

# Reading with Purpose

*Applying the Christian Worldview  
to American Literature*

by Nancy Wilson

## About the Author

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## Preface

When I was studying English literature as an undergraduate, I had a spiritual crisis. My professors were teaching a view of man that I could not refute. One professor in particular repeatedly taught us that man was just a beast, beyond hope, with no purpose in life but to reproduce. He accepted this view with a cool despair, but I became more and more troubled. *What was my purpose?* Did life have any ultimate meaning? If so, how could I find out what it was?

Literature always expresses a view about God, man, nature, and the world because it deals with ultimate questions. Ungodly instructors and writers can press unbelieving ideas upon students and readers with great force and persuasiveness, especially when the class is not grounded on a solid foundation. Students who are not *thinking Christians* can be led to believe many untrue things. Christians who study or teach or just read literature must learn to *think like Christians* and apply it to all they read. Because I did not know what was true about God, about man, and about the universe, I was tossed about and troubled and misled. But, thanks be to God, He used the ungodly view of man to lead me to Himself and set me on a firm foundation.

Because I have seen the destructive nature of literature when not studied from a Christian worldview, it was a great delight to me, years later, to be a high-school literature instructor myself. My goal has been to equip students to love literature while loving Christ more. When we understand how to examine the worldview of the writer and consider it from a Christian perspective, we are then free to stay uncontaminated by ungodly thinking while appreciating all that is good in the work.

It is my hope that this little booklet will be of special help to Christian teachers and parents who want their students to enjoy literature as one of God's many gifts to us, while thinking about all they read *Christianly*.

## Why Read Anyway?

Before we can discuss *how* to read Christianly, we must consider a more fundamental question: Why should we read at all? What is the purpose of literacy? Most parents are eager to see their children reading as early as possible, but why? Is it to keep their children busy so they can entertain themselves? What is the goal of literacy?

The non-Christian has only two options here. He can read for pleasure and entertainment, which is hedonism, or he can read for reading's sake, which is aestheticism. Reading for pleasure is just like anything else that is done strictly for the enjoyment of the creature: it turns into worship of the creature. Hedonism is the view that I exist to please myself. Therefore, if reading pleases me, then I will read. Reading is seen as the means to an end: pleasure.

Aestheticism is the worship of art for art's sake. This is obviously another dead end. This view sees reading not as a means to an end, but an end in itself. Bookishness can be seen as worldly sophistication: to speak of books and authors and poetry over coffee, to hold a fine volume in the hand, to display an impressive library, the result of years of ardent collecting. When this is not done to the glory of God, it is obviously idolatry. A huge mahogany library stashed from floor to ceiling with leather-bound books is appealing to us all; but that shouldn't be enough for the Christian. Without a right understanding of God and a deep gratitude to Him for His gifts, this is just one more hollow attempt to find meaning in a seemingly meaningless world.

Though Christians can certainly be entertained by reading, find great pleasure in reading, and love the beauty of expression in a work, they have a much more profound reason to appreciate literature than the unbeliever: the glory and pleasure of God. When a Christian is deliberately trying to take every thought captive for Christ, books can be a source of great pleasure and joy without being a form of idolatry. Believers have the opportunity to enjoy life, including literature, in a way the unbeliever cannot. God enables the Christian to feast gratefully on the many blessings He bestows while giving

the glory back to Him. This means that if we think carefully about books, and think rightly about God, literature can be richly enjoyed like all God's other gifts.

Christians, of all people, should *love* books. God Himself is the Creator of words, His Son is the Word, and we have God's precious Word to us in the Scriptures. Words for Christians have special significance because they are part of God's revelation to us. And He has created us to love stories and story telling as part of our creature-hood. This love of stories can be used and delighted in to His glory and praise. After all, the Bible is a collection of stories. The Gospel is Christ's story. It is *The Story*. And Jesus Himself is the Master Storyteller.

## What is a Christian View of Literature?

Christians have been discussing and defending a right use of literature for centuries. Some have argued that fiction is an ungodly form of writing because it is not true, because it is morally corrupting, or because it is purely recreational and therefore useless. Sir Philip Sidney ably defended the use of fiction in his treatise *A Defense of Poesy* written in the 1580's. As he points out, Christ used parables to teach during His earthly ministry. Fiction, he says, does not purport to be true, like history does, and is better suited to teach and delight than any other form of writing. C.S. Lewis, in the *Discarded Image*, echoes Sidney when he says, "Literature exists to teach what is useful, to honour what deserves honour, to appreciate the delightful. The useful, honourable, and delightful are superior to it: it exists for their sake; its own use, honour, or delightfulness is derivative from theirs."

Unbelievers have written much about literature, but it is important for Christians who are studying literature to develop a Christian view about the purpose of literature. Examining what writers like Sidney and Lewis have said is a valuable way to begin thinking about this. Consider the quote from Lewis above. Like Sidney, he believed literature should *teach* something useful. Some may think this is obvious, but many authors have felt strongly to the contrary. For example, Edgar Allan Poe believed literature should *not* be didactic, but should rather attempt to have one impact or effect. In Poe's case, he wanted to scare the reader to death. The American imagists (1901-1918) agreed with Poe that literature should not teach. They believed a poem should exist the same way a piece of fruit exists: it simply is. Archibald MacLeish, writing in 1892 in his poem "Ars Poetica," says, "A poem should not mean but be."

Both these views are impossible, for teaching something is inescapable. When you say poetry should not teach, you are, after all, teaching what poetry should be. Literature cannot be an end in itself; it must either glorify God or it will glorify something else.

According to Lewis's definition of literature, it exists for the sake of something other than itself: the useful, the honourable, and the delightful. In other words, literature reflects the glory of these things; it does not have any glory of its own. And the useful, honourable, and delightful glorify God. When we elevate literature above these things, we end up with the literary equivalent of modern art: words splattered across the page words that distort truth, goodness, and beauty. For the Christian, literature is a means of knowing more about God and His world and should result in more glory for Him. In the Christian's pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, literature should have a key role. Is the story or poem saying true things about God, man, and the world? That would make it useful. Is it embracing the good? That would make it honorable. And is it beautiful? That would make it delightful. This is what Christians should look for in literature. Without these things, literature fails to glorify God, for He cannot be pleased with falsehood, badness, and ugliness. Nor should we be.

So why should Christians read non-Christian writers? Of course we should be discriminating readers. But we cannot understand our world if we refuse to engage with the history of ideas. And even non-Christians have things to teach us. They can help us to understand the world through their eyes, enabling us to see the consequences of sin, the extent of spiritual blindness, and the need for the gospel. But God has shed His grace abroad, and even unbelievers can have extraordinary gifts in literature. Thus we can appreciate the common grace exhibited in the world. We can "plunder the Egyptians" and freely take the treasures offered in their writing. How else can we identify false ideas and teach our students to refute them if they never come into contact with any? The Apostle Paul was familiar with the classical literature of his day, and he quotes from three poets in Acts 17 (Epimenides, Cleanthes, and Aratus). If we are to be missionaries to our culture, we must understand it. The sermons and writings of the Puritans are saturated with references from classical literature. They understood this principle of being enriched in their understanding of God's world by being unafraid to study literature, even that written by unbelievers. For example, the Puritan Matthew Henry quotes from Ovid's *Art of Love* in his book called *The Quest For Meekness and Quietness of Spirit*. If Ovid's book were in the high-school reading list, it would make parents jumpy, and for good reason. But the Puritans truly understood how to read and make use of pagan literature. It is inevitable that



we will have imagination, but we Christians should strive for sanctified imaginations: those that are trained not corrupted.

R.L. Dabney, the nineteenth-century theologian, wrote an essay entitled “On Dangerous Reading” where he warns Christians of the hazards of reading without thinking Christianly. His day was particularly ridden with sentimental, sappy novels that were not just a waste of time, but morally corrupting. As he points out, “So it is perfectly easy to paint truth at the bottom and error at the top when falsehood holds the brush.” Here he is attacking the popularity of evil characters that were portrayed as heroes, arousing the sympathy of the casual reader. This is no different today. Christian people can find themselves sympathizing with evil characters in films and books if they do not pay attention. As a pastor, Dabney was gravely concerned for the spiritual health of his people. It is worthwhile to read his treatment of this subject. Christians have been struggling to have a right view and right use of literature for centuries. We should join into this discussion by reading all we can that Christians have already written about the subject. (A bibliography in the back of this booklet lists a few books you might find helpful.)

## **What is the Christian Worldview?**

A worldview is, quite simply, the way one views the world. It is the paradigm a person has, whether consciously or unconsciously, by which he interprets all of his experience. In literature we can categorize the author's worldview as the view of God, man, and the world (or nature) that is expressed in the work. (We could also include many sub-categories, such as the view of sin, the atonement, and revelation.) A Christian worldview is that view of the world that is taught and laid out in the Bible. To oversimplify for this discussion, a Christian views God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, man as a fallen and sinful being who can be reconciled to God through Christ, and nature as a created thing that reflects God's glory. In other words, the Christian does not view God as an impersonal force, or fate; nor does he view Him as a benevolent and benign Creator who made the world but does not sustain it by His own power.

Unfortunately, many Christians do not know what the Bible teaches. It is impossible for them to have a Christian worldview, for they do not know much about God or about His dealings with man and the world. These readers assume that if a work mentions God, then it must be written by a Christian. This is a tremendous handicap, for it makes them prey to many of the world's false ideas, whether evolution or egalitarianism or the social gospel.

When I am teaching literature, whether a poem, essay, short story, or book, I instruct my students to be continually asking two questions: *What is the author saying* (about God, man, and nature)? *Is it true?* This is a good habit of mind to cultivate no matter what the student is reading—even if it's the back of the cereal box, something is being *said*. What is it? Is it true? This discipline should be carried over to film watching as well. Thinking like Christians as we read is morally beneficial. It teaches us to apply our faith to everything.

Of course it is not only possible, but also sadly common in our day for Christians to write ungodly stories, poems, etc. The ungodliness can come in the form of sappy sentimentalism; it can simply be crummy writing; or it

can put forth ungodly views of Scripture and of God Himself. Christians need to be motivated and instructed to write beautiful, good, and true stories, not cheesy novels where everyone gets “saved” in the end. The Christian faith is much too glorious to be reduced to such unworthy levels. A good case in point is the popular *Left Behind Series*. These books have sold millions of copies around the world, and this series is lauded as great Christian literature. This is appalling. Not only do these books espouse unbiblical views of the end times, but they are also sappy, sentimental, and very poorly written.

Obviously, not every work will address every question. A short poem about a leaf may not say much at all about these ultimate questions. On the other hand, it may reveal much of the author’s worldview. Longer works cannot keep from exposing the author’s worldview. Sometimes several works must be read before the author’s worldview can be understood. Some works may reveal much about the author’s view of the nature of man, but say little directly about his view of God. But if you believe that man is basically good, then many things you believe about God will necessarily follow. If man is not in need of a savior (which is what those who think man is good must say), then Christianity has little to offer. I am not suggesting that we pull things out of context or try to read into works what is not there. Rather, I am saying we must look for the obvious things and train our minds to be always examining whether the true, the good, and the beautiful are evident.

## Literary Movements in History

When I have discussed these ideas with teachers, I have often been asked if there is any simple, short booklet that summarizes different common worldviews in literature. Not knowing of any, I am attempting here to lay out some of the basic ideas of the larger historical literary periods in American literature to help teachers and students develop an overview. I will use American literature simply because I am most familiar with it, and once these concepts are understood, they apply to any literature. This does not mean that I think classical literature is unimportant in the study of worldview; its worldview is crude polytheism, a despairing skepticism, and philosophical monotheism (no personal god). Nor do I lightly pass over British literature prior to America's founding. Much of it is deeply Christian. The writing of the Middle Ages is largely Christian, and the Renaissance has a generally dominant Christian worldview. But I am merely using American literature as a model to help train teachers to see how to recognize the worldviews in all kinds of literature.

This will necessarily have to be an oversimplification, but, Lord willing, it will enable both teacher and student to place books and authors in context. Dates used for the periods are based on those from the *Oxford Companion to American Literature* as well as *The Harper Handbook to Literature*. An important book to read to understand American thinking is *A Theological Interpretation of American History* by C. Gregg Singer. This is a detailed and scholarly explanation of the patterns of thought from our founding to the present. (The Bob Jones literature textbooks, though I do not recommend them unreservedly, might be helpful to you in this regard.)

Each period of literature, even if it is predominantly non-Christian, will have Christian writers who do not espouse the prevailing views. Just as we live in Post-Modern times and are affected by the thinking of our day, we strive to think like Christians in an unbelieving age. Thus, some authors in a period will be more openly ungodly than others. So much is obvious.

Each of these periods has been identified by historians as they have looked back and observed general trends, social and religious climates, and styles of writing. Within some of the larger movements are smaller sub-groups. Thus, this overview is not intended to be exhaustive. (At the end of each section I have included a small handful of other authors or works to help you get started.) As I have told my students, studying literature cannot be done apart from studying history and philosophy. It is important that the serious student of literature come to understand many philosophical terms as well as literary terms. It is impossible to examine a worldview without teaching your students the philosophical and historical context of each of these periods; this equips them to understand the mindset of the authors whose works they are reading. At the same time, realize that these are general characteristics and may not apply to each particular reading.

**Time line for American Literature**

Colonial or Early American literature 1607-1750

Neoclassicism 1750-1820

American Romanticism: 1820-1865

American Realism and Naturalism: 1865-1920

Modern Period: 1914-1965

Post Modern