

Should Adventist Academies Teach Literature?

*Report on a Survey of English Teachers
in Seventh-day Adventist Secondary Schools
in the Caribbean*

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Studying literature should be one of the most important, meaningful, and enjoyable activities in the high school English curriculum. Literature can have a powerful effect on the minds of young people since it addresses their needs and offers experiences in which they can vicariously participate. Through literature, people can see, feel, sense, and benefit from the multi-faceted experiences of others.

Despite these potential benefits, many Seventh-day Adventist secondary schools do not include literature in their English curriculum. Many factors contribute to its absence. The teaching of literature has always posed a problem because of the wide range of available reading material and the way such works are chosen for reading lists and curriculum guides in Seventh-day Adventist secondary schools. Although the research referred to in this article deals with selected regions of the Caribbean, it is nevertheless very relevant to Seventh-day Adventist teachers around the world because of its nature and scope. In many regions, the teaching of literature, including fiction, is still a controversial and contentious topic in Adventist schools.

This is not a new problem. Ellen G. White (1827-1915), one of the founders of the Seventh-day Ad-

ventist Church, had to contend with this issue in her day. She responded by writing prolifically about what constitutes good reading.

The Power of Literature

The appeal of stories makes them a powerful tool for education and communication. Eisner says: “[They] instruct,

they reveal, and they inform in special ways.”¹ Coles, a strong advocate for the power of stories on the mind and body, describes the powerful effect of stories, compared to other genres in literature, such as poetry and prose.² He sees stories as having greater power to awaken awareness in readers than any other medium. Literature is not only about the artistic and imaginative works of writers, it is also about life and living; it is about human experience and humanness.

Literature is a poignant artistic vehicle that communicates the ideas, philosophies, and values of one generation to another in concrete and imaginative ways. It appears in many forms and can be a tool for learning at every stage of a person’s development. Nilsen and Donelson’s model, which they called the “Birthday Cake Theory of Reading Development,”³ shows that every level builds on the one preceding it, from birth to adulthood.

The foundation level of reading includes “nursery rhymes, folk tales, picture books, cereal boxes and any-

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thing else that shows there is fun and profit to be gained from the printed word.”⁴

Concerning fiction, or the novel—the genre often studied at the secondary and tertiary levels—TeSelle says, “Almost every novel is concerned with the structure of human experience” since this form of literature addresses the felt experiences of people over time, both positive or negative.⁵ She goes on to suggest that this realism or concreteness becomes both the fascination and danger of fiction.

A strong relationship exists between this central thrust of fiction and the concerns of Christianity, as both explore the human condition and motivation for living. Gaebelein emphatically declares that both Christianity and literature are concerned with the springs of human character. Both have to do with the “outward manifestations of that character in human action.”⁶ Literature shows how real and fictional characters learn what life is like and why people behave the way they do. This understanding leads to self-knowledge, which forms a basis for problem solving.

But some people condemn literature because it contains so much fiction and because fiction is false and not true-to-fact. They, therefore, believe that literature should not be offered as part of the curriculum at Seventh-day Adventist schools. The most extreme of these critics believe that teachers should not try to integrate fiction with anything that has to do with faith and truth, since these lead to God, who is ultimate Truth. Peter Thorpe, a former English teacher and author of the book *Why Literature Is Bad for You*,⁷ cites the case of a young, enthusiastic, and ambitious English major who became totally disillusioned by her study of the great books—works of the Renaissance, Victorian, and 19th-century masters. He claims that there is something inherent in literary art that discourages people from maintaining stable relationships with others. Thorpe’s ideas, though debatable, are hardly unique. Ellen White, speaking out against the reading of stories that are not true-to-fact, wrote, “I know of strong minds that have been un-

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balanced and partially benumbed or paralyzed by intemperance in reading.”⁸

Ellen G. White as Source and Authority

For Seventh-day Adventists, Ellen G. White, a prolific writer, lecturer, and educational theorist, is a significant authority figure because they believe she possessed the prophetic gift.

Ellen White issued many warnings

against the reading of fiction.⁹ All of these counsels strongly suggest that fiction reading should not be encouraged at home or at school because of inherent dangers—dangers that relate to the use of time and the effect on moral sensibilities, as such reading robs many of energy, spirituality, and the self-discipline required to address the rigors and challenges of daily living.

Given this seeming dilemma for Seventh-day Adventist English teachers, how should they deal with the teaching of literature, which, to a large extent, includes fictional works? Secondary-level English teachers can use Christian principles to choose literary works that will teach value and faith to students within the framework of beauty, artistry, and imitative accuracy that serious fiction allows. Students can then be encouraged to respond to and participate in themes and episodes that communicate the truth about reality, human experience, and God.

Reasons for Ellen White’s Counsel on Literature

What elements in fiction was Ellen White objecting to, and what did she mean when she used the broad term *fiction*? In *Messages to Young People* and *The Ministry*

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of *Healing*, she counseled against sensational stories and Greek tragedies—classics of her age that dealt with violence, incest, murder, and bloodshed.¹⁰ These were included in the study of Greek at educational institutions. Students exulted in the excitement and suspense in such stories. Waller says that the sensational novels in White's day "were almost one hundred percent trash."¹¹

Another common type of fiction was filled with maudlin sentimentality. White strongly criticized this saccharine literature and its effects. Young women reading popular novels became overly sentimental and engaged in sick fancies, as well as indecent and obscene thinking, while older women became disillusioned with their marriages, dreaming of imaginary husbands and romantic affairs.

When Ellen White used the broad term *fiction* in her writings, she was referring to a type of literature that encouraged readers to immerse themselves in plot-dominated stories of excitement, suspense, violence, and sentimentality. The feverish excitement produced by stories of this nature dulled the senses to the beauty and artistry of serious literature and made readers dissatisfied with the demands of reality.

Ellen White's condemnation clearly dealt more with the content of the works rather than their genre. Waller examined five scrapbooks used in the book *Sabbath Readings for the Home Circle*, which was edited by Ellen White. He investigated whether certain narratives that White read, clipped, and preserved were fictitious or true-to-fact. He concluded that quite a large portion was fictitious. Waller, therefore, concluded that "absence of sheer factuality was not White's definition of fiction."¹²

Ellen White was not unique in her views about fiction. Other religious writers also decried the type of fiction that prevailed during that period. The Roman Catholic journal, *Thought*, carried an article on Longfellow by Joseph E. O'Neil, which described him as one who "neither would or could look at reality except through a golden mist of emotion."¹³ O'Neil further described Longfellow as a victim of "the great Romantic doctrine of the importance of the heart in the life of

man. . . . Having rejected completely his forefathers' diet of strong Calvinistic meat and drink, Longfellow is sometimes to be found dining on little pink cakes and the very weakest of tea."¹⁴

The early issues of the *Methodist Quarterly Review* strongly counseled against the reading of fiction. It was not until 1845 that one finds the slightest acceptance of any sort of fiction among Methodist writers, according to Waller.¹⁵ An article in the *Quarterly Review* entitled "Critical Notices" suggested that although some moral fiction could be read sparingly by various classes of people, fiction should not be read excessively, especially by young people, lest this create an omnivorous appetite

for it: "Light reading, however, free from the total faults of our popular novels, like condiments, should be resorted to with great caution, and especially by the young, under proper advisement."¹⁶

The taboo on literature was gradually lifted as fictional works became more artistic and serious in nature. Less emphasis was placed on plot-dominated, suspenseful writing, with greater attention being given to style, structure, theme, and characterization. Although it still held the potential for stimulating negative habits and attitudes, fiction gradually became a model for imitation because of its beauty, artistry, and design. A note in an 1857 *Presbyterian Quarterly Review* illustrates this shift, crediting the change in subject matter and style of fiction:

"It seems pretty well settled now, that works of fiction must be tried on their own merits, and that any such sweeping rule as was formerly laid down, that all fictitious writing is per se bad, must be abandoned. The reason does not lie in the fact that the world has grown wiser than formerly in its judgments, but in this other fact that the extraordinary merit of many parts of fiction during the last half century will not allow the rule to remain. The question cannot now be, Shall I read any novels? But what novels may be read? . . . The genius and virtues of many men and women have passed into this class of books, and there can hardly be any fine culture without them. This world is a place of trial. We must choose the good and reject the evil."¹⁷

This shift enhanced the acceptance of literature both as a vehicle for communicating life values through the exploration of themes, characters, plot actions, and other aspects of literary works.

Purpose of the Study

The author of this article set out to discover and document, by way of a dissertation, the perceptions of Seventh-day Adventist secondary-level English teachers within selected regions of the Caribbean, regarding the teaching of literature.¹⁸ The term *literature* was used as a broad term for several genres, including fiction. Thirty-four teachers of English participated in the study and gave their opinions through questionnaires, inter-

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views, and case studies.

Their responses can serve as a catalyst to stimulate discussion about the teaching of literature in other Seventh-day Adventist secondary schools. Teachers who do not teach literature may want to review their own philosophical and ideological positions, and those who do teach literature may want to rethink the materials they select, while having their convictions reinforced that this subject is valuable and indispensable to the English curriculum.

The six research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

1. What value do English teachers place on literature as part of the English curriculum?
2. How do administrative and other bodies influence the literature teacher's choice of literary works?
3. How does the teacher's philosophy of life impact the selection and teaching of literature?
4. In what ways does Ellen White's counsel on literature influence its selection and teaching?

5. How do Seventh-day Adventist literature teachers relate to fiction as a genre in literature?

6. In what specific ways do teachers believe students benefit from the study of literature?

Summary of Survey Analysis

The six research questions allowed teachers of English within selected regions of the Caribbean to analyze their perceptions about the teaching of literature. These perceptions do not always coincide with their actual classroom practice. A large percentage of teachers who did not teach literature said they believed that this subject was important and vital for high school students. For these teachers, other factors prevented the inclusion of literature in the English curriculum. Some of these factors are linked to the school's tradition or history: Literature has not been taught in their school. Other teachers expressed discomfort with the types of books their Government Ministry of Education selected for classroom use. Within the Caribbean, students are required to write

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a local or external final qualifying examination at the end of their fifth year in high school in order to gain entrance into college or university. These examinations are the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) or the General Certificate of Education (GCE—London). For the local examination (CXC), literature texts are

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prescribed by the government. In cases where the recommended texts are not viewed favorably by Adventist educational administrators and English teachers, the students do not take the examinations, and no literature is taught in those schools.

Further, some English teachers said that literature was not taught in their schools because there was no budget for additional staff, since every English teacher is not a literature teacher. Others avoided the teaching of literature because of Ellen G. White's counsels on the selection of texts and the reading of fiction.

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The study, however, showed that several teachers do incorporate some genres of literature into their English language program. In the lower Forms, selected poetry is used; in the upper Forms, a few carefully selected narrative works, especially works from the classics, are taught. Contemporary works, which include Caribbean or local literature, are not popular because of their realism and the inclusion of objectionable language and questionable lifestyles of characters that do not meet the approval of many teachers and school administrators. Results of the study showed that teachers used con-

temporary and/or Caribbean or West Indian literature only if they had to prepare students for the local CXC examination.

Teachers who do not prepare students for the local or external examinations in literature were asked why they did not choose other works of literature, apart from fiction, for classroom study. Many could not give a satisfactory response. Their practice was largely influenced by their schools' tradition, which excluded the teaching of literature.

Overall, English teachers responding to the study believed that the teaching of literature was beneficial to students and that it should be an important subject in the school's curriculum. They agreed that fiction, chosen with care, reflects the experiences of life and can help students deal with a variety of situations in their own lives and better understand the life situations of others. They thus discover that things are not always "black" or "white," but are more often "grey"—the color that fiction frequently addresses. The teachers also agreed that literature helps students to become better thinkers because of the analytical, critical, and interpretive skills required to work with images, symbols, motifs, and nuances in such works. Furthermore, they said that literature helps students become better writers through their exposure to a variety of writing styles and effective use of vocabulary to convey meaning. However, many of these teachers, because of factors outside of their control, do not teach literature as a separate subject in their school's English curriculum.

Summary of Teachers' Perceptions on the Teaching of Literature

The study asked 34 teachers of English in selected regions of the Caribbean to give their perceptions of the teaching of literature in Seventh-day Adventist schools. Of this group, 19 taught literature, 15 did not. Eighteen of the 19 were female. All of those who taught literature agreed that it was an important subject in the English curriculum and should be taught in all schools. However, they offered varying degrees of support for lit-

erature, compared to other subjects in language arts. While some teachers said that literature should be placed above grammar and composition, others thought it should evolve from these subjects. Still others said that the subjects in language arts should be integrated, with none having precedence over another.

English Teachers Who Teach Literature

The majority of teachers who taught literature indicated that biblical literature should take pre-eminence over other types, such as Caribbean, Women/Minority, Contemporary, and Classical. Ten of the 19 teachers gave biblical literature a ranking of 1, with 1 being the highest and 3 the lowest.

Ironically, however, none of the respondents indicated on the questionnaire or through interviews or case studies that they used any portion of the Bible as literature in their classes.

Types of Literature Preferred by Teachers

Teachers indicated mixed perceptions about literature authored by women and minorities. Whereas some saw literature written by women as important to study since it generally addresses life's issues from a more sensitive perspective than works by male authors, others said it should be taught with care, especially if the stories promote a feminist agenda. Of the 19 surveyed respondents who taught literature, only two gave literature written by women and/or minorities the highest ranking of 1. Furthermore, they were very specific in separating "literature by women" from "minority literature," commenting negatively only on literature authored by women.

In rating the various genres of literature (biography, drama, poetry, fiction, and non-fiction), respondents who taught literature saw fiction as the most important genre, followed by biography. Through their written comments, they indicated that fiction addresses the various nuances and shades of life. Seventeen of the 34 teachers of English gave fiction a high ranking of at least 2 (with 1 being the highest and 5 the lowest). Of the 19 who taught literature, however, 15 gave fiction

a ranking of at least 2. A majority of both groups of teachers expressed great concern about the objectionable language and amoral behavior contained in many of the fictional works recommended for study by the various educational bodies. Their objections centered around vulgar language, low morals, and unacceptable values in the works, rather than the idea that fiction is false or not true to fact.


Finally, the three teachers who were the subjects of case studies, as well as those interviewed face-to-face and by telephone, perceived literature as the embodiment of English, although each had slightly different perspectives on the types of literature that were suitable for classroom study. Moreover, they all agreed that the study of literature exposes students to a variety of writers and styles, which in turn helps them to become better writers and thinkers.

Conclusion

The acceptability of literature as a subject in the high school curriculum has always been a matter of concern for those who deal with moral and spiritual development.¹⁹ Because of its power to affect readers negatively or positively through the values, morals, and ethical concerns conveyed through themes, characters, points of view, settings, and plot actions in novels, short stories, narrative poetry, and drama, literature has always raised the suspicions of both Christian and non-Christian educators. However, over many decades, Seventh-day Adventist as well as other Christian and non-Christian writers have attested to the wholesomeness of this subject and its significant role and function in the lives of young students. According to a Report on "The Aims and Teaching of Literature in Seventh-day Adventist Schools," the chief value of literary studies "lies in the way they lead constantly outside of themselves, to a deeper understanding of human nature, personality, and interrelationships."²⁰ This report goes on to suggest that "the proper approach to literature forces us to evaluate our own existence, and to make vital discriminations between the healthful and malignant in our culture, both in relation

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to God's purposes for man, and in comparison with the culture of other ages."²¹

Teachers' approach, methodology, and personal philosophy can give the teaching of literature an influence that endures far beyond the classroom, for as Hyde poignantly remarked about the co-relationship that exists between literature and life: "I can bring forward no more appropriate generalization than the oft-repeated one that literature is an interpretation of life. . . . The books that pupils read are their short-cuts to an experience in worthy living."²² It is not surprising that the Apostle Paul, in the greatest of all literature—the Bible—admonished his young friend Timothy: "Till I come, give attention to reading" (1 Timothy 4:13, NKJV). John the Revelator, in the last book of the world's greatest literary masterpiece, echoed this theme as he declared to the seven churches in Asia: "blessed is he [she] who reads!" (Rev. 1:3, NKJV). 

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