, and perhaps advise a newspaper or an annual staff. I believe that each of these areas is a legitimate curricular (or perhaps extra-curricular) concern, but should be considered apart from literature. A teacher's job descrip-

Jargon
tion and the specific function of a classroom experience should merely be the application of a carefully constructed curriculum and all the areas such a curriculum embodies. Literature is one area.

Structuring a curriculum in literature immediately confronts the English teacher with the old student-centered vs. subject-centered dichotomy. In the public market place the student-centered proponents are in power, which became obvious with publication of James Moffett's A Student-Center Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13 and its subsequent popularity. Very few protests have been published against the student-centered approach, and those that have been voiced have usually come from the Chris-

should never be considered in isolation from its Creator and from man, God's image bearer on earth.

Fundamental to structuring a curriculum, then, is one's view of reality, and it is on this basic assumption that the Christian's view of God's creation should provide a distinct perspective in curriculum planning. When the English teacher deals with literature, he is working with a unique aspect of God's creation. The first question is, then, what is that creational stuff that literature is made of? What makes literature literature?

Many an English instructor has begun his course by making the distinction between any transcribed verbalization and that transcription

"Fundamental to structuring a curriculum, then, is one's view of reality, and it is on this basic assumption that the Christian's view of God's creation should provide a distinct perspective in curriculum planning. When the English teacher deals with literature, he is working with a unique aspect of God's creation."

fian community. Although Richard Tiemersma in his article "Sticking to One's Last: A Plea for Organizing Literature by Genre" (The Christian Educators Journal, November, 1972) doesn't specifically attack this approach, he does make a convincing case for what would be classified as a subject-centered approach to the teaching of literature.

And Christians should rightly be concerned about this dichotomy. A student-centered approach which states that curriculum should be determined solely on the basis of a student's needs tends to place the student in a vacuum. The student then stands independent of God and all creation, which approach results in a relativistic view of reality. A subject-centered approach, however, may be just as dangerous if one tries to look at creation apart from man's heart-directed response to that creation. (Dr. Tiemersma is careful to avoid that error.) Reality

which merits the classification literature. An article in the English Journal, Berkhof's Manual of Christian Doctrine, the Washington Post's coverage of the sky-lab mission, my wife's grocery list--these may communicate the thoughts of man, but they are not necessarily literature. All the above selections are probably qualified by their communicative (lingual) function; the important ingredient in such writing is clarity. Literature presupposes clarity, but is normed by its aesthetic qualifications. It is the aesthetic quality, the integrated harmony that is reflected in man's imaginative written response to the cosmos in which he has been placed that qualifies a transcription as literature.

Man has discovered many ways to express this response artistically. Shelley, using the sonnet, portrays ironically the fatefully false pride of King Ozymandias; E.E. Cummings, in

an innovative free verse poem "In just-", captures a spontaneous, innocent, and child-like response to spring; Hemingway, in a skillfully crafted short story "Hills Like White Elephants," probes the psychological turmoil of an affair that ends with abortion; Graham Greene describes the conscience struggle of a whiskey priest during the Marxists' rule in Mexico in his novel The Power and the Glory; and Arthur Miller enabled audiences to witness the tragedy of Willy Loman in the play Death of a Salesman. I underlined "discovered" because I believe that man's artistic response is part of creation. He does not create new art forms independent of the structure of creation—a concept 20th century "autonomous" man would like to maintain.

irrelevant

"By trying the spirits of an age through its literature, the teacher helps the student to see the cultural dynamic of the literature he is studying, and perhaps to develop a sensitivity to the spirits of his own historical time."

Man never operates apart from the laws of creation, however. Rather, he discovers or unfolds new dimensions of the aesthetic principles that are a part of creation itself. Man, as he makes these discoveries, must be careful that he does not absolutize them. While the basic structure that God gave to creation has not changed, man may refine his theoretical and abstract perception of it. The initial rejection of Whitman's poetry assumed a poetic type of religious dogmatism because man failed to acknowledge an historical unfolding of the aesthetic aspect of creation, namely Whitman's use of free verse poetry. New art forms and the new expression of old art forms even now probably await discovery, and the Christian should see that this dynamic unfolding dimension can result in a fundamental unity between structure and change.

?
But formless poetry - what is aesthetic aspect of creation does this discover?

Assuming that literature is qualified by its aesthetic function and that this function will continually find new forms of expression, the literature teacher still must determine to what extent (if any) the teaching of literature is the teaching of aesthetics. Most teachers rightly, I believe, reject the idea that teaching literature is really teaching aesthetics. There is a good case for requiring all college English majors to take a course in aesthetics, but to make every literature course a course in aesthetics would contribute to a rapid decline in enrollment in such courses.

The aesthetic may be a qualifying aspect of literature, but there are two other equally important dimensions that deal with the response that is being artistically expressed. That response is both historically and thematically qualified. Most literature is a distinct product of its age dealing with its value system, with its sociological, economic, and political problems, and with its philosophical vision. Literature is written within the context of the spirit of an age, and thus becomes part of history's significant record. Even though I disagree with Henry Ford's statement that "history is bunk," I am not suggesting that the teaching of literature become the teaching of the history of literature. But seeing the historical-philosophical dimension of literature demands attention, for both the student and the contemporary literature that he would rather read are also shaped by this same historical aspect of creation. By trying the spirits of an age through its literature, the teacher helps the student to see the cultural dynamic of the literature he is studying, and perhaps to develop a sensitivity to the spirits of his own historical time.

I have to admit that the historical dimension of literature is not in vogue right now. In many high schools the historical survey courses in American and British literature have been dropped, and on the college level the enrollment in period courses is at an all-time low. Critics of the historical approach to the teaching of literature might justly ask whether the history teacher could not do a better and more efficient job of trying the spirits of each historical age. The history teacher does perform a job that the literature teacher cannot begin to replace, but the history teacher's primary concern

in dealing with an historical period is analytical, and the texts he uses are not selected primarily for their aesthetic value but for their clarity. The literature teacher, however, is dealing with an art form that seeks to imaginatively project the reader into an experiential understanding of a particular time, rather than to give an analytical report. Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby provides such an understanding of the jazz-betwitted 1920's--an understanding that the student could not gain from a history text.

the Rye prophetically warned his readers of the confrontation that took place between society and its youth in the 1960's, but Holden Caulfield at the end of the novel is in a mental institution where he will receive some God-less humanistic advice on how to face a blind man's view of reality. J.D. Salinger is a prophet, but like so many authors of the twentieth century, he is a false one. The Christian reader must also try the spirits of these literary prophets, and this means dealing with the thematic state-

"If the literary artist is honest with his reader, his world and life vision--his view of nature, man, and God--will become an integral part of his thematic statement. The work of the Christian literature teacher is crucial at this point."

The experience that a piece of literature conveys brings one to an understanding of the thematic dimension of literature--what the author is trying to say. The artist, although subject to aesthetic norms and shaped by the historical times in which he lives, is a unique creature standing before the face of God. He is responding to God's command to love Him--either positively through Christ, or negatively in his own depravity. If the literary artist is honest with his reader, his world and life vision--his view of nature, man, and God--will become an integral part of his thematic statement. The work of the Christian literature teacher is crucial at this point. Often the artist who is trying to objectify the spirit of his times doesn't realize that he is messing around with God's creation and mistakenly thinks that, with his own god-like reason, he is truthfully analyzing the society he is looking at. Many of the artist's observations might be valid, for he cannot escape God's ordering of life (just as the society he is analyzing cannot), but the central thrust will fall short of a Christ-redeeming view of reality. In 1949 J.D. Salinger in Catcher in

ment that literary work makes.

Related to the thematic aspect of literature is the proliferation of thematic units and mini-courses on the high school level and thematically based courses on the college level. (The student cry for relevance has often been a motivating factor in the creation of such courses.) While a course that focuses its attention on the thematic aspect of literature is certainly a legitimate curriculum option, its legitimacy is valid only if the aesthetic and historical dimensions of literature also remain an integral part of the course. Otherwise, the course ceases to be a literature course and falls more legitimately under the classification of inter-disciplinary, sociological, psychological, special interest, or whatever the case may be. The same criticism would be true for any genre course or survey and period course that would completely isolate its focus to the point of neglecting the other major components that make literature the stuff it is.

The aesthetic, historical, and thematic qualities of literature should not necessarily divide the teaching of literature into a three-

ring circus with each aspect striving for equal time. The contest between the aesthetic and thematic elements of literature has been going on for some time under the pseudonyms of form and content, another false dichotomy in the teaching of literature. Clarence Walhout, in an excellent article on this dichotomy ("The Teaching of Literature in the Christian School," *The Reformed Journal*, September, 1965) demonstrates that content and form "are integral and in the final analysis are fused." I believe that although it adds to the complexity of the literature teacher's task, the three aspects of literature that I have dealt with are ultimately inseparable.

The three aspects that represent the stuff that literature is made of should then become a part of the objectives that determine the total structure of a literature curriculum:

- I. That the student will develop a sense of the aesthetic aspect of literature.
 - A. That the student will develop an understanding and appreciation of the general characteristics of an art form and of each genre.
 - B. That the student will develop an understanding and appreciation of the relationship of aesthetic principles to the structure of creation and its unfolding dimension.
- II. That the student will develop a sense of the historical aspect of literature.
 - A. That the student will develop an understanding of the relationship between a work of literature and the spirit of the times in which it is produced.
 - B. That the student will develop the ability to Christianly try the spirits of those times.
- III. That the student will develop an understanding of the thematic aspect of literature.
 - A. That the student will develop the ability to discover the central statement or experience of a work of literature.
 - B. That the student will develop the ability to Christianly try the spirits of that theme.

I know that these objectives would not withstand Mager's scrutiny, but I think they provide a good starting point for structuring a literature curriculum. Psychological and pedagogical concerns will, of course, determine the degree to which the teaching of literature can assume a theoretical mode and what curriculum experiences can best fulfill these goals. Then many of the changes which I mentioned at the beginning of this article (the elective in pornography excepted) might just become valid classroom experiences for such a curriculum.