

The Loom: Tapestry Literary Studies: The Big Picture

THE TAPESTRY PROGRAM: K—MOM

Tapestry's “K-Mom” literature program presents worthy books, widely recognized for their artistic excellence and important content, in chronological order at appropriate reading levels. Over the course of twelve years, students read both classics of children’s literature and the great works.

Our program also teaches and applies universal principles of literary analysis throughout students’ school lives, beginning with children’s literature and moving on to great works. We include colorful worksheets for lower grammar, upper grammar, and dialectic students, as well as socratic discussion, literary analysis exercises, and worldviews analysis from a biblical perspective for dialectic and rhetoric levels.

Our general approach is to use the principle of meaning through artistic form and the “understand, evaluate, enjoy” process, as well as literary tools, terms, and historical background information, to pursue a chronological study of literature that aims at cultivating students’ growth in the following abilities:

- ❑ The ability to identify, describe, understand, evaluate, and enjoy artistic forms and literary elements such as plot, characters, settings, imagery, etc.
- ❑ The ability to identify, describe, understand, biblically evaluate, and (where appropriate) enjoy the worldviews, meanings, and messages in great literature.
- ❑ The ability to write strong literary analysis, literary comparison, and literary response papers, using literary analysis exercises as pre-writing and class discussions as topic and thesis generators.
- ❑ Additional benefits for the student include:
 - ❑ Increasing vocabulary and writing skills from reading and studying the poetic and rhetorical methods of excellent writers
 - ❑ The ability to distinguish between content and form (that is, between a genuinely true statement or argument and strongly affective artistry). Students who can make this distinction have the advantage when dealing with media (newspapers, speeches, movies, even song lyrics) that uses artistry to make falsehood attractive or truth unattractive.

INCLUDING ATHENS: WHY READ SECULAR LITERATURE?

What we have said so far makes sense for the study of literature that is written from a biblical perspective, but a good deal of the world’s great literature is not biblical in worldview. Should we, as Christians, consider studying such works?

The Difference Between Jerusalem and Athens

In the days of the early Christian church, theologians were wrestling with the problem of the relationship between biblical beliefs and seemingly sound observations and ideas (especially of Greek philosophy), which were unfortunately mixed with unbiblical beliefs. Some of these theologians wanted to mix Christian belief with Greek philosophy; others protested. Tertullian, one of the most famous of these men (and one who did not want the two to be mixed) famously asked “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?”

Tertullian was speaking in symbolic images. Jerusalem, the holy City of David and the place of God’s temple, for him represented the whole of biblical thought and belief, including Christian thought and belief. Athens, the great center of pagan Greek learning, represented unbiblical ideas and philosophies, or more generally the wisdom of the pagans. From Tertullian’s perspective, the two were utterly different and should have nothing to do with one another.

The question “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” has itself become a kind of shorthand phrase that symbolizes any situation in which Christians find themselves asking “Why should we try to understand or adapt ideas, even good ideas, that rest on an unbiblical foundation? What does Christianity have to do with other faiths or philosophies?”

Those are very good questions, and the debate about them is a very old one. When we apply the phrase to literary studies, we find that we have literature written from a biblical worldview (Jerusalem literature) and literature written from a non-biblical worldview (Athens literature).

If the difference between the literature of Jerusalem and the literature of Athens were only a matter of different artistic techniques and forms, few (if any) Christians would be likely to object to Athenian works. The Bible makes use of a wide variety of artistic forms: prose, poetry, epistle, proverb, hero story, epic, epithalamion, and parable are just a few of the genres included.

So, the trouble with Athenian literature is not that it comes in forms such as the science fiction or fantasy novel (Christian authors have made use of both), but rather the trouble is that its contents offer a false portrayal of reality. It is not merely that it doesn’t portray *all* of reality, but rather that the parts it does portray are often painted inaccurately.

In works of Athenian literature, we find very often that the truth about what is real, found authoritatively in Scripture, is more or less rejected, and that artistry is then used to dress a falsehood attractively. God is made to seem distant, or cruel, or like some sort of overindulgent parent, rather than near, loving, and yet holy beyond imagination and utterly opposed to sin.

In light of this, the Christian student of literature may well ask, “Why should I read secular works? What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” and “Won’t I be deceived if falsehood comes to me clothed in the power or loveliness of artistry?” These are excellent questions, and from them we can discern at least two good reasons why Christians might choose to avoid Athenian literature:

1. Because the literature of Athens may misrepresent God and reality
2. Because the literature of Athens may misuse artistry to enhance or make attractive that which is not true

WHY CHRISTIANS STILL STUDY ATHENIAN LITERATURE

And yet, Christian students still study Athenian literature. Why? Surely we ought to turn in disgust from even the most artistically marvelous work of literature, if it portrays a false view of reality. What if a particular story says that there is no God, or that there are many gods who are nothing like the God of the Bible? Should we read such things? Wouldn’t it be wrong to do so? These are questions which each Christian must decide before the Lord in his own conscience; and each one’s answer may be affected by his own weaknesses and temptations, or by his desire to care for other people around him who might be tempted by what he chooses to read.

However, for most people, the false portrayals found in the great works of Athenian literature are not exactly what you would call an overpowering temptation. They can indeed be powerfully misleading, but their type of deception is like drops of water on a stone—in many cases it would take much exposure over time, and much unguarded, blindly accepting reading, for Athenian literature to make a dangerous impression.

Also, because the portrayal of reality offered in Athenian literature is often strikingly different from our own biblical understanding of reality, Athenian literature is seldom able to “fly under the radar” and influence us. Usually, we react to it quite strongly, and much more often our task is to accurately explain *why* we object to it, than to be unaware that we should!

The danger is more likely to be that, finding ourselves unable to express what is wrong with Athenian literature, we become confused and subside into silence, wondering if it is we who were wrong. However, if we develop our literary study skills and hone our ability to understand how literature works and how we can tell between its true and false portrayals of reality, even that ceases to be much of a concern.

Meanwhile, there are very real benefits to be gotten from reading Athenian literature. Here are four of them:

1. *Vicarious Experience (“Jennifer’s Argument”)*

Jennifer is a real person. She was homeschooled all her life up until the age of twenty-one, and then went away to a Christian college to become a Literature major. Jennifer also has a tender conscience, and isn’t a bit afraid to stand by what she believes. One day, sitting in her college cafeteria, she began to explain to some of her friends the degrees by which she had come to be ready to read *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, a current assignment in English Literature.

Her friends knew that Jennifer had struggled for a long time with her literary vocation. Before coming to school she wrestled intensely with the same issues that all who wanted to be Christian students of literature had to face. Some of them were questions like “Why should a Christian study works that show apathy, irreverence, or even hostility towards God?” and, more relevantly, “Why should a Christian read a book like *Tess*, about a sweet English dairymaid who is first raped by one man, then betrayed by another, then tempted by grief and anger to kill the first man, which in turn leads to her own execution—especially when all of it is told in such a way as to make God seem at best indifferent to her misery, and at worst its cause?” There were many Christian students who, like Jennifer, loved the artistic beauty of Athenian literature but had strong concerns about its portrayal of reality.

On this day, however, Jennifer had an answer for these questions. “It may be,” she said quietly, “that the Lord is having you read things that you wouldn’t choose to read, so that you can experience life as you have never known it, and will never know it. It may be that He has people He wants you to reach out and minister to, whom you would never be able to relate to if you had not read these things.”

This argument, which we call “Jennifer’s Argument,” is firmly rooted in reality and everyday experience. For the truth is that there were, and still are, girls like Tess, maybe even more now than when the book was written, and some of them are our sisters, or our mothers, or our daughters, or the girls whom we take into our homes in order to show them Christ’s love. And, as Jennifer says, a book like *Tess* can help us to understand better how to love them.

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Tess of the D'Urbervilles is wrong, profoundly wrong, in what it says about God. But it also shows us how easily a young girl can fall into a trap, and warns us about the danger signs from a victim's perspective, so that we know better how to avoid walking into it. Still more, there must be many girls who feel as Tess did, and if we understand their feelings through reading the book, we can develop answer to show that the book is wrong about God, and that girls like Tess have cause for hope. To read such a book is to have a vicarious experience: to see through another's eyes, and reach conclusions about God that we had not imagined, but can now avoid for ourselves and address in others.

Finally, Athenian literature may not contain truth about God, but the reason they endure is that they do express some other profound and real truths: often those of mankind's painful state and obvious need for a Savior (though that is rarely the author's intention). To feel that pain and that longing through a book's bleak portrayal of reality, may urge us on to reach out to the lost and offer them the good news that we too often take for granted.

To this day, Jennifer's argument still constitutes the best justification we can offer for the study of Athenian literature. Such literature will grieve us, but it will also give us insight into the paining souls of those whom we see every day, perhaps insensitive to their extreme need. There are probably many Christians who could honestly say that reading *Tess* or similar books has made them more effective evangelists, and more prayerful, compassionate Christians.

2. *Strengthening of Faith in a Biblical Worldview*

Since all great literature tends to embody a set of principles in a concrete example (a story), we learn to discern the truth or falsehood of those principles as we read and compare them with our own. Thus, in reading Athenian literature, we have opportunity after opportunity to test various worldviews without accepting them, and to compare them with Scripture and our own experience. In the process, we may find our faith in a biblical worldview greatly strengthened.

Such comparison is especially helpful in *Tapestry of Grace: Year 1* (ancient world) studies, and for a special reason: bombarded as Christians are by claims that the Bible is only one of many "mythological curiosities" collected from the remains of our "ignorant predecessors", a careful study of and comparison between it and other works of contemporary literature demonstrates that the Bible is completely unique. The Bible expresses a worldview unlike anything else among literary works of the ancient world, as literary study can reveal.

3. *Common Grace*

Though a person's worldview, especially his view of God, may be untrue, we can still learn from the experiences and insights of unbelieving authors. The reality that an author portrays to us may not correspond completely to what is really real, but this does not mean that nothing in an author's imagined reality is true. The painful situation described in *Tess*, for example, is all *too* common, and some of the author's themes—particularly the way in which he exposes and condemns self-righteousness that another character shows to Tess—are well worth having. We can learn a great deal from the wisdom and common grace given to authors whose beliefs are not biblical, though at the same time we must be aware of their insufficiencies, false understanding of reality, and "missing of the mark."

4. *Learning to Discern Truth and Falsehood in Art*

Through reading secular literature, and learning to separate its content and worldview from its artistry, we can acquire an ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood, even when falsehood is presented in an artistically appealing manner, or when truth is presented unappealingly. Such skills make it difficult for trained readers and hearers to be led astray by a false argument clothed in artistic language. In this respect, studying some of the great Athenian literature is like having a vaccination. One can learn not only to appreciate artistic language (and write better oneself as a result!), but also how to recognize each smooth-sounding trick of speech, and separate the pleasure of artistry or cleverness of expression from the force of sound reasoning and biblical foundations in sermons, ads, newspaper articles, televised speeches and debates, conversations with friends or coworkers, stories, poems, plays, movies, sets of song lyrics, etc.

Other Considerations

To these four main arguments, we could add a host of other considerations. For example, reading and studying literature can lead to a wider vocabulary range, increased analytical skills, heightened appreciation for and knowledge of literary techniques, awareness of other cultures, and so on.