

Education for the Kingdom of God

The Need for Discernment in Imaginative Literature

For the December 2002 *Chalcedon Report*

Ronald Kirk
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Modern romantic notions inflict unrealistic expectations of life leading to disappointment and failed relationships. Young people are particularly susceptible. Similarly, occult practice seeks to assert autonomous power over life. Such humanism tends to use lawless expediencies to control life and effect personal satisfaction. Both result from original sin and are rampant in contemporary literature. To recognize subtle evil in the form of pretty temptation requires a developed discernment. Conversely, a godly imagination provides one of the most apt means to communicate Biblical truth. Because imaginative literature can powerfully influence for good or evil, particularly in movies, Christians should make thematic discernment a high priority in education and practice. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and other Christian fantasies offer a fair test of Christian discernment.

The Importance of Literature

Imaginative literature—such as stories and poetry—focuses on some aspect of life in an idealized form. The poet, believing he has caught a glimmer of truth, clothes his Idea with a metaphor that he believes will effectively pique another person's imagination. If the poet is skillful and his thought is true, his Idea will reach the depths of his neighbor's soul, just as it did his own. In the hands of the godly, such art may quicken the believer to a greater appreciation of God's creation; of His providence; and of His salvation, grace and lordship. If the poetic artist truly represents God's reality, he can greatly contribute to the kingdom of God. Otherwise, he may exert a destructive influence.

Moreover, as the writer labors to express himself, he necessarily reflects his time, its beliefs, its struggles, and its aspirations. Godly imaginative literature can portray the great character of God's faithful ones with due reverence, friendship, love, self-sacrifice, and true liberty. Good literature can contrast godliness with poor and sinful character. Literature in general can provide a graphic legacy of moral struggles, of elevated or low historical eras, and of the need for repentance from cultural sins. Literature can reveal God's providential legacy, to His glory and a people's edification. Literature represents a powerful instrument for education.

Imagination

Imagination is a gift from God, but it may be used for good or evil. The imagination abstracts the qualities of various known things and assembles them in a new form. This is the heart of human creativity. Interestingly, God called the Tabernacle architects of ancient Israel by name and commanded them to fashion the images of pomegranates as decoration. He commanded the graving of cherubim images. The representational arts are a good use of a godly imagination. Christ enlists the godly imagination when He speaks in parables. The imagination enables us to understand holy things that our senses cannot know. A *vain* imagination assumes the seat of God. Romantic desire is vain imagination. The vain imagination produces flattering thoughts, removing one from fellowship with God and leading one to self-destruction. It thinks more highly of itself than it ought. The vain imagination deifies itself.

The line between a fruitful, Christ-centered imagination and a humanistic, vain one may be difficult to determine and harder to maintain. Biblically perfect expression remains beyond our ability, though we must ever press on toward maturity and fulfillment of God's purpose for us. A timid imagination applied to arts produces banality or insipidity. An aggressively vain imagination may yield pompous and self-serving ugliness and evil. The horror genre is a good example. Early twentieth century humanists purposely designed art, music, and poetry to offend the sensibilities of the uninitiated. As

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sinners, Christians are not immune from a perverse impulse to glory. The glory of gifted and commanding human brilliance, balanced by the need to glorify God, will always tax the creativity and righteousness of the Christian. What God grants to His humble, yet faithful, servant often proves itself classic — of lasting value — as we may commonly observe through Christian history.

Missing the perfect mark is not necessarily good grounds for condemnation. Individuals and cultures are sanctified progressively. Bold initial enterprise is dangerous and often produces a less than satisfactory result. Though the fight for godly ideas must persist, Christian persons should not be its casualties. Jesus said “Judge not ye be not judged.” We ought not so quickly to condemn men like John Locke, who, though on one hand furthered anti-Christian thought in the world of philosophy,¹ was evangelically devout and used of God in the cause of American liberty.² Christian responsibility requires discernment — keeping what is good. Let us accept the contributions of our very human brothers with grace and then push on to discover an ever better way. Where so many frontiers lie before us in godly human endeavor, some questions may remain until a greater body of wisdom develops to judge them. For now, may it please God, we should continue to question, test, evaluate and correct, with grace. We ought always to attempt to cite the governing Biblical principle by faith, and then leave judgment to the marketplace of Biblical ideas where iron sharpens iron. Where brethren may be wrong, paraphrasing the American Pilgrim pastor John Robinson, *advertise them brotherly*.

Fantasy

Because setting a story in a mythological or unworldly place appeals to us in a way that mundane life cannot, fantasy is particularly seductive. The danger in desiring fantasy and the world of imagination lies in losing oneself in a romantic utopia. Utopia denies God’s economic and faith-based world and His providence over it. It is easy to justify escapism or outrageous conduct to gain personal control. A good character who uses magical means may suggest anti-Christian religious alternatives and a relative morality that makes man the final arbiter of right and wrong. Magical, fairytale-like actions could tempt the weak-minded to see them as potential occult sources of power. I have watched Christian young people lose themselves in fantastic role-playing games. The hippie generation desired to re-form their personal realities; they appropriated Tolkien as well as LSD.³ Christians must ask: Does the fantastic literary device glorify God and readily encourage seeking Him, or does it steer the heart into temptation? Does the use of the occult, magic or superstition in literary devices glorify God, or detract from His glory, purpose, and Law? Does C. S. Lewis’s wild Narnian Bacchus glorify God, or does association with this obscene god of the Romans lead us astray? What is a fantastic literary god in light of Scripture?

We may misunderstand literary figures. In Tolkien, though Gandalf may wield magical power and the elves possess a supernatural sentience, the good guys manifestly oppose the bad guys upon Biblical, moral grounds. It makes sense that World War II would figure prominently in Tolkien, as it does in the work of Lewis. Great evil in the form of ultimate and consuming tyranny clearly concerns Tolkien as it did Europe and the whole world at the time of the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*.⁴ Germany’s success would have destroyed historical Christian liberty in Europe. The prospect loomed fatally and large. Tolkien understood that the present mortal danger stemmed from evil spiritual roots and represented it accordingly.

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Tom Bombadil, the source of considerable speculation in *The Lord of the Rings*, appears as a mystery. Tolkien, perhaps coyly, called Tom “pure natural science.”⁵ I can further picture Old Tom as the United States from a British point of view. He seems all-powerful and god-like, “here before the river and the trees.” He is complaisantly jolly and full of faith or self-assurance. He possesses great power, yet he does not involve himself in the affairs of the forest. However, when the need arises, he effectively rescues the good guys. Is such a fantastic figure an abuse of Biblical means toward a godly and moral end?

What if Old Tom and characters such as Gandalf represent particular attributes of God, such as Wisdom is personified in the Proverbs? May the likes of Gandalf and Tom Bombadil represent the unseen power and work of God, the heavenly realm seamlessly revealed in the material to clarify the significance of the heavenly? These characters deserve the benefit of the doubt.

We may simplistically reject Tolkien, Lewis, and the European fairy tales. What might we then lose in the rich, effective, thought-provoking clothing of Biblical principles with imaginative life? What of the dangers? It remains the responsibility of literary consumers to interpret, sort, judge, and conclude. Christians must inculcate, in our children and in us, the capacity for godly wisdom and discernment over the creative product. Life is not simple. Because of these issues, Christians must rigorously sanctify the imagination by the Word of God. Otherwise, the vain imagination will rule.

Discernment

Satan is a clever master dissimulator and men are very vulnerable, but he can only corrupt what God made good. May Christians merely enjoy a good, extended fairy tale written for adults without overly scrutinizing and criticizing the text for its story devices? I am not willing to join the crabby naysayers, who use any imperfection as justification to avoid involvement and the responsibility to redeem imaginative literature or any other cultural institution. Neither will I absolutely and uncritically embrace the fallible work of men.

Men speak from fountains of the heart (*Mt. 12:34*). Though a writer may self-consciously intend no lesson or moral, he cannot help but express some theme — the theme of his heart. He speaks what he knows and what he believes. In interpreting a theme, a reader or viewer must understand that his discernment depends upon a sound interpretation of the figure. What does the literary image stand for? Using apparent occult or magical power for good may be confusing. However, to discard Tolkien and Lewis over this issue would trash some of the most engaging stories of good against evil ever written. We should strive to distinguish between the acceptable and the unacceptable in all creative work of men, and hold to the good by faith. Wisdom dictates interpreting promising literature and, in turn, teaching discernment to young, vulnerable minds. Parents must learn to take intellectual dominion and teach their children how to discern good and evil in literature. This is particularly true of purported Christian literature.

Pushing the frontiers of an otherwise godly imagination is dangerous. Danger should prompt discernment and prudence, not timidity, superstition, or fear. Therefore, we should attempt to redeem everything redeemable within our reach by faith, and leave the rest to Providence and better hearts and minds to follow. We must counsel our children and students toward discernment. They ought not to accept everything as good — even from good men. They should know that ideas have consequences

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and that, as distance grows, even small sighting errors lead to massive target misses. They should always test what they believe to be good or evil with a good conscience. The conscience emerges from intimate acquaintance with of Jesus Christ through His Word, intimate fellowship with Him in personal devotion, and the trust that His Spirit will make necessary corrections. Then, all things will work together for the good.

May men master the Word of God and the skills of good fiction. May we learn from the victories, failures and questionable accomplishments, all to educate our hearts and minds for new and ever godlier efforts. If anyone is unhappy with our present legacy of Christian literature, may the sons of God in Christ arise to produce excellence in imaginative writing that will glorify Him in all ways.

¹ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The One and the Many* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1978), 285.

² Mary-Elaine Swanson, *The Education of James Madison* (Montgomery, AL: The Hoffman Education Center for the Family, 1992), 285. Madison was deeply influenced by Locke's writings on government.

³ A humorous example can be found at the U.K. Website, <http://www.adrian.smith.clara.net>, "for all us old flower-children, drop-outs, long-hairs, tree-huggers and hobbit-lovers."

⁴ In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis refers to the bombing of London as the reason the children visit Professor Kirke in the country. According to the "Foreword of the Second Edition," Tolkien began *The Lord of the Rings* around 1937, the time of the rise of Hitler.

⁵ Eugene Hargrove, "Who is Tom Bombadil?" <http://www.cas.unt.edu/~hargrove/bombadil.html>.