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**GOD IN ABSENTIA – TEACHING JOHN FOWLES' *THE COLLECTOR*
FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

By

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INTRODUCTION

It is most difficult and mind-tormenting for a committed Christian to live and work in a world denying and gone astray from its real reason of existence. It is as if living in a mental asylum where everybody thinks they are somebody else, misinterpreting reality, consciously or not. It is very frustrating and worrying to realize God is ousted from the thinking and doing of His creatures.

Education is supposed to be the way of helping people see the truth about themselves and the world around, fitting them for life in a civilized community. Education can raise people's life above the purely animal level- the level of getting food and drink, producing children, sleeping and dying- which has been called the world of subsistence. Education is "the value added to the world of subsistence".¹

Literature is considered to be a "record of human needs, aspirations and values".² studying it permits the individual to "learn from the experiences of others, by identifying people's values and making personal value judgments".³

For almost two thousand years, Western culture has been dominated by the Christian faith. The earliest surviving literary works bear evidence to the religious nature of literary creations –"the Bhagavagad-Gita, the Eddas, the myths and legends of Greece all had a religious tenor and arouse out of the nature of belief and worship".⁴ However, in the last two hundred years, "as Christian beliefs and traditions started to be criticized and called into question, the separation between Christian approaches to the art and the secular ones has become more and more apparent."⁵

Literature fell from its position as a “handmaiden of religion”⁶ and it gradually turned into a secularized activity, making God “disappear from the literature of the 19th century... when Nietzsche said that He had died”.⁷

Thus, it seems that people have done away with the divine *answer to* their problems while the *question* persists and it gets all the more painful in the vacuum God’s absence leaves behind.

As a consequence, it is necessary for Christians to assess why they read literature and how to best approach the reading of literature, especially when most of what is now called literature is no longer conveying religious truth, confusing and misleading the reader, being littered with all sorts of atheistic ideas and concepts.

The Christian reader, then, “judges the truth of a literary text in relation to its revelation of human values, its representation of human reality and its interpretation of human experience.”⁸ Christians should compare these aspects of a text with their own Christian view of reality to determine the worth and the value of a literary work. In doing so, as Delmer Davis points out in his book *Teaching Literature - A Seventh Day Adventist Approach* they will have to face further questions and complexities:

- How should a Christian reader respond to works which are apparently silent regarding Christian values and perspectives?
- Can a Christian value a work of literature which explicitly contradicts the Christian worldview?
- Should a Christian only read works which are explicitly Christian in their outlook?

Davis goes on and suggests that in order to answer these questions, literature should be arbitrarily divided into three categories:

- 1) literature that is "exclusively Christian
- 2) literature that is "inclusively Christian"
- 3) literature that is "antagonistic to the Christian world view and Christian morality"⁹

GOAL OF THE PAPER

This paper tries to tackle the problem of how to correctly approach pieces of literature that are sometimes an unavoidable part of the literary studies curriculum. In doing that, we will discuss a highly celebrated novel: *The Collector* by John Fowles.

A novel can be approached in terms of literary expertise or content analysis. As far as technicality is concerned, *The Collector* pays tribute to literary modernity in that it is a skillfully two-layered story, told by a double first person narrator, thus allowing the reader to plunge deeply into the psyche of the characters.

The Christian reader can praise the beauty of a text because of its effective use of artistic language and literary devices even though its content may contradict the Christian world view and values. We will try to assess the degree of antagonism to the Christian world view that *The Collector* contains, especially taking into account the way God is represented (should we say *misrepresented* in this novel).

Reader-response criticism approach will be followed, this strategy allowing the student/ reader to become actively involved in the process of reading, asserting his/ her beliefs, especially when those presented in the novel are counter to his/ her own. Reader-response criticism makes it possible for the teacher to support the students-readers'

emotional response to what they read while noticing and guiding the way their own values and opinions clash with those presented in the text. This method of text study facilitates a close contact with the fictional world of the text while empowering the reader to stay faithful to his/her own worldview and assert his/her own personal values.

SUMMARY OF THE COLLECTOR

John Fowles' first novel, published in 1963, is considered to be an intelligently written thriller. It is about a young clerk, Frederick Clegg, a collector of butterflies who decides to capture and imprison a girl, Miranda Grey, with whom he has fallen in love. After winning a national football lottery he uses his winnings to purchase a secluded Tudor mansion with a fortresslike cellar. The victim, Miranda Grey, is a lively strong-willed art student, in love with a professor, who keeps a diary, records their conversations, and plans her escape, while Clegg wants to win her "respect." She gains small victories but never her freedom and dies of pneumonia. In the finale the collector plays with the idea of repeating his performance, looking for another girl to kidnap.

Fowles plays with the reader, never letting him/her know for sure whom to love or hate, who is the good character or the bad one, throwing him/ her into a state of confusion. This is in keeping with the modern literary trend that professed total separation from the nineteenth-century Victorian novel whose omniscient narrator took the reader by the hand through a clear –cut plot, indicating who was the hero and who the villain. "Fowles enjoys ambiguity and plays with it, taking no stand with respect to his characters, merely presenting what the characters do or think, as if he himself were taken by surprise".¹⁰

In short, Fowles' main narrative device is surprise. All experimentalists (Joyce, Woolf) wanted to shock the reader. But they tried to use methods opposite to those we find in the Victorian novel. They defied the Victorian novel, by abolishing plot, chronology, characters."Fowles defies everyone, the previous defiers included. He offers a plot, but it has two endings. He offers characters, but in the end we do not know how to understand them, because they have two faces and our doubts storm." ¹¹

THE COLLECTOR AS A PIECE OF LITERATURE ANTAGONISTIC TO THE CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW

From a Christian viewpoint, the most difficult category of works to value are those which are explicitly contrary to Christian perspectives and morality. Many modern writers do not subscribe to Christian beliefs and have adopted philosophical views that run contrary to the Christian faith. Such works may openly attack Christian beliefs and concepts, for example, by presenting a world that has no creator or no God, by emphasizing that human life is accidental or purposeless, or by glorifying immoralities such as adultery, murder, lying and cheating.

The way God is presented in *The Collector*, the moral profile of the characters in the book and the situations presented make this novel part of the category of writings contrary to Christian beliefs and morality.

RATIONALE FOR TEACHING THE COLLECTOR IN A CHRISTIAN INSTITUTION

One way of approaching such pieces of literature would be to condemn such texts and establish lists of “forbidden works” based on their handling of explicit sex or violence. However, doing so would mean that “Christians are turning their back on most of modern culture and retreating to some sort of distant nineteenth century island, unwilling to deal effectively with the contemporary issues and society around them”.¹² It goes without saying that such a reaction is not at all in keeping with the Christians’ commission to be “the light of the world” [Matt. 5:14 KJV].

One first reason for the Christian to read modern literature is to become aware of contemporary culture and understand the way of thinking of non-Christians. Moreover, the Christian reader should be fully aware of the process of literary secularization and be able to put the lost information back: he/she should be able to pinpoint the misinterpretations of divinity sugarcoated in literary forms of expression, making literature really fulfill its mission as an educator, helping readers to correctly contemplate issues of eternal importance. The Christian reader needs to use certain criteria and standards of criticism when reading such pieces of literature, testing what he/she is reading.

Secondly, being a famous piece of literature that deals skillfully with psychoanalysis and the powers of fantasy and fiction-making, *The Collector* belongs to a well-established literary canon and it is likely to be part of the literary curriculum anywhere in the world. When twentieth century British literature is concerned, one cannot skip Fowles. Therefore, in order to get a broad picture of the literary climate

shaping the modern novel, the discussion of Fowles' text proves useful to students in a literature program.

OUTLINE OF STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING THE COLLECTOR IN A CHRISTIAN INSTITUTION

In teaching an anti-Christian text, it is important that one guard oneself against being didactic- that is telling the students, before they even read the text, that it is anti-Christian. The teacher's role should be to assist the students in getting to that conclusion through some strategies.

First of all, it would be helpful to assign the reading of the novel and to ask the students to come to the next class meeting prepared to identify and discuss the passages where the image of God is described in the novel.

There are at least two fragments in the second chapter where divinity is presented and talked about. One of them belongs to the middle part of Miranda's imprisonment and represents a proof of Miranda's cynicism and loss of faith in the existence of a God who cares for His creatures:

I've been sitting here and thinking about God. I don't think I believe in God any more. It is not only me, I think of all the millions who must have lived like this in the war. The Anne Franks. And back through history. What I feel I know now is that God doesn't intervene. He lets us suffer. If you pray for liberty you may get relief just because you pray, or because things happen anyhow which bring you liberty. But God can't hear. There's nothing human like hearing or seeing or pitying or helping about him. I mean perhaps God created the world and the fundamental laws of matter and evolution. But he can't care about the individuals. He's planned it so that some individuals are happy, some sad, some lucky, some not. Who is sad, who is not, he doesn't know, and he doesn't care. So he doesn't exist, really.

These last few days I felt Godless. I've felt cleaner, less muddled, less blind. I still believe in a God. But he is so remote, so cold, so mathematical. I see that we have to live as if there is no God. Prayer and worship and singing hymns – all silly and useless.

I'm trying to explain why I'm breaking with my principles (about never committing violence). It is still my principle, but I see you have to break principles sometimes to survive. It's no good trusting vaguely in your luck, in Providence or God's being kind to you. You have to act and fight for yourself. The sky is absolutely empty. Beautifully pure and empty.

As if the architects and builders would live in all the houses they built! Or could live in them all. It's obvious, it stares you in the face. There must be a God and he can't know anything about us." ¹³

The second one is part of the last days of Miranda's conscious life and it mirrors her terrible feelings of contempt for a God she perceives as indifferent and "impotent":

I hate God. I hate whatever made this world, I hate whatever made the human race, made men like Caliban possible and situations like this possible. If there is a God he's a loathsome spider in the darkness. He cannot be good.

This pain, this terrible seeing-through that is in me now. It wasn't necessary. It is all pain, and it buys nothing. Gives birth to nothing. All in vain. All wasted.

The older the world becomes, the more obvious it is. The bomb and the tortures in Algeria and the starving babies in the Congo. It gets bigger and darker.

More and more suffering for more and more. And more and more in vain.

It is as if the lights have fused. I am here in the black truth.

God is impotent. He can't love us. He hates us because he cannot love us.

All the meanness and the selfishness and the lies.

People won't admit it, they're too busy grabbing to see that the lights have fused. They can't see the darknes and the spiderface beyond and the great web of it all. That there's always this if you scratch at the surface of happiness and goodness.

The black and the black and the black.

I've not only never felt like this before, I never imagined it possible. More than hatred, more than despair. You can't hate what you cannot touch, I can't even feel what most people think of as despair. It's beyond despair. It's as if I can't feel any more. I see, but I can't feel.

Oh God if there is a God.

I hate beyond hate." ¹⁴

Asking the students to come up with their own understanding of the message this novel conveys enables the teacher to use reader-response criticism which places the reader at the center of the reading, making it possible for the student to be more than a

passive receiver of the author's values, especially when they are counter to his/ her own and assert his/ her own values during the process of reading.

Reader-response criticism is avowedly subjective and it helps establishing what Stanley Fish, one of the first theorists of reader-response criticism in the United States, called an "interpretive community", namely a group of readers who share a set of beliefs and values according to which they express opinions about the text.

The teacher then establishes the reading community to which the students belong, asking questions that highlight the Christian world view that accompanies and filters the students' reading of *The Collector*.

The students are likely to comment on the inappropriateness of such a distorted image of God as presented in the fragments above as well as to the whole atmosphere of oppression, meanness and total despair created in the novel.

The idea of kidnapping and holding somebody captive is contrasted with the Bible teachings that promote only behaviour that is beneficial to the others, friends or enemies.

Christian values and morality are in total opposition with Clegg's utter selfishness and inhumanity that can be traced throughout the book in the manner by which he treats Miranda: "She was mine" ¹⁵ he comments when he captures her. He only thinks of himself "and all humanity can go and stew for all I care." ¹⁶

There are other anti-Christian themes in the text that the students may detect: the theme of chance- discussed in her diary by Miranda who believes this world has been at best created by God and then left to function randomly- opposed in the classroom discussion by the Christian theme of divine design and purpose, and the theme of suffering and emptiness of existence contrasted by the Christian theme of rich and

purposeful living, always doubled by a complete trust in a God who is just and loving at the same time..

The students themselves may feel baffled by the way life unfolds sometimes, even if one is a believer and trusts God to provide answers for life's troubling questions. The teacher should make it clear that, according to the Christian worldview, everything that men do, the writing of literature included, takes place in a world characterized by two themes which affect everything that "passes under the sun". [Ecclesiastes 9:3]

There is the major theme that depicts God's plan of salvation and His constant work in people's favor and the minor theme that presents our world as a place where bad things happen and nobody, God included, can provide any clear reason for that, people having to deal with all this on their own.

If God is neither bad and cruel, nor ignorant and helpless, if He is truly good and genuinely concerned for His beloved creation, then, as Oswald Chambers clearly states in his book *Baffled to Fight Better*, the answer to the *why* question is a matter of trust in a God who has the power and the will and the wisdom to put all pieces back together and make us see the whole picture of whatever is happening and brings confusion.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary to the book of Job supports this idea and underlines the fact that we, as created beings, are too limited in wisdom and knowledge and have too short a time to judge what is happening around us. Job had to cope with the predicament of finding an explanation for his misfortune and had to make his way from despair to confidence, struggling with the obstacles of misunderstanding and misrepresentation placed in his path by the current tradition.

“Job finds a solution to his problems when he discovers that God is not limited by the traditions men have developed concerning Him. He knows that God possesses infinite power and graciousness and he also knows that, although he may suffer, he is God’s child. God has made no attempt to explain to him *why* he suffers, but he is convinced that, whatever the reason, he need have no misgivings”.¹⁷

As a result of discussing *The Collector* in a Christian classroom, students cannot but realize that what is today called “the literary canon”, or “great literature” is no longer observing the Horatian norm of delight and enlightenment or the Aristotelian principle of catharsis, getting emotionally purged while reading. Nor is contemporary literature in keeping with the norms of traditional writing as exemplified by the Victorian novel, trying instead to subvert any order, playing with chronology, plot, characters and readers, being unconventional and subversive on purpose.

Finally, once the discussion of the text is exhausted, the teacher may add information about those aspects of John Fowles’ life and philosophy that inform his work. Having studied French literature (and Existentialism) at Oxford, his novels and stories would always display strong French influences.

As Dr. Gatsinzi Basaninyenzi from the department of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zimbabwe suggests at the end of his discussion of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (paper prepared for the 1993 IFL seminar), it would be useful for the students to be assigned the reading of the book of Job in order to compare suffering that takes into account God’s just and merciful rulership and suffering in a universe that denies God.

From a Christian perspective, John Fowles' otherwise highly acclaimed novel fails to capture and faithfully present the main theme of conflict between good and evil, a conflict that goes on under God's sovereignty and will have a bright end, focussing only on the minor theme of meaningless existence under the cold stare of an indifferent God. It just speaks the truth about the untruth.

We consider that this book should be taught only to mature readers, under the careful guidance of the teacher. There should also be brought into existence a well established and active Christian "interpretive community" who should carefully read and discuss similar works in terms of a clearly set agenda and with a view to provide useful guidelines for teaching such texts both to Christian and non-Christian groups.

CONCLUSION

Literature is a powerful tool that makes the reader take part into the world in many ways and for different purposes.

A correct approach to literature may enable people to give a satisfying answer to the great philosophical questions of human existence. It is the task of committed Christian teachers of literature to carefully select the material to be taught, keeping in mind the mission and message of our church. There are no fixed rules for the integration of faith and learning in the study of literature, but to a teacher who is genuinely concerned with the importance of the restoration of God's image in man, integration will come naturally.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Bradbury, Malcolm. The Modern British Novel 1878-2001. (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 14
- ² Op. cit., p. 34
- ³ Op. cit., p. 38
- ⁴ Barayuga, Luz. An Ethical-Theological Approach to Literature: Some Suggestions for Adventist Teachers Essay prepared for the Integration of Faith and Learning Seminar Held at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies Lalaan I, Silang, Cavite, July 1993. Internet resource
- ⁵ Delmer Davis, Teaching Literature - A Seventh Day Adventist Approach (Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs, MI, 2002), p. 29
- ⁶ Barayuga, Luz. An Ethical-Theological Approach to Literature: Some Suggestions for Adventist Teachers Essay prepared for the Integration of Faith and Learning Seminar Held at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies Lalaan I, Silang, Cavite, July 1993. Internet resource.
- ⁷ Op. cit.
- ⁸ Delmer Davis, Teaching Literature - A Seventh Day Adventist Approach (Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs, MI, 2002), p. 34
- ⁹ Op. cit., p. 38
- ¹⁰ Lidia Vianu, British Desperadoes (All Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999), p. 81
- ¹¹ Op. cit., p. 56
- ¹² Davis, op.cit., p. 39
- ¹³ John Fowles, The Collector (Jonathan Cape, Thirty Bedford Square, London, 1970), p. 222
- ¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 225
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 120
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 126
- ¹⁷ The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary, volume 3 (Review and Herald Publishing Association Washington, DC 20039-0555 Hagerstown, MD 21740), p. 612

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