



## English Literature

'When a culture reflects basic biblical truths fragmentation results in every area of life.'

### **James Nickel 'Mathematics – Is God Silent'?**

English is the study of communication and God's desire is for us to communicate accurately and truthfully. Literature reveals the wisdom and folly of men and women through gifted writers.

'To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.' **Daniel 1:17**

### **God is a communicating God.**

'In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe.' **Hebrews 1:1, 2**

'He who forms the mountains, creates the wind and reveals His thoughts to man, He who turns dawn to darkness and treads the high places of the earth – the Lord God Almighty is His name.' **Amos 4:13**

God desires to communicate with man both orally and in written form.

Literature is one form of communication. It is a means of encapsulating and conveying the message of our inheritance. This may be biblical or the literature of our own nation, forming part of our culture.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as: 'the total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge which constitute the shared bases of social action'.

Culture can, therefore, be a 'message' or inheritance which we receive and by which we may be educated and enriched.

Even the non-Christian author recognises the fact that a book carries a worldview. Joyce Cary, the novelist, wrote: 'All writers must have, to compose any kind of story, some picture of the world and of what is right and wrong in that world'.

'Art and Reality: Ways of the Creative Process' by Joyce Cary

**Literature is to entertain, to enrich us with a new experience.** A good reader enters into the world of the story as completely and vividly as possible. A work of literature asks us to relive an experience.

'The first demand any work of art makes upon us is to surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way!' 'An Experiment in Criticism' by C. S. Lewis

**In addition:** we must pay attention to our response to the images, characters and events in a work of literature. Our response will be to some degree an individual and biased response as we interpret what we read from our own experiences and our own worldview. A Christian reader will obviously view through the lens of Christian belief and experience.

We are interested in assessing the morality, the truth, the claims and the worldview of literature we read.

‘Having listened to a work of literature, we must also talk back to it.’

For us who have been given the responsibility to teach a new generation, Christian perspectives of literature, it is necessary to be very clear about the Christian worldview which is our frame of reference.

Culture perceived in a Christian light may be defined as the celebration of excellence of men and women’s gifting which reflects the gifting and excellence of God their Creator.

Culture, therefore, in Christian terms is meant to communicate God’s message i.e. His ‘Kingdom’ truths, values and principles glorifying Him. When Nebuchadnezzar wanted to impart the values and history of his culture he chose to have Daniel and others trained in the literature of the Babylonians.

Literature is one powerful method of conveying this ‘message’. Story form always leaves a more enduring impression than individual truths taught in abstract form and is easier to remember.

God’s thoughts, principles, commands and His ways are revealed in the literature of the bible. Literature created by men and women can also communicate values and principles, experiences and ideas which can shape our responses to life.

## **Literature and Worldview**

**Fiction as well as non-fiction gives us information about the world.** A fictional story corresponds to life in the real world, even as a biography or factual news report does.

Fiction often is more powerful e.g. parables of Jesus: -

The Good Samaritan – illustrating truth

The Prodigal Son – illustrating truth

**Literature is an interpretive presentation of human experience and is valid as such.**

We may disagree with the writer’s presentation, but this does not invalidate their interpretation.

‘Writers first portray human experience and then offer an assessment of that experience. Before they can offer evil for disapproval they must portray it. Literature communicates its message in two complementary ways – by offering us positive examples to approve and negative examples to avoid. Both strategies are ways of expressing truth. The Bible itself follows this dual pattern. Like all literature it portrays life as we know it in a fallen world. Many of the experiences about which we read in the Bible are sordid, evil and repulsive. This is no reason to avoid reading the Bible. Some literature does indeed offer evil for the reader’s approval and should be judged as immoral for doing so.’ ‘Realms of Gold’ by Ryken

‘Literature is usually truthful in its portrayal of life and human experience. We can call this representational truth. We should value the truthfulness of literature at these levels, even when it falls short ... works of literature clarify the human situation to which the Christian faith speaks, even when their viewpoint is wrong.’ Ryken

**Literature is a window on life.** Literature offers an interpretation of life, exposing it to our gaze and broadening our horizons. The experience of life, of people and of situations offered through literature may parallel our own. Alternatively, we may gain understanding and experience of other cultures, other periods of history or present-day lifestyles and relationships beyond our present experience. This will extend our horizons.

‘Books do impart a sense of security. Children meet others whose backgrounds, religions and cultural ways are unlike their own. They come to accept the feeling of being different and fear, which is the result of not understanding, is removed. Geography invades our living rooms as children visit families of other countries and the world seems quite friendly. Facing failures and tragedies with the characters of a story may vicariously give children the experience of courage and loyalty. Weeping with some and rejoicing with others – this is the beginning of a compassionate heart.’

‘Honey for a Child’s Heart’ by Gladys Hunt

**Literature is not an end in itself.** It is a means to a greater end. All artists who do not recognize God as the author of the Creative Spirit end up limiting their gift and idolising their art as an end in itself. In fact, any gift properly submitted to God will be enhanced and increased in power. It should lead us to a greater knowledge and appreciation of God.

‘Literature catches the meaning of life: a work without meaning is not literature. Hence, the study of literature must help the student to discover (to take the lid off) the meaning of the work. For the Christian to treat literature as if it were ‘form’ alone is to allow himself and the writer to usurp their responsibility to respond to life biblically.’

‘Shaping School Curriculum: A Biblical View’

**Literature can facilitate and serve other studies or subjects.** Literature is not an isolated study. It can serve, enhance and helpfully interpret aspects of life and culture in History, Geography, Political Studies, and Science etc. e.g. ‘Moonfleet’ by J. Mead Faulkner can be used to add strength and depth to an 18th Century History study.

Other examples: ‘To Kill a Mocking Bird’ by Harper Lee links with biblical studies on justice, apartheid etc. as does Alan Paton’s ‘Cry the Beloved Country’.

**Literature can lead us to a greater maturity and wholeness, enriching the reader.**

Through carefully selected material, students can experience situations and challenges vicariously without being personally and emotionally involved.

‘Literature is a human, imaginative, symbolic response that expresses some vision of life’s meaning. As such, it offers a coherent aesthetic experience that has the power to influence lives. Christian teachers help students develop spiritual maturity in their reading especially so that they are enabled to discern the vision that is being presented and promoted.’

‘Walking with God in the Classroom’ by Harro van Brummelen

Our aim, therefore, is a controlled exposure to issues of right and wrong. This will hopefully lead to a deeper awareness, sensitivity and understanding of the world and of the people in it.

## **Choice of Literature**

**Choice is the sphere of our rulership.** The dearth of Christian literature available reflects the lack of integration of faith into Art and Literature in previous generations. The books of C. S. Lewis are a rare example of successful integration of Christian principles into fantasy form.

From our schools we may hope to produce writers who will communicate a Christian worldview in literary form. Meanwhile we must make choices from what is available.

Choice is the area of our governing or rulership. We will differ in our choices. This is a vast responsibility. It is at the point of choice that we will need dependence on God and prayer, allowing ourselves to be guided by the peace of God and other wise counsel e.g. the Head, other Staff etc.

**Factors guiding choice:** In broad terms, the Christian school has a responsibility to ensure that the literature studied should be helpful in developing our knowledge of God and His world.

It will: -

### **1. Be worthy of appreciation**

We need to ask: Is the content and general tenor of the book worthy of appreciation? Much modern literature is intent on facing our students with many of the 20th century problems of society. This may be relevant and helpful to some degree. Alternatively, are we losing opportunities to provide some relief from grim reality?

We are burdening children with minority problems, poverty, world hunger, pollution and broken families.

Authors of books for upper elementary and early teen readers are now treating dope, alcohol, sexual problems and rape in their stories, using formerly taboo words and even homosexual characters. Defenders of these books believe there is a need for candour because so many children feel isolated in their real-life situations. Surely, they say, a young person reading stories about parents with excessive drinking problems would be comforted to know others share his problems. For readers with no such experience, it gives understanding and compassion for others. On the surface that sounds convincing.

Compassion and understanding are the by-products of good reading and I am heartily in favour of children having wider worlds than their own. All good reading should accomplish this. But many of these new books are faddish, exploiting the permissiveness of our age and will not stand the test of time or of good literature. Do they illumine in significant ways what is true? Mr. Macawber in Dickens' 'David Copperfield' is no paragon of virtue. Why are his character and the details of his life so memorable? Can the reader understand or sympathise with the incredible complexities of Macawber family life that resulted from his indiscretions? Mr. Macawber, Little Emily and Uriah Heep are even somewhat shocking if you describe them out of context. Good literature does deal with reality but not in the burdened way of contemporary writers.

A good book is not problem-centred; it is people-centred. It reveals how to be a human being and what the possibilities of life are; it offers hope. Good literature has always dealt with truth but not in a way that makes man less. Good literature shows man how to be more.'

'Honey for a Child's Heart' by Gladys Hunt

**2. Offer an exemplary standard of vocabulary, grammatical structure, characterisation and plot.**

**3. Either teach principles which are relevant and scripturally sound or offer an experience which is valid in helping students' growth towards healthy maturity.**

'It must deal with what makes life and/or its parts meaningful, it must be technically competent and it must exhibit uniquely aesthetic qualities.'

'Shaping School Curriculum: A Biblical View'

**Philippians 4:8 is a general guideline:**

'Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.'

This gives us a general standard. Of course, most books will be a mixture, but our focus must be to determine whether the result of reading a book will be edifying and positive. We may ask the question: Is there anything that would better communicate the particular values I see in a particular book? It would be good to ask the question: What does God want to say to this year group through this book?

There are personal boundaries for us as staff which will limit what literature we feel we can teach. If a book offends us we cannot teach it. Alternatively, the book may not offend us but may not meet the requirements of our guidelines in 'Choice of Literature'. There is a need to be led in our literary choice and in our responses by the peace and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### **How we read**

Students of literature need to be taught to read it for enjoyment but also with discernment, asking questions at other levels. We should teach them to enquire: -

- a) What is the main principle or 'message' of this story?
- b) What other values is it promoting?
- c) How does this book affect me?
- d) Do I agree with the principles and values expounded?

'A writer's product reflects his views of life ... What view of life does the work convey? How does the writer treat the facets of life he has selected? What meaning does he give to them? Does his treatment acknowledge or suppress the sovereignty of God?'  
'Shaping School Curriculum: A Biblical View'

- e) Are these compatible with Scripture?
- f) What makes this book worthy of appreciation?

Students must learn that Scripture is always the plumbline against which we test content and values (no matter which ways the author has aroused our sympathy for his characters!).

Students need to be given practice at: -

- a) Discerning and evaluating principles embodied in literature; thus, developing analytical skills.
- b) Reading a variety of literary styles.
- c) Recognizing excellence in use of language, character portrayal and plot and structure development.

An analysis of parts that make the whole: -

- (i) Setting
- (ii) Characters and Relationships
- (iii) Plot/Structure
- (iv) Significant Events
- (v) Symbols
- (vi) Images
- (vii) Theme(s)/Motif(s)

- d) Using literary techniques and vocabulary skills in their own writing.

*By David Freeman*

## **Forms of Literature and Terms to be Understood**

### **Prose, Poetry and Drama.**

#### **Prose**

In the novel form or the short story.

#### **Drama**

#### **Poetry**

Language having a marked metric structure or verse.

#### **Narrative Prose**

A story form, beloved from earliest times. Norse sagas, legends, Anglo Saxon narratives often took the form of poetry e.g. 'Beowulf'. In England poetic ballads to be sung were popular methods of story-telling also.

#### **Character**

English literature especially shows a fascination for character e.g. H.G. Wells' Mr. Polly. The 20th Century has developed this much further; characters and their thoughts have become more important than plots.

#### **Plot**

As stories developed so the plot became of greater interest. Shakespeare often borrowed plots from foreign sources; sometimes more popular English sources like Christopher Marlowe's 'The Jew of Malta'. Sir Walter Scott's novels have long and involved plots. Dickens' were more complicated and sometimes got out of control. Short stories are an excellent discipline for authors e.g. Kipling and Maugham.

#### **Humour**

English literature is rich in this. In Shakespeare we have humorous characters like Falstaff nearly dominating a play. Even in his tragedies we see them provide comic relief as with the grave diggers in 'Hamlet' or the drunken porter in 'Macbeth'. Oscar Wilde uses a different form of humour based on wit – his plays are still very popular.

#### **Satire**

Satire is a reforming humour which uses wit to amend folly, vice or human frailty by means of ridicule e.g. Swift's 'Gulliver's Travels' and Jane Austen's novels.

#### **Wit**

Wit is free from emotion, usually a comic idea, as in Oscar Wilde's works.

#### **Comedy**

A play given totally to humour e.g. Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night', Brian Rix' Farces, French and Restoration comedies

#### **Tragedy**

A play where the main character falls to disaster either through personal character flaws or through circumstances

#### **Allegory**

A story in which characters and often events have symbolic meaning e.g. 'Pilgrim's Progress' by John Bunyan, 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' by C.S. Lewis.

## **Melodrama**

A play characterised by extravagant action and emotion.

## **Literary devices and their definitions**

### **Simile**

A figure of speech which likens one thing to another e.g. 'as cool as a cucumber' or 'like a rocket'

### **Metaphor**

A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action that it does not literally denote in order to imply a resemblance e.g. 'he was a lion in battle'.

### **Soliloquy**

A speech spoken by one person on stage expressing their true thoughts and feelings for the audience to hear

### **Personification**

The attribution of human characteristics to things, abstract ideas etc. e.g. 'Mother Earth'.

### **Imagery**

Descriptive language using images as ideas for the description

### **Alliteration**

Where words are used with the same first or last sound to heighten effect of language e.g. 'shallow shining sea'

### **Rhythm**

Where words or lines are balanced in syllabic use

### **Rhetoric**

1. Rhetoric – effective use of language or speech.
2. Rhetoric – the art of using speech to persuade, influence or please.
3. Rhetorical question – a question which does not require an answer  
e.g. 'Oh you do, do you?'

### **Chorus**

A device used originally in Greek or Classical tragedy to narrate events or comment on action. Usually the chorus was a person or group of people.

### **Onomatopoeia**

A word which sounds like the sound it describes e.g. 'buzz'.

## **Biblical Source Statements and Aims for Literature from The King's School, Witney, Oxfordshire**

'That the glorious Father may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better ... that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints and His incomparably great power for us who believe.' **Ephesians 1:17-19**

To learn the knowledge of what is wise through the wealth of inheritance available in the works of gifted writers.

The example of Daniel shows us that, in the world's literature, gifted writers are sometimes 'Babylonian' humanists but 'wisdom cries aloud in the streets' (**Proverbs 8:1ff**) i.e. there is wisdom to be found in non-Christian writers so long as we select and handle with care. Our ultimate aim is **Philippians 4:8-9**:

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things ... put it into practice.

### **Process**

1. To read texts which display a degree of excellence which can lead to an understanding of the values, standards and principles of The King's School.
2. To learn to link experiences or events in literary text and explore parallels with twentieth century life.
3. To be taught to evaluate the themes and values against a plumb line of scripture.

### **Major principles we see in literature**

**The dignity of man** – made in the image of God – but the internal not the external.

**1 Samuel.** Man looks on the outward appearance. Prejudice and intolerance are negative themes regarding the dignity of man.

Good versus evil.

**Relationships** – All of you are Christ's body and each is a part **1 Corinthians 12:27**

Sacrifice and Redemption – 'Greater love hath no man ...' **John 15**

**Choices and consequences** – right or wrong

**Love** – 'God is love.' **John 15:13**

**Success and failure** – often due to an heroic quality or a fatal flaw in the main character.

### **Aims for our students**

1. To be enriched through vicarious experience and use of imagination.
2. To be able to perceive, interpret and then re-express relevant values.
3. To be able to recognize modern-day dilemmas as well as potential situations in their own lives and to apply the relevant values.
4. To become wise and enriched individuals with a greater understanding of the nature of God, able to make choices which further the purposes of God in their own lives and in the lives of others.



## Christian Perspectives on Poetry

In considering a Christian approach to poetry we are faced with even more varied and complex issues than those raised by novels or plays. Poetry, perhaps more than any other form of literature, has intense personal appeal with an ability and power to touch our emotions deeply.

The following thoughts are humbly submitted as a condensed version of our discussions together in the hope that they may provide certain guidelines to Christian teachers.

Shelley believed that “poets are the uncrowned legislators of the world”. In common with many poets (and this is especially true of the Romantic Poets) he failed to recognize that his gift of communication and expression came from God. In his work he worshipped creation rather than the Creator.

‘For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.’ **Romans 1:20-23**

Shelley’s belief comes from a view that the bard is incarnating in himself the Divine being. This is an ancient and pagan concept. Despite such arrogance God’s gifts are given to men and not retracted and through His grace some degree of excellence and ability is still obvious in the work of men who do not acknowledge Him. Were we to avoid the works of all artists, musicians and writers who did not acknowledge God we should deprive ourselves of the enjoyment and appreciation of many great works of art, music and literature.

We need discernment and guidelines to help us both in our choosing of the material we teach and in the way we handle it. The guidelines applying to novels and plays in ‘A Christian Approach to English Literature’ (available from The Christian Schools’ Trust) seemed to us to apply equally to poetry. There is a need for us to apply the following briefly stated principles:

1. Firstly, that which we teach should be life-giving, leading us to a greater knowledge of God, His world and what He desires for His people. We should be conscious of seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Literature is meant to communicate a message of God – this is the ideal.
2. Literature expresses the meaning of life but as such must be tested with the plumb line of scripture which is God’s standard (and therefore ours) for all values and meaning in life. Poetry especially communicates an interpretation of life in an often condensed and therefore more powerful form. As such its emotional and intellectual appeal needs weighing.
3. Through literature we may extend our experience of relationships, experience, peoples and countries. The aim of these should be to lead us to greater maturity and wholeness.

Factors which guide us in our choice of poetry should be that it is worthy of appreciation (**Philippians 4:8** is a general guideline) and that it leaves us with a general sense of well-being even if it was not specifically Christian. We may say that it should either teach principles which are relevant and scripturally sound or offer an experience which is valid in helping students grow towards healthy maturity. As English teachers we recognize the need to assess poems we may love in an objective light asking: -

1. Is it worthy of appreciation in values and in language content?
2. What is the main message or principle the poem is communicating?
3. Is it compatible with scripture?
4. What other values is it promoting?

In poetry, even more than in prose, we will differ on what we feel is acceptable. There will be personal faith boundaries which vary from teacher to teacher.

Poems, which aim to express biblical truth, or the search for it, will always contain a vision, a warning, a purpose and/or a hope.

Some poems, especially those written by unbelievers, may express a 'truth' which is actually falsehood. The plumb line of scripture needs to be used to test the message of any poems we use in the classroom, whether for study or enjoyment. We need to discern and help the children to discern each poet's worldview and implicit message in addition to investigating and enjoying the surface meanings of the poems.

## **1. Beauty/Creativity**

Poetry can celebrate the beauty of God and His Creation. G.M. Hopkins is a notable example of a poet who mirrors God's creativity as he reflects upon the complex craftsmanship of his Creator. In the Psalms we find a constant celebration of God and His handiwork.

It should be noted that certain poets e.g. Wordsworth and Keats, are actually worshipping nature in some of their poems. We need to show the folly of this and redirect worship and appreciation to the Creator Himself. (It may be considered that this best be done by the omission of offending works or by their analysis and discussion, depending on each school's policy.)

There is also beauty in the various rhymes, sounds (alliterations, assonance) and metrical patterns of poetry.

## **2. Compassion**

Some poems aim to promote a deeper understanding of an individual's or a particular group's thoughts, experiences, feelings or dilemmas.

Jesus had compassion on the people He met. Our understanding through poetry can enable us to respond with compassion: to make a Jesus-response.

Some poems are crying out, 'Look! Take notice! Do something!' A controlled exposure to such material, sensitively approached at the appropriate age, can do much to heighten a child's awareness of the needs of others. Clearly much sensitivity is required, however, to avoid overburdening young people with too much, too soon. The maturity of each class and particular family situations within it need to be considered carefully and prayerfully.

### 3. Healing

The writing and reading of poetry can help to bring about healing and a release of tension. It might be said to have a therapeutic quality. In the Psalms we sometimes see the Psalmist beginning in despair but gradually expressing his feelings and ending on a note of peace and release. Many poems, particularly those about love and death, are written to help release pent-up feelings.

T.S. Elliot expresses the therapeutic quality of poetry very well. 'He (the poet) is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief ... He is going to all that trouble ... to gain relief from acute discomfort ...' Wordsworth's opinion: 'All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' also appears to support this view.

We found general agreement on the fact that teachers need to guard their hearts in the poetry they choose for their pupils. With reference to 'great' poets, excerpts can be used very effectively. We need to realize, however, that such excerpts may mislead students into an uncritical admiration of the poet's work and we may need to guard their hearts too by giving a brief explanation of the sort of emphasis, belief or philosophy that ruled the poet's life so that they are aware of the wider perspectives. There is a need for controlled exposure for senior students to certain poetry to prepare those who may study further at 'A' Level or University in this field.

Certain modern poetry reflects the godlessness of this age and its humanism. There is a lack of spiritual perspective and also a lack of the appreciation of any kind of beauty. Our aim and desire would be that God will use us as teachers to train and inspire students who may become Christian poets able to interpret God's nature and His world in beautiful and revelatory ways, which we believe will be all the more powerful as they glorify God and acknowledge Him as the source of all creativity, beauty and truth.

**'In Him (Christ Jesus) is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'**  
**Colossians 2:3**

**'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.'** John 14:6

**'I have come that you may have life in all its fullness.'** John 10:10

May we never forget that 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.'  
(Westminster Catechism)

David Freeman, Poetry Seminar, February 1992

### Recommended Poetry Books

On methods of teaching literature:

'Teaching Literature for Examinations', Robert Protherough O.U.P. (Graded for 'A' Level but full of practical advice on how to approach literature)

## Recommended Anthologies:

'The New Dragon Book of Verse', O.U.P. (Thematic groupings, excellent quality of 'good' poetry)

'Poems of Faith and Doubt' (Out of print but available in libraries)

'Touchstones' Books 1 – 5. Hodder and Stoughton

'The Wild Wave' (Chronological poets)

'Appreciating Poetry', Sadler, Hayllar and Powell. MacMillan, Australia. (Some thematic, some grouped under alliteration, metaphor or simile, etc. Some questions and activity work.)

'Cambridge Poetry Workshop', Jeffrey and Lynn Wood. C.U.P. (for GCSE assignments, contrasts old and new poetry; needs discernment for choices)

'Poetry 1900-1975', George Macbeth. Longman. (Each poet introduced with notes on individual poems.)

'Stand Up Poetry', Ed. Fraser Grace, Framework Books. (The best of contemporary poets)

'I Like This Poem', Ed. Kay Webb. Puffin. (Junior to age 13)

## A. Poetry in the Bible

The whole of the Psalms and Song of Songs are examples of some of the most beautiful poetic language to be found in the bible. In addition, many parts of other books add to the rich repertoire:

- **Isaiah** - e.g. 'The Suffering Servant', Chapter 53
- **Ecclesiastes** – e.g. 'A Time for Everything', Chapter 3:1-8
- **Habakkuk** – e.g. 'Habakkuk's Prayer', Chapter 3
- **Luke** - e.g. 'Mary's Song' and 'Zechariah's Song', Chapter 1:46-55, 68-79
- **Philippians** – e.g. Philippians 2:6-11
- **Revelation** – e.g. Revelations 7:15-17

From these examples we can deduce both that God likes to communicate with His people through poetry and that the following are among the worthy themes we may study in our schools;

- songs/poems of praise – Psalms, Luke, Revelation
- love poems: between a man and a woman – Song of Songs: between Man and God, Psalms, Luke
- poems in which feelings are poured out: fear, sorrow, confusion, enthusiasm, happiness – Psalms, Luke, Habakkuk
- poems which are asking questions, seeking the Truth – Psalms, Ecclesiastes
- poems which persuade by bringing a prophetic message, a vision or a warning, a purpose and/or hope – Isaiah, Revelation
- poems which reflect order and harmony:
  - in Creation – Psalms, Habakkuk
  - in the character of God himself – Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, Philippians

Much of the poetic language in the Bible was written in the form of songs and many of the choruses we sing in our churches are based on poetic scriptures which readily lend themselves to being set to music.

## **B. Aims in teaching poetry**

### **1. Communication**

All literature is concerned with communication. God is a communicating God who desires that His people, designed in His image, will communicate with Him and with one another. As we teach poetry we need to seek material with a meaning worth communicating. It should have a clarity about it, a succinct and apposite use of vocabulary. Poetry aims to communicate by using the right words, or at least, the 'least wrong words' ('The Three Voices of Poetry', T.S. Elliot 1973). Carefully chosen vocabulary and style can be extremely powerful particularly in poetic form.

### **2. Truth**

Truth is a vital ingredient of a poem worthy of study in our school. Truth helps us to see something more clearly or in a new light. Jesus said: "You will know the Truth and the Truth will set you free."

Truth may be presented in various forms including:

- persuasion e.g. Stewart Henderson and Gerard Kelly - Christian performance poets with a prophetic bite
- warning e.g. Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon on the realities of war
- searching for truth e.g. T.S. Elliot's early poems

Poems which aim to express biblical truth or the search for it will always contain a vision, a warning, a purpose and/or a hope.

## **C. How is poetry unique?**

Poetry is a unique art form, although it has a tremendous variety of form. Some of the aspects which distinguish poetry from prose are as follows: -

- precision: 'the least wrong words'
- economy: saying a tremendous amount in a few words
- memorable impact, using metaphor, simile, unusual imagery
- craftsmanship, especially rhyme and rhythm
- ability to express feelings accurately and powerfully
- therapeutic quality
- uncluttered clarity, which makes it a valuable tool, especially in evangelism: the unveiling of the Truth.

## D. Discipline and spontaneity: poetry is worship

‘Should poetry be written spontaneously or in a disciplined organized manner’? The quote from Wordsworth above seems to suggest that spontaneity is the essence of excellent poetry. Wordsworth’s worldview, as we have already mentioned, is not a Christian one but perhaps he helps us to find a balance when he continues ‘... but though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.’ (‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads’, William Wordsworth 1798)

As Christians, our poetry-reading and writing is part of our worship to God. Rather like our corporate worship, sometimes poetry will flow easily; at other times it is a real effort to read and write. There is a real parallel here for us as teachers. Some of us teach and write poetry spontaneously on the spur of the moment, whereas others of us labour thoughtfully and painstakingly over the task. Perhaps the discipline of writing and reading poetry when we find it difficult is beneficial to us and to our pupils. Perhaps it delights God’s heart when we come to Him spontaneously and enjoy reading and writing poems about Him and His world. Perhaps it delights His heart even more to see His children struggling to find the right words and the right ways to teach, understand and write poetry in a way that brings most honour to Him.

Whether we are by nature spontaneous, needing sometimes to discipline ourselves to achieve the best results for Him or whether we are more orderly in our approach, needing the release of the Spirit’s spontaneity from time to time, perhaps we need to ask these questions about the way we are teaching poetry:

1. How will the discipline of better organization of my lessons/schemes of work help me to teach the children better?
2. Would more careful organization of my ideas bring greater blessing to my colleague who could then use my ideas/lesson plans/worksheets?
3. Do I need to ask the Holy Spirit to give me a fresh enthusiasm about teaching poetry?
4. Do I need the ideas and input of other Christians to keep me more fresh and ‘life-giving’ in my approach?
5. Is the reading and writing of poetry recognized as part of the worship in our schools/church?
6. Does God want to use me to help spread the impact and benefits of poetry more widely?
7. Have I written any poetry which God wants to use either in my school or in a wider context to help to encourage the children to write for Him and to extend His Kingdom?
8. Am I hoarding any worksheets or other resources which I should be sharing more widely?

My prayer is that, as a result of thinking and praying through some of these issues, God’s Kingdom, His Beauty and His Truth may be etched more deeply into our teaching, thus enabling His children, with whom we share the poetry, to know the Father better and to make a living, compassionate ‘Jesus-response’ to His world.

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## **LITERATURE**

### **Objectionable elements in Literature**

Training in different genres to discern what is objectionable.

We need exposure of themes and values. Literature can otherwise be deceptive.

#### **Seven elements** (objectionable)

Profanity	<b>John 8:48</b>
Eschatological realism	<b>Isaiah 36:12</b>
Erotic realism	<b>Proverbs 5:1, 19; Ezekiel 23:20, 21</b>
Sexual perversion	<b>Genesis 19:39; Romans 1</b>
Lurid violence	<b>2 Samuel 20</b>
The Occult	<b>1 Samuel 28:7-25</b>
Erroneous philosophies	<b>Colossians 2:8</b>

#### **Three tests**

Books must pass all three tests.

1. Test of gratuitousness – is evil there for a purpose or for its own sake?
2. Test of explicit – is it purposeful? to an acceptable degree? Is it more vivid than the purpose warrants?
3. Test of moral tone – does it come from a condemning perspective? It needs to uphold morality. Is it both dangerous and repulsive? Is it properly regarded in the work?

All fantasy that is Godly stirs up imagination and increases faith.

#### **Guidelines for discerning the silent voice of the author**

1. Are the characters I sympathize with noble, honourable, morally upright?
2. If evil is presented, is it presented as dangerous and repugnant?
3. Does the action cause me to desire virtue and reject vice?
4. Does the resolution reward good and punish evil in the plot?
5. Does the theme conflict with biblical truth?
6. What is the spirit of the book and the author?
7. What do I need to consider in choosing for teaching?
8. Concentrate on attitudes and behaviour you want to expose.

#### **Resources**

Refer to 'Towards a Christian Curriculum' by Barbara Lord