

The Loom
Tapestry of Grace Rhetoric Literature
Pendulum Swinging
Romance and Realism in History

V. toPIcs In lIterary theory, PractIce, study, and InterPretatIon a. lIterary InterPretatIons of hIstory

Authors tend to be intensely aware of the past—at least of the literary past, and often of the historical past as well. In fact, throughout history it has been a common game among literary people to retell the same stories—for example, the stories of Arthur and his knights—vying with past authors for the best artistic expression of the same subject, characters, and essential plot.

Authors have also tended to mine the stories of history—of actual events and people—for the basis of their fiction. Arthur, or somebody similar to him, was probably a real person, and his historical presence forms the center of the immense body of stories that have been woven around him.

For these reasons and others, you will often find writers presenting historical material in literature. Since history (unlike fiction) literally happened, an author's account of a historical person or event (whether intended to be accurate or "embroidered" with fictional elements) requires an extra level of understanding and interpretation from us, and may repay our extra attention with additional enjoyment.

At the very least, when taking notes on a literary work which includes historical people or events, you should be aware of the author's portrayal of them. Is the author's account literally accurate, as far as historians know, or does it include some elements of fictional embellishment? How do these extra pieces, if any, affect your view of the historical story? How does the author intend the historical story to be understood—in other words, how is he portraying the reality of that historical person or event? If you are studying a play that includes a historical character, how can you imagine that he might be acted? These are all valuable questions to ask yourself when you are studying a fictional or semi-fictional account of a story from history.

B. character studies and BIBlical terminology

We want to build the skill of using biblical terms to think and talk about people, whether in real life or fiction. Because no one knows the human heart as God does, using His terms to describe what is going on in a character is in many cases the best way to deepen our understanding of that character and evaluate him rightly.

This is not to say that we should ignore the way the author describes the character—far from it! However, once we have understood the author's perspective on his character's personality, actions, and motivations, it can be both wise and helpful for us as Christians to step back and say to ourselves, "We know what this author thinks about his character, but what would God think of this fictional personality? Is the author asking me to admire something that I shouldn't admire? Or, if I should admire this character, how would I describe his virtues in terms of what God considers valuable?"

For example, suppose that an author indulgently portrays his character as "frustrated." As Christians, we can apply biblical language and describe that character as actually "impatient" or even "angry," which helps us to see that the author is picturing as acceptable something which God condemns as wrong. Or, if a character is portrayed as "a good person," we might translate his trait (depending on its expression in the story) as "kind," "hopeful," or "loving."

It is always important to first understand how the author is viewing his own character, because we don't want to misunderstand the story. However, after having understood, we can apply these biblical terms to

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characters in order to discern what kind of people they would be in the eyes of God, and therefore how we should think about them.

c. romance and realism In the human Imagination

1. Pendulum sWingIng

The romantic and realistic modes are like two extremes of a pendulum's swing. One can observe the way world literature hangs evenly between them, or else swings towards one or the other, throughout the history of the human imagination as expressed in literature. Painting with a very broad brush, the romantic and realistic tendencies of the human imagination could be characterized as follows:

Footnote 1. Such additions are extremely common and expected among authors of fiction, and have not historically been considered as lying, provided that everybody understands the story is being padded with fictional additions.

☐ Realistic mode

☐ The realistic mode might be described as horizontal, dealing with people on earth and their relationships.

☐ The realistic mode purposes to present the earthly realm as it usually seems to our earthly senses.

☐ Since the realistic concentrates on the horizontal and the earthly, it does not tend to focus on the reality, power,

influence, and (or) significance of the supernatural realm as it touches life (including human life) on earth.

☐ Literary realism also tends to portray people as they ordinarily are, with typical strengths and weaknesses, and to

emphasize history, community, and the complexity of human thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

☐ Romantic mode

☐ The romantic mode could be called vertical in that it emphasizes man's interactions with the supernatural.

☐ The romantic mode tends to focus on supernatural beings and events and their effects on earthly people and events.

☐ This mode also tends to emphasize extraordinary strengths and weaknesses, heroism redemption, clear presentations of good and evil, and romantic love.

2. romance and realism In sCrIPture, the gosPel, chrIst, and the cross

3. According to Leland Ryken's *Words of Delight*, the realistic and romantic approaches to literature can be used together. In the Bible, each offers an essential part of a complete picture of reality (36-39).

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Ryken points out that Scripture shows us a very realistic (i.e. lifelike) picture of earthly existence and paints human beings as we are, but at the same time is romantic in that it continually shows how our lives on earth lie open to God and the supernatural realm, and how we should live our natural lives in light of supernatural realities (39). The realistic provides us with an accurate picture of who we are in the earthly sense, while the romantic can show us the deeper realities of God and the supernatural realm which affect our immortal souls and our future beyond earth.

4. The horizontal and the vertical, the realistic and the romantic, thus meet in the Bible. Even more specifically, however, they meet in the Christian experience of reality in the sense that they meet in the gospel and in Christ. Jesus is both man and God. For those He saves, He redefines both their relationships with one another (horizontal) and their relationship with God (vertical). Jesus is also both a man who lived on earth, with an ordinary face and body that could be beaten and killed, and yet is a perfect, sinless supernatural hero who is glorious and immortal.
5. In Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and promised return, we have the world's most romantic story, full of heroes, vil-
6. lains, kingdoms, redemption, poetic justice, and a royal wedding, but it is also absolutely realistic in its portrayal of human strengths and weaknesses and the way it practically addresses the needs of life on earth. A good image for this is the cross of Christ, which is made up of the intersection of the horizontal and vertical.

3. eValuatIng the romantIc and reallstIc modes as lIterary PersPectIVes and forms

4. One might be tempted to ask, "Which is generally the better mode for poems, stories, and plays: the romantic or the realistic?" As a Christian, especially, one might wonder whether the romantic is automatically better than the realistic because it seems more likely to emphasize God's work in our lives. Asking which is the better perspective in a moral
5. or spiritual sense, however, is a misleading question. It is like asking whether the audience's perspective or the author's perspective of a work of literature is the better one. Each contributes something important to the overall understanding. Although each emphasizes a different aspect of reality, both modes are equally valuable ways of approaching imaginative literature and portraying a complete picture of reality.
6. Either mode and its associated literary techniques and devices *could* be used in service of a distorted worldview. For instance, as occurred in ancient literature and again during the Romantic era, the romantic mode can be used to present a false picture of gods, fairies, and other supernatural beings influencing life on earth at their pleasure, unaccountable to God or to any authority. Or, the realistic mode can be used to present a picture in which the supernatural realm and God Himself are denied completely.
7. Such misuse can be made of these modes. However, the same is true of any literary form ever invented. The realistic mode is not automatically "bad" because it emphasizes the horizontal and earthly plane, just as the romantic mode is not necessarily "good" because it focuses on the vertical relationships between the supernatural and the earthly. As Ryken ob- serves, both can also be used to portray true aspects of reality and glorify God by reflecting the truth about Him.

4. romance and realism in history

For most of recorded history (until about A.D. 630), literary artists have used both modes about equally, producing works that are realistic, romantic, or both. In the Neoclassical era (630-785), there was a hard swing towards the realistic

mode only. In reaction to this tendency of Neoclassicism, Romanticism (785 through the 1860's in some places) showed a strong movement towards the romantic mode. However, this was only a return to the idea of the supernatural, not to God.

Then, in reaction to Romanticism, the pendulum began to swing back towards the realistic extreme during the literary movement now known as Realism (beginning in the 1850's). Between these two, however, there was a long struggle and for a time the two impulses towards the romantic and the realistic appeared side by side. They were even sometimes mixed.

Why does the pendulum swing? One might say it is because of changing tastes; human beings have a tendency to grow tired of one extreme and prefer a turn with the other, just as they want steak for dinner if they are tired of chicken. Also, however, the changing world views of different eras may have something to do with it. As long as people believed in the absolute reality of the supernatural realm, the pendulum hung even, but when people began to deny the supernatural, it began to swing.

d. What can Be called “great literature”?

1. defining “great literature”

Great literature might be readily defined as that literature that addresses the deepest things in the best ways. This definition covers) content: the “deepest”—most important and meaningful—things, and 2) form: “in the best ways.”

Our definition does not limit *what* literature can talk about, but it does assume that some subjects—such as the purpose of human life, death, the existence of God, love, sin and suffering, how people can be saved from evil, etc.—are more important to people than others.

Such topics are simply *deeper*, more essential, closer to the core of human nature and the beliefs, fears, hopes, or expectations on which we base our own experiments in living. Thus, a story that talks about the lives and deaths of rabbits simply

is not as significant to us as one that talks about human life and death—unless the rabbit story is really an allegory about ourselves (e.g., in the case of books like *Animal Farm*, which uses animals to talk about human society). Because great literature speaks of the deepest things, it also generally has a universal appeal. That is, it is meaningful to people of many different time periods, nations, and beliefs; and, moreover, it is meaningful to most ordinary people, not just to the intelligentsia.

Generally speaking, therefore, great literature is set apart by the deep importance and meaning of the topics that it addresses. It is also set apart by the artistic excellence with which the author crafts his form so that it enhances his themes. Again, note that our definition does not suggest any particular form for great literature, but it does assume that some forms are more suitable for an author's purpose than others. Thus, a work of literature does not have to be written in poetry rather than prose in order to be considered great. Rather, it is evaluated on whether it is an excellent thing *of its kind* (poetry, prose, play, novel,

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allegory, etc.) and whether its form is suitable to the function of the work as a whole and artistically enhances the author's meaning. For instance, *Animal Farm* is a short allegorical story written in ordinary prose language about animals on a farm. It is not epic poetry like *The Odyssey*. It does not display incredibly beautiful language like Shakespeare. However, because it addresses some deep things in the human heart, and because its plain prose style suits very well what the author has to say about this subject, *Animal Farm* is indeed considered great literature.

2. What We are and aren't saying about the excellence of great literature

Definitions and standards are extremely useful, but they can also be hard to use at times. Saying "the standard is this high" means that some things necessarily fall below the standard; and saying "this is what great literature is" means that unfortunately there are some pieces—maybe even books we enjoy very much and regard highly—that are not great literature.

It can be hard, for instance, to find that by this definition our beloved *Winnie the Pooh* or *Peter Rabbit* books from childhood are not "great" literature. They are literature, and they are excellent, charming, delightful, beautifully written and illustrated—but they do not address the deepest things. Set beside the greatest literature of all, the Bible, they are like well-made little wooden chairs beside a glorious golden throne—exquisite in their own way, yet not grand or full of significance, or made of such precious stuff.

When we realize that our definition of "great literature" necessarily says that perhaps some of our favorite books are not "great," it is important to remember a few things that we *aren't* saying. We aren't saying that we can only allow ourselves to enjoy "great" literature. We aren't saying that great literature is the only literature worth reading or writing. We aren't even saying that works like *Winnie the Pooh* and *Peter Rabbit* are not excellent—indeed they are! What we *are* saying is that you mustn't confuse a small white wooden chair with a golden throne, or claim that the first is worth as much as the second (at least not to people in general; you yourself may prefer the wooden chair if you like).

Footnote: 1. Definition courtesy of Brittainy Spina.

3. Giving Weight: Whose opinion matters most in evaluating literature?

If great literature is that which addresses the deepest things in the best ways, then it is important to evaluate not only the content of literature (the "deepest things") but also its artistic excellence ("in the best ways"). This might seem straightforward, but once people begin to try to form actual opinions it becomes quite complicated. So many voices are involved, and all of them insist that their view is most reasonable. Whom do we believe? How shall we judge? When trying to evaluate whether or not a book is great literature, whose opinions carry the most weight? Do we give more weight to secular opinions or to Christian ones? Should we give the greatest regard to the judgment of past readers or that of present ones? Should we rely on a work's popularity with the world at large, or should we consider only its popularity with those who are considered discriminating (literary critics)? Should we honor most the objective standard or our own subjective enjoyment?

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For the Christian reader, there is a fairly straightforward answer. The person whose opinion matters most is not oneself, not the public, not the literary critic (not even a Christian one), but God. Scripture tells us more about what is good for us to read (and see and hear, for that matter) than we might suppose. After considering what the Bible has to say, however, some of these other opinions can be valuable as well. Objective standards of truth and artistic excellence, the assessment of the public, the estimation of critics, the judgment of past ages, the evaluation of the present age, and our own subjective opinion, all have something to contribute. They also all have “blind spots.” Here are a few of the strengths and weaknesses of each:

❑ Objective Standards

❑ Strengths: Objective standards are very helpful in making judgments. For instance, if a poem claims to be a sonnet, then it should have a sonnet form (iambic pentameter, a particular rhyme scheme,

etc.). If it does not have a sonnet form, it can fairly be called a bad sonnet and therefore a poor example of artistic form, not worthy to be called great literature.

❑ Weaknesses: Objective standards cannot take into account all the pleasing variations that the human imagination is capable of making. Thus, though a poem like Shelley’s “Ozymandias” is an irregular sonnet in some ways and might be judged “bad” by objective standards alone, its irregularities have a highly artistic pattern of their own and are a very pleasing variation on the regular sonnet form, so that everybody agrees that “Ozymandias” is indeed great literature in terms of its artistic form.

❑ Public Opinions

❑ Strengths: The united opinions of many people are usually more weighty than those of a single person, and so if

many people agree that a book is great literature, it is worth paying attention to their opinion. Public favor is also a good sign because it indicates that many ordinary readers have found a book worthwhile and (or) enjoyable. One of the things that great literature must be, if it is to survive the test of time, is accessible and valuable to many people, not just to a handful of highly trained critics.

❑ Weaknesses: Unfortunately, public opinion is not always discerning. People may like a book because it appeals to their selfish desires, or because they have heard it praised by someone whom they trust. Sometimes “the public” even gives its full approval to something that most of its members haven’t yet read.

❑ Critical Opinions

❑ Strengths: There are two excellent reasons for giving a lot of weight to the opinions of literary critics. First, in most cases they are trained readers who know how to evaluate artistic form. Second, they usually have a wide experience of books and have studied many works of great literature, so they can more easily tell when a book is great. Therefore, generally speaking, their opinion is proven right over time, even if the public does not agree with them about a book when it first comes out.

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❑ Weaknesses: On the other hand, literary critics can be just as mistaken as anybody else if they allow pride or personal preference to cloud their judgment, or if—despite their training—they simply make a wrong judgment. Critics also sometimes have a tendency to favor books that many ordinary readers do not enjoy or benefit from, simply because these books are highly original or unique. Extreme originality and uniqueness are not necessarily one of the primary tests of good literature—in fact, most great works have family resemblances.

❑ Past Opinions

❑ Strengths: If there is agreement between public and critical opinions in the past, and if these have remained

consistent for a long time, they can be one of the strongest possible arguments in favor of a book being considered great literature. For instance, readers and critics have agreed for well over 2,500 years that Homer's epic poems are great literature. The fact that each succeeding generation for over two millennia has come to the same conclusions about these books is a weighty opinion indeed!

❑ Weaknesses: There is really very little weakness here. Such a unanimous opinion as we have described is very difficult to argue against and remains one of the primary tests of literary greatness. However, past opinions do lose some of their strength when either 1) they are disunited (e.g., critics have always felt one way about a book but the public has always felt differently), or 2) it is the opinion of only one or two eras, not of a long stretch of time. Thus, a book that everybody agreed was excellent in the eighth century but had forgotten about by the tenth century would not be as likely to be great as a book that everybody *still* agrees is excellent in the twenty-first century.

❑ Present Opinions

❑ Strengths: Present opinions tell us what people today think. They are valuable in that they tell us whether a book is still worthwhile to people of our own time, or whether it has begun to be irrelevant and therefore less great than it may have been considered before.

❑ Weaknesses: Present opinion is only the opinion of the moment. A work of literature that everybody (readers and critics both) like very much right now is not necessarily one that they will still like even twenty years from now, and it is not necessarily great literature. For instance, a novel called *The Lamplighter* was wildly popular in nineteenth-century America, but few people today have heard of it because it did not stand the test of time. Similarly, there are books that people think very fine now which may be all but forgotten by our children because they are not worth remembering.

❑ Subjective Opinion

❑ Strengths: Our own subjective enjoyment of a book tells us whether or not we ourselves think it worthwhile, and this is important, because a work of great literature will be one that the ordinary reader can benefit from and appreciate, at least on some level.

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❑ Weaknesses: We must always remember that our own opinions may lack either training or insight or both. If we don't know much about literary artistry, for instance, or if we are not sure whether or not the content of a book is really true and great, our subjective enjoyment should not lead us to make a bad judgment.

There is a degree of relativity involved in compiling lists of great literature. Only a handful of books are widely judged to be absolutely the greatest literature ever produced. The Bible is at the head of the list (not only for Christians but also for many secular judges of literature), along with works like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or several Shakespearean plays. After that come all the rest, each lower than this small group of "greatest works," each jockeying for position with the others.

Sometimes the distinctions are clear. For instance, *Pride and Prejudice* is greater literature than many other romance novels which are either not very significant in what they have to say about romantic love or not very well-written, but *Pride and Prejudice* in its turn is not as great as *Paradise Lost*—a work that not only addresses romantic love in deeper ways than *Pride and Prejudice*, but that also addresses it with a higher degree of literary skill than Jane Austen exercises.

Sometimes it is less easy to draw a line. Most people would probably agree that the novel *Crime and Punishment* addresses deeper issues than *Pride and Prejudice*—topics such as suffering, salvation, and the nature of reality itself. However, others would say that Austen's form and artistic skill are greater than those of Dostoevsky. Which is "greater" literature? The answer to this question will vary, and this variance is simply due to the nature of judging the value of a work of art. Remember this point! Literature has a different nature than mathematics. While we can say with complete objectivity that $2 + 2 = 4$ and

not 5, literature has no such precise rules. Literature is not a recipe book that must be followed exactly or a set of logical arguments that are necessarily valid or invalid. Instead, literature is a part of the *humanities—that is,*

a study of things that relate to people. While it has much to say about truth and falsehood, and right and wrong, judging literature is not itself a question of right and wrong. Rather, it is a question of better or worse, more true or less true, etc.

Thus, in literature there is a place for objective standards *and* for the opinions of the ages, of the public, and of trained critics. There is also a place for subjective judgments and personal taste. Not all works of great literature appeal to all people, and few (if any) readers enjoy all styles of writing equally, no matter how artistically perfect each may be.

As with so many aspects of literary studies, there is ultimately both an external and internal component to a good evaluation. So, even if you conclude that a piece of literature does "address the deepest things in the best ways," you are not obligated to enjoy it as much as another—even an inferior—literary work. Or if two works seem about equally great, there is nothing wrong with preferring one to the other for ourselves because we like one style, genre, or story better.

Judgments about literary greatness are not usually a matter of life and death. In the grand scheme of things, they are not even really that important. Only in one sense do our judgments matter, though in this sense they matter a great deal: the only thing that we as Christians *must not* do is to judge and praise as

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true and right a book that God would describe as false, or vice versa. Such an action would be ignorant at best, hypocritical and harmful to our witness for the gospel at worst.