

Using the WORD

Studying Biblical References in Poetry

Integrating faith and learning is one of the cornerstones of Seventh-day Adventist educational philosophy. Teachers in all disciplines try to help students understand the connection between their courses and a Christian worldview.

However, in many classes, students get an intellectual introduction to the Scriptures but little help in learning how to apply biblical principles to their daily lives. Teaching poetry can be an excellent means of enhancing students' faith, as well as their appreciation for the Bible. In addition to the poems that probe theological issues, teachers can also find poetry of a superior quality that helps students apply biblical principles to their lives. In the English classroom, poetry can open a window on faith by appealing not only to the head, but also to the heart.

The Bible has always inspired writers—and poets in particular—because of its imagery, its rhythms and cadences, and its often elegant simplicity. For many generations, poets grew up reading and hearing the Bible in school and at home and found the language irresistible. Writers of an earlier era made extensive references to the Scriptures and used biblical terms and stories. It was an integral part of their heritage and their lives, even if they were not believers, since they considered it a shared part of Western culture. When poets alluded to the Scriptures, they could expect their readers to recognize and understand these references.

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BY JUDITH P. NEMBARD

Unfortunately, the contemporary poet cannot assume that 21st-century readers will recognize biblical references. David Jeffrey states that "in colleges and universities in the English speaking world today, there is an almost universal recognition of an increasing unfamiliarity with the Bible."¹ Jeffrey notes that because of English literature's great indebtedness to the Bible, this puts the study of the English literary heritage in great jeopardy. He sees what he calls a "cultural shift" away from participation in and inculcation of the Bible in "our collective cultural memory."²

Students in Seventh-day Adventist schools should have a better "collective cultural memory" than those in secular institutions, since Adventists emphasize the Bible as a guide to living and read it often. Our students should be better able to see the connection between the book that they study as a source of faith and the poetry they read in acquiring a liberal education.

Poets, even contemporary ones, often use the Bible as a reference point and allude to it naturally. One also sees echoes of biblical themes, especially the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, as well as "verbal coloring,"³ that gives a biblical flavor to many passages. Students may not always

recognize the presence of such allusions in their reading, but they can be helped to see the pervasiveness of the Bible in literature. So when

they encounter such words and phrases as *yoke, jot and tittle, mote, sinking sand, millstone, mammon, fleshpots*, and *eye of a*

needle, they should realize that they are dealing with biblical vocabulary.

The Bible as literature has been long recognized, and college and university courses have been created to explore this genre. But the Bible in literature seeks to discover biblical influences in the ideas and terminology of literature. The teacher can help the students explore pieces of poetry with biblical references, pointing out how potently the Bible inspires creativity, even to shaping the writer's thinking and language. Gradually, students will see that because of the Bible's relevance, even the secular mind can apply the Word to many ordinary contexts in life. They can discuss and write about ways to apply the Scriptures in their own experiences.

In a unit on biblical references in poetry, the teacher can explore with the students some of the Scripture references made by various poets and then assess the compatibility of the poet's views with their belief systems. Oftentimes, what the poet says runs counter to basic Christian beliefs. This is the time to help the students express and clarify the basis for their faith as they apply to their own lives the basic concepts or implied beliefs of a particular poem. A look at a few specific passages will show some ways to approach such an analysis and application.

"Jones Beach, A Sunday in November," by Catherine Barry, makes a good beginning. The poem illustrates the surprising nature of biblical references. One can never tell where they will appear.

Just because eye has not seen
Is no alibi for never peeking.
Because ear has not heard is
No excuse for not eavesdropping.
There are days like today
To gull-flip a double passport
At the border of small infinities
And stare at shells
That talk out loud⁴

This delightful little poem shows the wonderment that can come from observing the ordinary things of nature. What joy exudes from the lines as the poet surprises us with her quirky sense of humor and utter relish for the sanctity of the commonplace. After asking students if they can identify the biblical allusions, the teacher can use overheads or handouts to reveal the original Bible reference (1 Corinthians 2:9: "Eye hath not seen

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nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.")⁵

Discussion starters could include the following:

- Do you find it offensive to have the Scriptures referred to in this way? Why or why not?
- How would you defend the poem against the accusation that it has too flippant a tone or that the poet is making fun of the Bible?
- Do you think biblical language should be incorporated into our everyday lives? Or should such language be reserved for dealing

with sacred topics?

The teacher may even prepare discussion sheets with "talking points" for small-group participation and whole-group sharing at the end of class.

Well-known Harlem Renaissance poet Arna Bontemps grew up Adventist, so it should not be surprising that his poetry contains many biblical allusions. In "A Black Man Talks of Reaping," the usage is subtle, and the reader can be easily beguiled into concentrating only on the literal elements of the poem or its implied social issues. But Galatians 6:7 ("for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap"), the parable of the sower, and Joseph's experiences in Egypt all come together in a poem exposing agonizing inequity and bitterness.

I have sown beside all waters in my day.
I planted deep within my heart the fear
That wind or fowl would take the grain away.
I planted safe against this stark, lean year.

I scattered seed enough to plant the land
In rows from Canada to Mexico,
But for my reaping only what the hand
Can hold at once is all that I can show.

Yet what I sowed and what the orchard yields

The teacher can help the students explore pieces of poetry with biblical references, pointing out how potently the Bible inspires creativity, even to shaping the writer's thinking and language.

My brother's sons are gathering stalk and root,
Small wonder that my children glean in fields
They have not sown, and feed on bitter fruit.⁶

The irony defies the predictability inherent in nature and espoused in the text in Galatians, and thus forms a basis for discussion and reflective writing.

In analyzing other poems, the teacher can show the students passages or lines and ask them to identify the corresponding Bible reference. "Why flesh that mirrors Him must someday die" ("Yet Do I Marvel" by Countee Cullen) should elicit the Genesis story: "So God created man in his own image" ("mirrors Him") and the Fall ("must someday die"). Discussion of students' reactions to the poetry can occur after identification of each allusion. How can we reconcile the inevitable outcome of death to creatures made in God's likeness? As the students' beliefs are elicited and discussed impartially, the teacher should be prepared to help them find resolution on difficult points.

In "On His Blindness," John Milton dissects the parable of the talents to help find consolation for his own soul. Some of the archaic language, such as "true account," "mild yoke," and "thousands at His bidding speed" will stump the students. After they have wrestled with the terms for a while, the teacher can help explain the references and scriptural contexts.

Next, the students can conduct their own search for biblical references. They should turn in lines from poems, along with the biblical passages to which they allude. The more unusual the reference, the better. Of course, the teacher will need to guard against contrived or inaccurate connections. Just as stu-

dents tend to be overzealous in finding symbolism in poems, they may see biblical references in places where none exist.


Group activities make good teaching devices, since most students enjoy their participatory nature. "Using the Word" is a popular activity. The teacher can hand out index cards on which a short Bible text is written with one word or phrase underlined. For instance, a card might contain the following text:

"Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings. And not one of them is forgotten before God" (Luke 12:6).

Working in small groups, the students are to use the underlined word or words to create their own poems. They can share their creations at the end of the class period, asking their classmates to identify the text to which each poem refers. Later, the poems and texts can be arranged in an attractive display.

The poetry unit can help students both gain some theological knowledge and nurture their faith. They should at least come away from each activity feeling that the Word is potent, diverse, and powerful, able to appeal to both mind and spirit, and come to see that gifted people do have room for things of the spirit. They will also be more attuned to the presence of biblical phrases in the poetry they read and hear.

This unit of study can launch students on a lifelong journey of enjoyment and discovery. Later, when they come upon Keats' Ruth standing homesick "among the alien corn," they will experience a delightful "shock of recognition." Or when confronted with

William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming" and its 20 centuries "shocked by a rocking cradle" and the rough beast "slouching toward Bethlehem to be born," they will grasp the power of the Word both in literature and in their daily lives. 

Judith P. Nembhard is an experienced educator living in Kingston, Jamaica. She has taught English at Columbia Union College in Takoma Park, Maryland; and at Howard University in Washington, D.C.; and most recently served as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Northern Caribbean University in Mandeville, Jamaica, West Indies.

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
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4. Catherine Barry, "Jones Beach, a Sunday in November," in Diane Gabrielsen Scholl, "Review of Views From the Intersection, By Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Catherine Barry; New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1984," *Christianity and Literature* 34:1 (Fall 1984), p. 92.
5. Bible texts in this article are quoted from the King James Version.
6. Arna Botemps, "A Black Man Talks of Reaping," in *African American Literature: Voices in a Tradition* (Orlando, Fla.: Rinehart and Winston, 1992), p. 396.