An Analysis of the Book of Esther as Literature:
A Methodology for Using the Book of Esther
In Secondary or College English or Bible Classes
As an Introduction to the Stylistic and Thematic
Concerns of Secular Literature

Wilma McClarty, Professor of English and Speech
Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists: Collegedale, Tenn. 37315

"Christianity is the most literary religion in the world," the best evidence being the Bible (Ryken, The Literature 9). And in recent years "a revival of interest in the literary qualities" of the Bible has occurred; "the general reader can now be offered a new view of the Bible as a work of great literary force and authority" that has shaped "the minds and lives of intelligent men and women for two millennia and more" (Alter and Kermode 1-2).

The "biblical writers wrote as craftsmen whose works display a grasp of literary forms and conventions"; consequently, "biblical literature asks of us a sophisticated literary response" (Ryken, The Literature 21-22). The complex interplay of literary elements, such as style, theme, and point of view, "calls for expert literary appraisal and also guarantees that there will be no unanimity of approach or of interpretative conclusions" (Alter and Kermode 5). Alter makes a further claim for a literary approach: "The evidence of the texts suggests that the literary impulse in ancient Israel" was about as strong "as the religious impulse, or, to put it more accurately, that the two were inextricable"; therefore, to comprehend the religious impulse one needs to take "full account" of the literary impulse (Alter 16-17).

Frye, noted literary critic and teacher, maintains "that a student of English literature who does not know the Bible does not understand a good deal of what is going on in what he reads," with the best student "continually misconstruing the implications, even the meaning" (Frye

xii). And since the "narrative is the dominant form in the Bible," the more readers understand "about how stories work, the more they will enjoy and understand vast portions of the Bible" (Ryken How To 33).

"GOD MADE PEOPLE BECAUSE HE LOVES STORIES. So claims a rabbinic saying. Henry R. Luce, founder of Time Magazine, quipped, 'Time didn't start this emphasis on stories about people; the Bible did'" (Ryken, How To 33). And one of the most captivating books of the Bible is Esther. "This fascinating story is one of the most dramatic in the Old Testament, reflecting as it does the passions, luxury, intrigue, and the political and social organization of the Persian regime," as well as "demonstrating something of the vitality that characterized the Jewish colonists of the Persian period (539-333 B.C.)" (Harrison 1085).

Interest in the book of Esther has been both negative and positive. "Opposition to the Book of Esther is not a modern phenomenon. . . . Esther is the only book of the Hebrew Bible not represented among the Dead Sea scrolls." Interestingly enough, in the New Testament no allusions to Esther exist (Gordis 361). Martin Luther, feeling Esther "'Judaized'" and "contained too much 'pagan impropriety,'" wished it didn't exist (Jones 171).

The book of Esther intrigues positively, too, one reason being its containing rationale for the celebration of the feast of Purim, the popularity of which "can be accounted for in part by the fact that it constitutes the only worldly holiday in the Jewish calendar for the expression of the light-hearted side of life" (Harrison 1095-1096).

Part of the current scholarship interest in the "literary characteristics of the tale" of Esther results from the "incomplete knowledge of the Persian period," shifting interest "from the identification of specific persons and events" to more literary concerns (Berg 3). With its fascinating plot, its psychologically interesting characters, its historically based setting, its omniscient third-person point of view,

its craft-conscious style, and its provocative themes (plus what it does NOT say)—all have combined to make Esther the Old Testament book which "has occasioned more antipathy from some readers, and more enjoyment for others" than any other (Fuerst 32).

Since the Bible stories did exist—with all their literary elements--millennia before the secular literature studied today, the integration approach underlining the base for this paper is basically compatibilist. Nelson, in defining the compatibilist approach to faith-discipline integrating, points out that when "the Christian scholar identifies assumptions and concerns integral to both her faith and her discipline and links them in ways requiring no radical revision of either, she may be counted among the compatibilists" (Nelson 319).

This paper analyzes six basic literary narrative/fiction elements of the book of Esther—plot, character, setting, point of view, style, and theme—and then discusses some pedagogical uses of this literary study of the book of Esther to introduce similar concerns in secular or other biblical literature, be it taught in secondary or college Bible or English classes. Having narrative literary analysis skills is particularly valuable since the narrative is "the dominant genre of the Hebrew Bible" (Alter, "Introduction" 22). "The prominence of narrative as a biblical form arises from the Bible's view of God. The God of the Bible is, above all, the God who acts" (Ryken, The Literature 77).

PLOT: The first narrative element a reader should understand is plot, "the sequence of events in a story and their relation to one another" (Charters 1365). And no one could "conceive of a more dramatic and surprising series of coincidences than those that led up to the exposure and death of Haman" (Nichol, "Esther" 461).

The plot of Esther is consciously crafted, a craft "reflected in the fact that his [storyteller's] story, like the story of Ruth, can be sketched in terms of the well-made plot," with exposition, inciting

force, rising action, and turning point (Ryken, The Literature 76-77).
The SDA Commentary outlines the plot into five well-organized sections:
"I. Esther Made Queen of Persia, 1:1 to 2:20"; "II. Haman's Plot to
Exterminate the Jews, 2:21 to 3:15"; "III. Esther Champions the Cause of
Her People, 4:1 to 5:8; "IV. The Fall of Haman, 5:9 to 7:10"; "The
Triumph of the Jews Over Their Enemies, 8:1 to 10:3" (Nichol, "Esther"
461-462).

Harrison also emphasizes the importance of the book's plot structure
since its form "supports the claim to historicity, since the work
commenced with the usual formula for the beginning of an historical
account, and concluded with the typical reference to the complete
chronicle . . ." (Harrison 1090-1091). The plot unfolds in three stages
. . . prelude, struggle, and aftermath," with the "rising action of the
story" describing "an account of how various obstacles to the deliverance
of the Jews are overcome" (Ryken, The Literature 75). Similarly, "The
Bible as a whole begins with a perfect world, descends into the misery of
fallen history, and ends with a new world of total happiness and victory
over evil" (Ryken, How To 83). Hence, even the structure of a well-
crafted plot can be thematically significant, another example being the
author's delaying a second banquet which becomes "partly a narrative
device to increase suspense in the reader" (Jones 177).

Plot development "usually involves a conflict or struggle between
opposing forces" (Charters 1366-1367). "The tale [of Esther] is one of
court conflict," summarizes Humphreys (Humphreys 213). Thompson mentions
more specific conflicts. First, Queen Vashti doesn't obey the king.
Then the conflict centers on Haman and Mordecai, "a conflict between
courtiers, but it is also a conflict between a son of Kish (2:5) and a
son of Agag (3:1)," which is a specific instance of the "long-standing
conflict between the Lord's people and the Amalekites," in part fulfill-
ing Ex. 17:16, "'the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to

generation'" (Thompson 127).

"Storytellers are also addicted to a narrative device known as dramatic irony. "When Esther reveals herself as a Jew and saves her people," she "presents some of the most effective dramatic irony in the Bible" (Thompson 128). Some ironic situations involve reversals of roles, with Haman's being "hanged on the gallows" and Mordecai's receiving "the signet ring which the king has taken from Haman." Mordecai is even set over Haman's possessions. Doomed by edict, the Jews are ultimately saved by another edict "the same day they were to have been destroyed" (Thompson 129-130).

Dialogue also serves to move plot along (Charters 1367); however, Esther uses "far less dialogue than other narratives in Hebrew Scripture, and the storyteller sometimes attributes statements to groups rather than to individuals (as in 3;3, 5:14)" (Sasson 336). Nevertheless, the author must have been artistically aware of dialogue's effectiveness, a way of knowing a character "through the thoughts and words of that character" (Ryken, How To 38). Sasson maintains that Esther's "most brilliant lines, however, are delivered at the second banquet, where she flatters, pleads, deplores, then turns sarcastic—the last, admittedly lost on Ahasuerus—all within two verses (7:3-4)" (Sasson 337).

A final plot device used is foreshadowing, an introduction of events, images, or words "into a narrative to suggest or anticipate later events that are central to the action and its resolution" (Charters 1406). Such foreshadowing is used in Esther when Haman's wife and wise men prophetically warn him: "If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him" (6:13 KJV).

CHARACTER: "Character is what produces action; on the other hand, characters are known to us through their actions" (Ryken, How To 37). To help distinguish types, characters are often labeled flat or round. "For

characters in a story to emerge as round, the reader must feel the play and pull of their actions and responses to situations," seeing them also as "capable of alternatives" (Charters 1369). The four main characters in the book of Esther are "deceptively static," or flat (Sasson 336), yet analysis reveals them to be more complex than they might at first appear.

"Of all the biblical heroines Esther has enjoyed greatest popularity among writers, artists, and musicians, representing feminine modesty, courage, and self-sacrifice" ("Esther" 908), a popularity due to her being the most complex, or round, character in the story. Jones credits Talmon with being one of the few to notice Esther's character growth. "'In the course of events she ascends from the role of Mordecai's protegee to become her mentor's guardian.'" Finally, "'it is Esther's superior cleverness which saves the day . . . . It is clearly Esther who plays the decisive role in the development of events'" (Jones 177). From chapter 4 on, Esther is in control. "Mordecai cannot save the Jews; he was the one who precipitated their predicament. However, Esther can" (Jones 176). The SDA Commentary characterizes Esther "as a woman of clear judgment, remarkable self-control, and noble self-sacrifice," with Mordecai's challenge (ch. 4:14) projecting "the youthful queen to the heights of heroic action" (Nichol, "Esther" 461).

As mentioned earlier, Mordecai experienced role reversals with Esther, she becoming his counselor and protector (Jones 177). At different points in the narrative Mordecai is shown to be proud, patriotic, solicitous, crafty, caring, revengeful, visionary—a round character indeed.

Haman is another complex character. "A cool control and cleverness is displayed in the careful presentation of his plot. However, these qualities are overshadowed and destroyed by his blind hatred of Mordecai, which leads him to abandon his plan and seek a more immediate fulfillment of his ends," which leads "in turn to a rashness that climaxes in the

beginning of his fall in ch. 6" (Humphreys 215). Sasson also views Haman
as complex, showing that the storyteller gave Haman "a rich assortment of
postures befitting his evil character." Proud of his connections to the
king, "he is so insecure that he brandishes his _vita_ even before those
who must know it well" (5:9-12). Yet Haman is not one-dimensional. When
told he will be overcome by the Jew Mordecai, he "comes to realize the
consequences of his own acts" (Sasson 337).

The fourth main character is the king, Ahaseurus, "a capricious,
despotic, passionate man" (Harrison 1092) who is "much puffed up" (Clarke
802). Jones points out that "the constitutional needs of the monarchy
are subordinated to the sexual pleasures of this king." There was "no
queen between his third year (1:3) and his seventh (2:16). Remember, too,
that Vashti would still have been queen" had it not been for the king's
"excessive drinking and concomitant anger, aided and abetted by his seven
wise princes who escalate Vashti's modesty into an imperial crisis" (Jones
175). His love of wine and his general insensitivity is demonstrated
by his drinking with Haman shortly after having the first genocide edict
published, although the city of Susa was troubled (Jones 179).

Although a minor character in the story, Vashti is nevertheless
intriguing. "We are simply given a picture of a proud woman who refused to
be manipulated by a man, even by a king." Vashti's role may be "only
incidental to the story, setting the stage for Esther," but what is known
"stands in stark contrast to the drunken, impulsive king and his fawning
courtiers who magnify the event into a constitutional crisis" (Jones 175).
Beautiful but banished, Vashti exits the story with her dignity intact, a
most "major" minor character of heroic dimension.

SETTING: Setting, the third element of narration, "is the place and
time of the story." A story's setting "furnishes the location for its
world of feeling" (Charters 1369-1370). Ryken maintains the importance of
knowing that the events in Esther "occurred during the Jewish exile in

Persia, when the Jews were a vulnerable minority" (Ryken, How To 36).

The historical accuracy of the book of Esther has caused considerable speculative controversy. Baumgarten discusses some historical and chrono- logical problems to accepting "Esther as veritable history": Mordecai's age having to be over 100; Herodotus' account of Amestris as queen, not Vashti or Esther; and the concealments of Mordecai's and Esther's Jewishness (Baumgarten 1051). Childs claims there is a "growing consensus forming around a compromise position which shares neither the traditional position of the book's complete historicity (Keil), nor the theory of its whole fabrication (Semler)" (Childs 601). But the discovery "of a cuneiform text mentioning a high official at Susa during the early years of Xerxes' reign with the name Marduka, along with the fact that Esth. is a credible Persian feminine name with the meaning 'star,'" does seem "to indicate that the characters of the story are intended to represent historical persons rather than deities" (Richardson 233).

Berg emphasizes that the "author's familiarity with both general and specific features of Persian life . . . lends credence to his story," along with the writer's knowledge of "persian court-etiquette and public administration." Two of the characters, Ahasuerus and Mordecai, are "known from other sources." And the Persian words and many Aramaisms imply "the story's composition during a period not far removed from the events it describes" (Berg 2). "The author at once gives his story a setting of grandeur by giving historically accurate information about the vast size of the Persian king's empire and the magnificence of his palace . . ." (Richardson 233). Indeed, Esther has "a high degree of specification in the foreground of artifacts, costumes, court customs, and the like" (Alter, The Art 17), artistically recorded by the storyteller to lend authenticity to the story, because, as Ryken points out, whenever an author elaborates the story's setting, readers can "rest assured that it is there for a purpose, either to make the story come alive . . . or as a contribution to the

meaning" (Ryken, <u>How To</u> 37).

After dealing with several objections to believing the historical accuracy of the setting of Esther, Gordis summarizes:

> It is true that we have no external sources corroborating the nucleus of the incident described in Esther. On the other hand, there is nothing intrinsically impossible or improbable in the central incident, when the accretions due to the storyteller's art are set aside. The high degree of familiarity of the author with Persian life and custom has long been noted. (Gordis 388)

"We therefore believe," Gordis concludes, that the book of Esther should "be regarded as a basically historical account of an anti-Semitic attempt at genocide which was foiled during the reign of Xerxes" (Gordis 388).

POINT OF VIEW: "As a specific literary term <u>point of view</u> refers to the way the story is told," with first-person narrator and third-person narrator being the two main ways (Charters 1371). By definition, "The third-person narrator is not a participant in the story," although the narrator does know "about all the characters, both inside and out—what they think and feel as well as what they do" (Charters 1372). The story of Esther is told through this third-person point of view. As is also true in Esther, Bible storytellers "narrate what happened but do not explain it," often writing "key utterances that we intuitively recognize as summing up what the story as a whole is asserting" (Ryken, <u>How To</u> 62). In illustration of this technique, certain "key utterances" in Esther seem very thematically significant: Moredecai to Esther, "For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, <u>then</u> shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place . . ." and Esther to Mordecai, "and if I perish, I perish" (4:14,16 KJV).

STYLE: Another element of narration is style, "the language the author uses"; and with the "magic . . . of literary style," readers can hear an author's "tone of voice as well as understand" the author's attitude about the story being told, be it "humorous or serious, excited or compassionate. Style conveys part of the story's meaning" (Charters 1373). In Esther the

writer "adopts the style of an archivist, giving dates for specific activities and providing genealogies for his main characters" (Sasson 335). And one aspect of style involves the author's use of symbols, a symbol usually being "defined as something that stands for something else" (Charters 1373). Interestingly, some of the most complex symbols in the book of Esther are the characters.

Esther herself is a symbolic representation. She is "above all a national heroine. Her importance as a person is completely subordinated to her status as a representative of the Jewish people" (Ryken, The Literature 74). She has also been called a "type or pattern of the Virgin Mary, and the gigantic gallows built by Haman is supposed to foreshadow the cross of Jesus Christ (the Hebrew word for 'gallows' most often means 'tree')" (Fuerst 38). Mordecai also became a symbol for "the Jew who will not be bowed by circumstances and who will seize unforeseen opportunity" (Sasson 338).

Ryken maintains that a biblical literature introduction is not complete "without insisting on the archetypal content of the Bible. An archetype is a symbol, character type, or plot motif that has recurred throughout literature" (Ryken, The Literature 22).

Several motifs appear in Esther, the motifs of banquets, feasts, fasts, and "kingship and obedience/disobedience" (Berg 31-37, 59), motifs that appear throughout the Bible as well as in secular literature. In summarizing the narrator's stylistic use of motifs, Berg points out that "The dominant motifs help to unify the book of Esther by potently anticipating or recalling their other occurrences through conscious uses of parallel and contrast" (Berg 95).

Word choice is another aspect of style. In Esther, the narrator "is careful to use a language with a restricted vocabulary only when narrating action. However, when lingering on descriptions of specific scenes (such as the banquet or the search for a new queen) he uses a cataloguing style,"

which is "rich in vocabulary for luxurious living, often without con-

junctions" (Sasson 336). The author also uses some "rare words intended to

dazzle the reader" (Jones 174). Stylistically, the narrator's limited

vocabulary for action and rich vocabulary for description is further thrown

into contrast by the storyteller's alternating of description and action

passages, although the whole story can be read in one setting (Sasson 335).

Carefully chosen phraseology is another stylistic characteristic

evidenced in Esther. To ensure that the readers do not miss the careful

structuring of the antithetical pairs, the narrator uses identical, or

nearly identical, phraseology," with his "repetition of similar phrases"

establishing the connection "between earlier and later events," thus

emphasizing "the counterpoint between them" (Berg 106).

To heap up "superfluous synonyms" is yet another literary device the

narrator uses to highlight excessiveness in the story: "the Jews are to be

destroyed, slain and annihilated . . . all of them, including young and old,

women and children (3:13)." Further on, Esther used "the same three verbs

of destruction when she tells the king what Haman has ordered (7:4). They

are all used a third time when the edict is reversed (8:11; cf. 9:12)"

(Jones 178). Indeed, the narrator's artful use of stylistic options

reveals a craft-conscious storyteller, capable of manipulating language to

advance plot and to emphasize themes.

THEME: "Theme comes last in a discussion of the elements of fiction

because all the other elements must be accounted for in determining it." A

story's theme and structure "are fused like the body and soul of a reader;

their interaction creates a living pattern" (Charters 1375). "Theme is a

generalization about the meaning of a story," whereas plot is simply what

happens" (Charters 1374). And very divergent views exist concerning the

themes of Esther.

The SDA Commentary summarizes the "religious character and moral

teaching of the book of Esther" into four themes: God's providence; the

feast of Purim origin; the "transitory nature of earthly power," with God

humbling the proud and exaulting "those who trust in Him"; and the union of

"divine power" and "human effort" (Nichol, "Esther" 461). Berg mentions

other main themes of power, "loyalty to the Jewish community," and "themes

of inviolability and reversal" (Berg 96, 98, 103), concluding that "Esther

may be considered a didactic work, even if its primary purpose was to

entertain" (Berg 95).

Scholars defend numerous themes for numerous reasons. Several agree

with Thompson that "Esther makes a positive statement about life in exile"

(Thompson 127). Both Mordecai and Esther prove that high position is "not

incompatible with living the life of a Jew in exile," the life "in exile as

a distinctive people" (Thompson 130). Using the same diaspora perspective,

Jones maintains a purpose "is to reconcile Jewish readers to their status as

a minority among gentiles, whose attitudes toward Jews may vary unpredict-

ably from honor to persecution" (Jones 171). Fuerst feels the diaspora

theme helps account for the popularity of Esther in Judiasm:

> The Jewish reader does not fail to identify with Mordecai; he is
> "the Jew" in the book. He prevails because he is Jewish (6:13);
> and his victory is the victory of the Jewish people. Yearnings,
> pleasures, and fears of centuries are touched by the story of
> Esther and Mordecai; the book directly addresses the problems of
> life and existence for those Jews who were scattered over the
> world—in the dispersion or Diaspora as it is often described—
> without a national security. (Fuerst 40-41)

Other scholars discuss the theme of Purim, there being "general

agreement that the major purpose of the book of Esther is to provide the

historical grounds for the celebration of the feast of Purim" (Childs 599).

"The book was written to explain why the feast of Purim, which does not have

the authority of the Torah behind it, came to be, and must be celebrated"

(Murphy 156).

The most troublesome themes, however, concern the absence of obvious

religious elements. No references are made to God or even crying aloud to

God, nor is any religious significance attached to fasting, "esentially a

religious practice" (Metzger, An Introduction 61). Perhaps God's name was

omitted on purpose because when Esther was read at Purim by a drunk reader,

God's name would not have been desecrated (Gordis 363).

Others defend these omissions. Although no mention is made of "prayer,

praise, or the direct worship of God," it would be a "palpable mistake to

regard the composition as being purely secular" since fasting carries

religious connotations and "an awareness of the divine purpose in securing

the survival of the Jews in Persia appears to underlie" Mordecai's convic-

tion that if Esther would "not intervene on their behalf, the Jews would be

delivered nonetheless" (Harrison 1098). Fuerst holds that "the objective of

the book of Esther would seem to be to encourage the reader to remain

confident that Jews and Judaism will prevail over their enemies" (Fuerst

32). Esther is a simple version of the Jewish expectation that "those with

the right beliefs or attitudes would emerge on top with their now powerful

enemies rendered impotent" (Frye 115). Although God's name is absent,

thematically "The election and protection of Israel remain" (Murphy 157).

Clarke agrees with the divine providence theme: "Providence seemed to have

advanced her [Esther] on purpose for this work" (Clarke 801). Streane

mentions the theme of emphasizing "upon the Dispersion those lessons as to

the Divine providence" (Streane xvii). In commenting on Esther, White

observes that "the experience that brought Esther to the Medo-Persian

throne" shows that "God was working for the accomplishment of His purposes

for His people. That which was done under the influence of much wine worked

out for good to Israel" (Nichol, "Ellen G. White Comments" 1139).

In summary, although Harrison acknowledges problems with the divine

providence theme, he nevertheless believes it is present:

> . . . Esther is unique among the Old Testament Scriptures in the
> way in which it deals with religious and moral issues. The
> writer certainly seems to have stressed the value of political
> intrigue and human intellectual acumen, and to underplay, if not
> actually to disregard, the possibility of divine intervention. At
> the same time, the literary skill of the author leaves the reader
> in little doubt that he is observing the operation of divine

providence as the narrative proceeds, and that the indestructible nature of the Covenant People will ultimately be made evident. (Harrison 1098-1099)

Although the chauvinistic attitudes toward women in Esther have been a source of contention, yet White and Paddock find in the story positive role models for women. White stresses the Esther story as illustrating the important part "converted women can act" in accomplishing God's purposes (Nichol, "Ellen G. White Comments" 1140). "All who doubt that a woman can be pretty and at the same time have a beautiful character, should read the book of Esther," suggests Paddock. "As any true follower of God would do in a time of crisis, Esther prayed for help and guidance. Of course, she must have been in touch with Heaven daily, or she would not have had the confidence to go to God for guidance" at a "time of emergency" (Paddock 7). In urging parents to educate children correctly, White suggests Esther as a role model for all youth, not just ladies: "'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' Young men should be gaining solidity of character, that they may be fitted for usefulness" (White, Testimonies 321).

No matter how correct and complete any literary analysis, such as the foregoing analysis of the book of Esther, no discussion of a literary work ever suffices for the actual READING of that work, as Tolstoy points out:

> "The most important thing in a work of art is that it should have a kind of focus, i.e., there should be some place where all the rays meet or from which they issue. And this focus must not be able to be completely explained in words. This indeed is one of the significant facts about a true work of art--that its content in its entirety can be expressed only by itself." (Charters 1376)

PEDAGOGICAL USES OF THE ANALYSIS OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER: If literature is composed of "writings which interpret the meanings of nature and life, in words of clearness and power, touched with the personality of the author, in artistic forms of permanent interest" (Hook and Evans 133), then the book of Esther qualifies. And although an analysis of a literary work never equals a reading of the work itself, as Tolstoy so correctly observed, yet knowledge of a literary work's elements and how they function will surely

heighten a reader's appreciation, increasing awareness of stylistic and thematic issues often missed in a plot-oriented reading. White speaks against literature that "encourages the habit of hasty and superficial reading, merely for the story" (White, The Ministry 445, 446). But superficial reading becomes almost impossible with analysis.

In his article, "Literature in Adventist Schools," Gibbs makes a strong case for the importance of how a literary work is read, mentioning four places in the Bible where Jesus asks, "'How readest thou?'" "But in our neglect of the how we may have stumbled into an over-emphasis or a faulty interpretation of the what" (Gibbs 113). In keeping with Gibbs' suggestion to consider both the how and what of reading, what follows are some suggested pedagogical uses of the literary analysis of the book of Esther for the academy or college Bible or English teacher when teaching biblical or secular literature, particularly narration. General uses of the analysis of the book of Esther are discussed first, followed by more specific uses related to each of the six elements of narration/fiction.

In general, the literary analysis of the book of Esther can be used pedagogically as follows:

*To show that not all reputable scholars agree.

*To show that a literary work can have not just a moral but a spiritual dimension without mentioning God or even religion.

*To show that a reader of literary works does not have to know the answers to all questions an analysis raises in order to comprehend the underlying theme(s). Albert Baumgarten wrote a book entitled Four Strange Books of the Bible, of which Esther was one of the four.

*To show that narratives often raise issues in readers' minds that the author never intended as major—or even minor—ones, consequently never fully developing them. Therefore, a reader should never demand more of a work than it purports to do. For example, the book of Esther should not be faulted for its failing to give a definitive statement on dating practices, pagan-Christian marriages, or premarital sex.

*To show that a literary work can exist on its own merits, even without knowing its author or date of composition, with unanswered questions no matter who or when is posited (Harrison 1097).

*To show how the analysis issues of plot, character, setting, point of

view, style, and theme can be used as a heuristic for composing original stories (Charters 1380).

*To show how the book of Esther can be used to illustrate the most complex of literary analysis concerns, yet how it can also be used on an elementary level spiritually, historically, and literarily.

*To show how experiences/expressions/characters from famous literary works become universal allusions to explain certain of life's experiences, as, for example, "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" and "If I perish, I perish" (4:14,16 KJV).

*To show that the analysis of the six elements of narration is beneficial no matter which of six general approaches to literature a teacher would use, either the "historical, sociopsychological, personal, value-seeking, cognitive, and analytical" (Hook and Evans 147-151). In fact, Esther could be approached from any or all of the six ways, with each approach emphasizing the analysis of the six elements differently.

Specifically, the PLOT analysis of the book of Esther can be used pedagogically as follows:

*To show no storyteller tells all—even all of the facts—but instead selects, emphasizes, organizes, or omits. No author, then, is totally objective, even ones using history.

*To show an example of a Bible story that has a captivating, focused sequence of events that illustrate the ideal in plot: "Until the end of the story, events should continue to unfold with the easy forward movement of an apparently endless silk handkerchief drawn from a skillful magician's coat sleeve" (Charters 1368).

*To show how a plot's structure can be thematically significant.

*To show types of narrative conflict.

*To show uses of the narrative devices of dramatic irony, dialogue, and foreshadowing.

Specifically, the CHARACTER analysis of the book of Esther can be used pedagogically as follows:

*To show a comparison and/or contrast with other characters from biblical or secular works. Berg devotes a section of her dissertation to comparing the Esther story with the Joseph, David, Ruth, and Jonah stories (Berg 123), a comparison that can raise such questions as "Why couldn't Daniel's king have issued a counteracting edict as did Ahasuerus for Esther?" or "Who remained truer to God while in high pagan position, Esther or Joseph?" or "Why did Daniel not conceal his nationality as Esther did?"

*To show why Esther is the Bible heroine most appealing to artists, musicians and otherwise, thereby arousing interest in other artistic uses of biblical or secular characters. Students could then be encouraged/assigned to find other instances of literary characters/artistic "cross-pollination."

*To show examples of flat or round characters, with several characters showing marked complexity.

*To show that minor characters such as Vashti—not just major ones—can make significant thematic contributions.

Specifically, the SETTING analysis of the book of Esther can be used pedagogically as follows:

*To show that historical setting is important to either the literary or the historical approach to recording events, two ways that can be combined. And "in the Bible they <u>have</u> been combined, and biblical stories can therefore be approached as history as well as literature" (Ryken, <u>How To</u> 44).

*To show how scholarship can add to the <u>interest</u> <u>and</u> <u>understanding</u> of a literary text. For instance, the <u>SDA</u> <u>Commentary</u> provides fascinating information on the spacing of horse stables to facilitate the speed of the Persian postal system (Nichol, "Esther" 474).

*To show how setting can be thematically significant.

*To show how the details of setting can give a narration a sense of authenticity.

Specifically, the POINT OF VIEW analysis of the book of Esther can be used pedagogically as follows:

*To show the difference between first-person and third-person point of view.

*To show an example of a third-person point of view and how this omniscient point of view permits knowing all characters inside and out.

*To show how in the Bible stories third-person point of view often tells what happens without explaining what happens, often making characters' utterances thematically significant.

Specifically, the STYLE analysis of the book of Esther can be used pedagogically as follows:

*To show the use of symbols in a biblical story, symbols being used very often in secular and other biblical literature. "God Himself employed pictures and symbols to represent to his prophets lessons which He would have them give to the people, and which could thus be better understood than if given in any other way (White, <u>Selected</u> <u>Messages</u> 319).

*To show that symbols may be people, places, events, or objects. "The decree which is to go forth against the people of God will be very similar to that issued by Ahasuerus against the Jews in the time of Esther. . . . The Protestant world today see in the little company keeping the Sabbath a Mordecai in the gate," whose "character and conduct, expressing reverence for the law of God, are a constant rebuke to those who have cast off the fear of the Lord and are trampling upon His Sabbath" (White, <u>Testimonies</u> 450).

*To show the artistic selection of vocabulary, using rich or simple words to heighten or hasten descriptive or action passages, employing effective repetition to emphasize.

*To show a stylistic use of motifs (archetypes) to fortify theme.

*To show in the analysis of stylistic choices the storyteller's craft-conscious selections, demonstrating that the writing of narratives is a deliberate art, not a haphazard recording.

Specifically, the THEME analysis of the book of Esther can be used pedagogically as follows:

*To show that all the other five elements must be understood correctly to completely grasp theme.

*To show a long narrative can develop several major and minor themes, not just one, as the book of Esther involves several themes such as divine providence, chauvinism, and feast of Purim background, with not all scholars agreeing on these themes and/or what they say.

*To show that a story's theme can remain intact in spite of scholars' disagreements as to the story's historical accuracy, yet not forgetting the importance of setting to theme as already discussed.

*To show how scholarship bases its opinions on the TEXT, not on a reader's fancy, thus teaching students to say "I think this story means _____ because the text says _____," rather than saying "I think this story means _____ because literature is personal, and it means what I feel it does."

In summary, Frye says that a teacher "is not primarily someone who knows instructing someone who does not know." Instead, "it is the teacher, rather that the student, who asks most of the questions" (Frye xv). If Frye is correct, then the foregoing literary analysis of the book of Esther along with the subsequent suggested pedagogical uses will open up new ways for a teacher to question, perhaps a new heuristic for approaching secular and sacred literature. All major literary concerns are confronted in Esther; thus its analysis can serve as a model/springboard for other literary evaluations.

So once again, Esther, at this period of renewed interest in integrating faith and learning, maybe you have come . . . this time to the classroom . . . for such a time as NOW.

Postscript to teachers: Even though this literary analysis of Esther demonstrates that the themes do not relate to, and hence do not speak authoritatively to Christian dating and marriage behaviors, yet some students will still want to discuss such. After emphasizing that these issues are not what the book of Esther is about, a teacher can—and should—discuss these adolescent concerns.

For a more elaborate treatment of this analysis of the book of Esther, write to the author.

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