Teaching the Classics: Worldview Supplement

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Appendices

Worldview Analysis: Introduction

Use the space provided to take notes on the live presentation as you follow along in your syllabus.

Goal of the course:

To explain some advanced techniques for analyzing and interpreting literature

To explain some advanced techniques for leading discussions of literature

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Why this goal?

Many *Teaching the Classics* alumni have asked for further help in interpreting the literature they're assigning to their children. They want suggestions for how to apply Christian principles of interpretation to literature. What they want, without necessarily saying so, is a Christian way to do literary criticism, to interpret and evaluate what they read based on Christian principles.

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Our calling:

One of our callings as Christians is to extend the Gospel into the world of ideas, "casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ." (2 Cor. 10:5) Importantly, this call extends to the ideas we encounter as we read.

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What is a worldview?

A worldview is a set of answers to certain basic, universal questions:

Who is God? What is a human being? Where did the world come from and how does it function? What is the difference between good and evil? What is a good life? What is a good death? What is love? Should we look to the future with hope or despair? Why?

Everybody has answers to these questions, even if they are not conscious of them. Reading literature with an eye to these questions can not only help us understand our authors more clearly and deeply but also understand ourselves. As we examine the works of others to see what they say about these universal questions, we will be drawn to examine and perhaps modify our own answers – or discover answers we weren't aware of before.

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Understanding before Evaluation:

The subject of worldview analysis must be approached with great caution. It is very easy to get the cart before the horse when it comes to worldview thinking – to get the rhetoric before the grammar, to use the vocabulary of the classical educator. So let us be reminded of the horse, before we move onto the cart:

The *Teaching the Classics* basic seminar is designed to teach students to understand what the author has said.

TTC is worldview neutral: that is, the techniques for good reading presented in *Teaching the Classics* are equally applicable to any work of fiction, regardless of the subject matter of the book or the philosophical/religious assumptions of the reader. The reason for this is simple: you must first understand an author on his own terms before you can properly evaluate what he's saying. TTC focuses exclusively on understanding the author – on arriving at a good clear answer to the question: "What does the author say?"

We can hardly overemphasize the point that this is where literary analysis and interpretation begin – with a clear understanding of the work itself.

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CS Lewis: The Importance of "Receiving" Instead of "Using"

Lewis imagines John Keats contemplating the vase that gave rise to his famous poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Perhaps, muses Lewis, the vase led him to meditate on Greek

Myth and the immortal nature of art and memory. If so, this was an admirable use of the vase which has merit in and of itself. But Keats was not doing the work of a pottery critic. He was not admiring the pottery as pottery; he was using it for something else!

Lewis warns that real appreciation of literature

"Demands the opposite process. We must not make books the vehicles of our own subjectivity. We must begin by laying aside as completely as we can all our own preconceptions, interests and associations. Then, we must use our eyes. We must look, and go on looking until we have seen exactly what is there. We sit down before the picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking first whether work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.)" (C. S. Lewis, An Experiment in Criticism)

In literature, this receiving involves asking and answering the basic question: "what does the author say?" This is the focus of the *Teaching the Classics* basic seminar, and the present supplement assumes that we remember the fundamental techniques necessary to this task.

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The Worldview Question

There is another question, however, besides "what does the author say?" That is, "Is the author telling the truth?" This is the basic question of a "worldview" approach, and as your students mature they will need to be able to ask and answer this one, too.

London's *To Build a Fire*: Worldview Analysis

Questions in this section are drawn from the Socratic List, which begins on page 28 of this syllabus. Answers are given in italics, and represent possible responses to the Socratic questions. You may, of course, answer the questions differently – these are provided as a guide to discussion only.

When did the author live?

In what year was the author born? When did he die?

1876-1916

What events took place in the world during the author's lifetime? Did the author know about them? Was he involved in them?

London journeyed to the Yukon Territory in 1897 along with countless others hoping to make a score in the gold rush. In November 1897, he staked a claim in Henderson Creek, the destination of the man in "To Build a Fire." Though he left Alaska the following summer without much gold, he would draw from his rich experiences in the northern wilds for many of his lasting works, including Call of the Wild and White Fang and, of course, 1908's "To Build a Fire," usually considered his most lasting work.

What did the author believe?

Was the author a believer in a particular religion?

No

Was the author a member of a certain political party or other organization?

London was an ardent socialist

Was the author associated with a particular intellectual school or mode of literature? (Examples include Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Existentialism, Naturalism, Realism, Postmodernism, etc)

Jack London is usually considered a literary Naturalist, along with authors such as Stephen Crane (Red Badge of Courage) and Theodore Dreiser (Sister Carrie).

Naturalistic writers were influenced by the evolution theory of Charles Darwin who, in his monumental 1859 work <u>On the Origin of Species</u>, theorized that environments alter the biology and behavior of organisms; the organisms whose traits promote survival reproduce more successfully and adapt new, more efficient traits. (Survival of the fittest)

Naturalists saw the world through evolutionary eyes and concluded that it was deterministic – that is, that it proceeded by a series of physical cause-and-effect

relationships. Human actions, even, have been caused by prior environmental, social, and biological factors beyond the control of the individual.

Naturalistic works exposed the dark harshness of life, including poverty, racism, prejudice, disease, prostitution, filth, etc. They were often very pessimistic and frequently criticized for being too blunt. In the United States, the genre is associated principally with writers such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser.

This deterministic view of life common to naturalists influenced their writing in a number of areas. Since humans do not have free will, the naturalists often refrained from making moral judgments on the actions of their characters; after all, the environment, and not the human, has determined these actions. The naturalists also viewed the deterministic environment as indifferent and harsh to its inhabitants; accordingly, keen instinct rather than civilized intellect is necessary for survival (in "To Build a Fire," for example, the man is lacking this instinct).

What did the author believe to be the driving force that causes human events? Chance? Fate? Man's free will? God?

London was an evolutionist and so believed that physical cause and effect, guided by chance, was the driving force behind human events.

What does the story say about human nature?

What is a human being?

A certain kind of animal

Are human beings different from animals? In what ways?

They are not really different from animals, except they have intelligence instead of just instinct, which may be seen as a hindrance rather than an asset. They are frail and unsuited to life in the natural world.

Are human beings created by some higher power, or is man his own god?

There is no mention of God in this story and no reference to a higher power or to creation.

Do human beings have souls? Eternal ones?

There is no mention of souls or eternity in this story.

Do human beings exist for a purpose? What is it?

We can't detect a purpose for human existence in this story.

What adjectives might be used to describe human nature as it is presented in the story? Is it brave, generous, heroic, creative and benevolent? Is it frail, selfish, dull or evil?

Human nature is frail, dull and selfish, concerned only with survival.

Do the story's answers to these questions tell the truth?

Although man's nature is marred by sin, the Bible is clear that he is the crowning achievement of God's creation and is unique among all of God's creatures in his reflection of the Divine image.

Do the story's answers to these questions accurately represent the author's views?

Yes.

Does the story demonstrate the implications of the author's views in some way?

You might say that the tone of the story (bleak, hopeless, cruel) reflects the authors' atheistic evolutionist views quite well.

What does the story say about God?

Does the world of the story include a God or higher power that governs events in some way? Is the higher power assumed to exist or is it mentioned explicitly?

If there is a higher power in this story, it is the natural world. We might say that the natural world has endowed the dog and the man with instinct, and has endowed the man with intelligence as well.

Who is God? Jehovah? Allah? Zeus? Fate? Chance? Nature?

Nature

What is God like? Is he (or it) loving, judgmental, terrible, inscrutable, capricious, good or evil?

Nature is an impersonal force which operates by physical laws and chance.

What actions are ascribed to God in the story, either implicitly or explicitly?

Nature kills the man, but selects the dog for survival.

How does God relate to man? Is the relationship adversarial in some way? If so, who opposes whom?

Nature relates to man as an impersonal force, acting upon him relentlessly, exposing his weaknesses and eventually killing him.

Do the story's answers to these questions tell the truth?

No. The higher power governing the world is nothing like London's Nature.

Do the story's answers to these questions accurately represent the author's views?

Again, yes. The story reflects London's naturalism, atheism and evolutionism.

What does the story say about the natural world?

What rules govern the natural world in the story?

The law of cause and effect governs the natural world, as demonstrated by the events that surround the man's death. Also, the law of instinct, which might