

HIERARCHY OF LITERARY VALUES

Vaun Waddell—*Department of English*

Here's the problem: some literary works are of great value and some are unworthy to appear at BYU-Idaho—and the world is not much help in the discernment process. My small narrative example is not a pretense of a universal answer, but a description of how I first began dealing with the problem.

My Shakespeare class droned along normally—three or four students taking notes, a couple others snoozing, still another drinking a smuggled Pepsi Free, I up front performing: “If I profane with my unworthiest hand/This holy shrine. . . .”

Melody raised her hand, “So, Brother Waddell, what makes Shakespeare so great?” Nothing changed for her classmates, who continued swigging, snoring, and scribbling, but my recitation of Romeo broke off abruptly, replaced by a sudden perceptual power-point. Melody’s “irrelevant” question had jolted my subconscious. Students had been asking me her question for years, and my answer was muffled. But now I saw it in a new way; the best teaching moments are sometimes unplanned.

“Well, Melody, sometimes God’s own mind wafts up off the page, an oracular script of things as they are or were or will be, the Truth. Then sometimes we find that reading informs our souls; having read, we see the world in a new shape, but actually it is we being formed and reformed from the inside through the reading. Or again, maybe the world is not altered but we find ourselves more alive in it, inspired (Latin for *having been breathed into*) by the text. If not enlivened, we may at least be taught; literature can instruct. Short of teaching, it can entertain us, and, lacking that, it may beguile for us the tedious time. Literature that cannot even fill up the hours pleasantly is degrading, meaning that it leaves the mind worse than before.

“No other text speaks to me quite as the Holy Scriptures do. This is a mystery, and language does not readily describe it except by analogy—something about birth or living water. But a few writers, a dozen perhaps, leave me a new person, informing my soul, altering my *Weltanschauung*. Shakespeare is not always first among them, but he is among them. I think he does this for many readers, including many whom we respect. In critical opinion, that makes him great.”

I sucked in a long breath, for it had been a long speech. Melody, her pencil poised, sang out, “Would you say that again?” So I did: oracular, soul-informing, inspiring, instructive, entertaining, pastime, and degrading.

Literature that cannot even fill up the hours pleasantly is degrading, meaning that it leaves the mind worse than before.

- oracular
- soul-informing
- inspiring
- instructive
- entertaining
- pastime
- ☞
- waste-time
- aggravating
- destructive
- expiring
- soul-deforming
- the lie

We toyed with this critical pattern, associating it with lots of literary works and workers: the Sunday funnies, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Sophocles, and Louis L'Amour. Everyone in the class was into it now, wanting to know what I thought went where. Confessing that each reader must compose his or her own list, and that even then the list will fluctuate throughout a reader's lifetime, I observed, for example, that as I entered middle age Hermann Hesse dropped from soul-informing to inspiring on my list.

They asked about American authors, and I lamented that *The Scarlet Letter* doesn't lift me above inspiration—and if anything in America is better it might be *Moby Dick*. And I ventured that Cervantes is the best ever for me because he doesn't just lament the layers of the onion, peeling off one after the other to find nothing left at the core, as Ibsen does in *Pere Gynt*, but in *Don Quixote* Cervantes hands me an unlimited onion. Peeling off layers of Cervantes' paradoxical meaning—alternating madness and sanity, bitter and sweet, good and evil—can go on for a long time.

I knew, too, that every literature teacher worthy of the name had his own version of The List. So I put it on my syllabus, Hierarchy of Literary Values, sighed with satisfaction, and considered the matter closed. Then a thoughtful colleague walked into my office and saw it on the desk. He said, "What's that?" So I told him. He announced, "You haven't put down the *degrees* of degrading."

Two minutes later we had them, analogues to all the positive values, sequenced inversely: waste-time, aggravating, destructive, expiring, soul-deforming, and the lie. Suddenly I understood my repulsive fascination with, for example, Nabokov's *Lolita*, which is marvelously skillful and obviously important, but leaves me feeling dead in a world shrunk and twisted, and threatens, if I should give myself to it, to bind me to a world forever warped. And I understood, too, what would be the dark power of the Gadianton pact in manuscript—the great lie made literature.

Nothing is secret, by the way, about the lie, except to liars (fools of their own fortune—the law for liars being that soon they come to believe their own mendacities while no one else does). The oaths and administrative stuff are forbidden to be written, but Cain announces the actual lie baldly: "Truly I am Mahan, the master of this great secret, that I may murder and get gain" (Moses 5: 31). Brother Nibley refers to this as the Mahan principle, the idea of coercively trading someone else's blood for your private temporal gain. No other idea, to one who subscribes to it as if it were true (the liar's unhappy fate), could damage one's spirit so severely, which makes it a great lie indeed. This first mortal lie stands opposite the sublime gospel truth: "Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him"

(Moroni 10:32), the plan of salvation wherein the Savior voluntarily sheds his own blood for the human family's universal spiritual gain.

I had not consciously sought spiritual insight, but I could now begin to connect the rationale of literary choice to revelation, a connection between academic and doctrinal mimesis. I could make a selection from among “secular” literature. I saw that on this campus we should read from the uplifting side, not the degrading side, and that most selections should place high on the hierarchy. I realized that the issue of appropriateness is not connected with subject matter, but with attitudes toward humanity, toward God's creation, and ultimately toward God. I sensed a connection between the choice of readings and the first and second commandments.

My two questions had become: “Is it a ‘good work,’ (Matt. 5:48), glorifying the Father in Heaven?” and “What is its intensity, that is, to what degree is it a ‘best book?’” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118) I had recently arrived at Ricks College from a state college, where I had been sensitive to implicit moral values in literature, but where not much issue was made of appropriate and inappropriate. Melody's question had helped me see that in my new work place appropriateness is always an issue. And more significantly, she had helped me recognize these twin maxims: I need never make excuses for choosing uplifting texts, and I need to maintain my scholarly self in an attitude of praising God, acknowledging His hand in all things.

Maybe ethical choice in literature is a little bit like our dress-and-grooming standard in that habitual adherence to a positive custom, without burdening oneself with reinterpretations and hair-splitting, frees the mind for productive work. If we each adhered to the injunction of the 13th Article of Faith in choosing literature, art, and entertainment, President Hinckley would not have to shoulder the sorrowful burden of preaching against pornography.

The Melody episode is now a couple of decades past. I have come to think that the uplift/degrade issue may be resolved in the author's mind or character before the pen hits the page, and also in the reader's mind at a later date, and that the criterion may be love—or hatred—of humanity and creation.

Chaucer and Shakespeare for example, as well as Swift and Browning, take no pains to avoid the seaminess in humanity, but their work is never degrading. I think they are lovers of mankind, celebrating humanity, affirming life and meaning, thanking the Creator. As a reader, I hope I may think of myself, too, as a lover. ☺

**I need never
make excuses for
choosing uplifting
texts, and I need
to maintain my
scholarly self in an
attitude of praising
God, acknowledging
His hand in all
things.**