

Institute for Christian Teaching
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***CARPE DIEM: SECULAR AND CHRISTIAN LITERARY
APPROACHES***

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Definition of Literature and Poetry

Laurence Perrine states in Sound and Sense that a poem is a kind of language that “says *more* and says it *more intensely* than does ordinary language,” therefore, is regarded as “something central to existence, something having unique value to the fully realized life, something that we are better off for having and spiritually impoverished without” (3). He again adds that literature “exists to communicate significant experience” and enables us to participate in the experience imaginatively (6).

Leland Ryken also adds that “the function of the arts is to heighten our awareness and perception of life by making us vicariously live it” (The Liberated Imagination 31). Additionally, the Bible which reveals God to people is in large part, a literary work, replete with artistic beauty hence Ryken concludes that God himself regards the arts as essential.

Why Teach Literature

If God does regard literature as essential, then certainly literature is worth teaching in our Adventist universities. The objective of the secular institution is to make scholars out of their students while the Christian school is committed to produce men of noble characters. Therefore, there should be a difference in the approach to literature regarding the way it is presented in a secular institution in comparison to the Christian school.

E. G. White writes in Education: True education does not ignore the value of scientific knowledge or literary requirements; but above information it values power, above power, goodness; above intellectual acquirements, character. The

world does not so much need men of great intellect as of noble character. It needs men in whom ability is controlled by steadfast principles (225).

Therefore, we need to teach literature but it is clear that most literary works are based on certain theories that are in conflict with our biblical worldview for there has always been a pressure on authors to gain audience by pandering to its godless tastes. For these reasons the Christian teacher is a very important factor in the classroom.

Introduction

In Elements of Literature, the authors explain that the Renaissance humanist movement led by the philosopher Pico della Mirandola and John Milton, the English Latin Secretary concluded that:

The proper aim of life is to attain virtue, not success, money or fame, because virtue is the best possible human possession and the only source of true happiness. The aim of humanistic teaching, as Milton summarized it in his essay "Of Education," was not to produce scholars but to fit their students to "perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously all the duties, public and private, of peace and war" (169).

The objective of Renaissance humanists is almost on par with the definition by E.G. White when she states that true education is "more than the pursuit of a certain course of study ... but is the harmonious development of the physical, mental, and the spiritual powers" (Ed. 13).

Writers like Alexander Pope maintained that works of virtue surpass intellectual wit. Matthew Arnold also posited that poems must have redemptive quality, but the individual and his personal thoughts became the prime motive in many works of art. If it is important to you as an individual, then it is worth writing and talking about. It is in this self same line of selfishness and selfish sensuous pleasure seeking that Andrew Marvell

writes his poem: "To His Coy Mistress." This poem is usually cited in many anthologies as one of the best examples of the *carpe diem* motif.

Definition of Carpe Diem

The Latin term *carpe diem* - *enjoy life in the present* is defined in A Glossary of Literary Terms as "seize the day." It is supposed to have originated from one of Horace's Latin Odes.

The speaker in a *carpe diem* poem emphasizes that life is short and time is fleeting in order to enjoin his auditor--who is often a virgin reluctant to change her state--to make the most of present pleasures... *The greatest poems of this kind communicate the poignant sadness--or else desperation--of the pursuit of pleasures under the sentence of inevitable death (21).*

Thesis Statement

Carpe diem as seen from this definition has a negative connotation. But it does not have to be so as much as the concept expresses some level of truth. For time is actually fleeting and beauty wanes and death is inevitable for both the secular minded as well as the Christian minded individual. This paper therefore, examines the secular and Christian approaches to this concept.

That this concept is anti-Christian is demonstrated by the statement that the speaker in a *carpe diem* poem emphasizes the shortness of life and fleetness of time "in order to enjoin his auditor--who is often a virgin reluctant to change her state--to make the most of present pleasures." Christians should not urge others into illicit behavior. Nonetheless, both Christians and non-Christians have 24 hours in a day and they all wish they had more. Certainly, *carpe diem* should not be only a secular concept.

Christians must think Christianly and reflect God's values. Therefore, if we prepare a people for God's service, we ought to prepare them adequately to develop

Christian character, to realize their individual worth as God's children, embrace Christian values, and learn to make principled choices by integrating faith with learning in our classrooms.

Lesson Plan

Before assigning this poem, it will be useful to ask students to write about their philosophy of beauty, love and death. This will later help them to either agree with or reject the worldview in the poem. When students are able to write about something, that something becomes clearer in their minds.

After writing, students can be assigned to read all three poems that deal with the negative concept of *carpe diem*. The teacher could also ask students to read the biographical data about Marvell at this time. In order to guide students in their reading a list like the following could be given to them:

Identify the literary elements in this poem and answer the following:

1. Who is the speaker in the poem?
2. What does he want his hearer to do?
3. How, according to the poem can human beings become masters rather than victims of time?
4. Suppose the speaker had proposed marriage to the woman in the poem, what difference would that make in the poem?
5. What is the overall meaning of the poem?
6. Is time fleeting to only the secular minded?

Reading Andrew Marvell's *Coy Mistress* shocks the fine sensibilities of the young student. Most of these students are at this time in their formative years and are very impressionable. Some still think at this point that because it is in print, it must be good. The teacher therefore has to work with great care and concern to enable students rise above the position where they may swallow every published idea "hook line and sinker".

In Child Guidance, Mrs. White records a solemn statement:

Because they do not properly restrain and direct their children, thousands are coming up with deformed characters, with *lax morals*, (italics mine) and with little education in the practical duties of life. They are left to do as they please with their impulses, their time, and their mental powers. The loss to the cause of God in these neglected talents lies at the door of fathers and mothers; (and I would add, teachers) and what excuse will they render Him whose stewards they are, entrusted with the sacred duty of fitting the souls under their charge to improve all their powers to the glory of their Creator? (177).

Methodology

In the 28th session of the IFL seminar directed by Dr. Humberto Rasi, we collectively arrived at the conclusion that, as teachers, our main objective is “to help students develop a solid Christian character, to realize their individual worth as God’s children, *embrace* Christian values, and learn to make principled choices.” This goal is best reached in a context of responsible freedom and redemptive discipline. This is the means to forestall the development of “deformed characters and *lax morals*.”

To His Coy Mistress Andrew Marvell (1621 – 1678)

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love’s day;
Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the Flood;
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow.
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;

An age at least to every part,
 And the last age should show your heart.
 Nor would I love at lower rate.

But at my back I always hear
 Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
 And yonder all before us lie
 Deserts of vast eternity.
 Thy beauty shall no more be found,
 Nor in thy marble vault shall sound
 My echoing song; then worms shall try
 That long preserved virginity,
 And your quaint honor turn to dust,
 And into ashes all my lust.
 The grave's a fine and private place,
 But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
 Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
 And while thy willing soul transpires
 At every pore with instant fires,
 Now let us sport us while we may;
 And now, like amorous birds of prey,
 Rather at once our time devour,
 Than languish in his slow-changed power.
 Let us roll all our strength, and all
 Our sweetness, up into one ball;
 And tear our pleasures with rough strife
 Through the iron gates of life.
 Thus, though we cannot make our sun
 Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Discussing The Poem

Ryken states that, because of the special language of a poem, poetry always puts a burden of interpretation on us so we have to interpret this poem. In order to interpret, we would need to look at all the other literary elements of this poem. We will discuss all aspects of the poem by looking at all its technical points – the hyperbolic expanses of time, the elevated language, the rhymed couplets coupled with the stately tetrameter. We

would be impressed with the poem's refined grammatical mood, with its third person point of view as well as its calculated diction. Its idioms, imageries, metaphors, personifications, symbols, figurative language, metonymy and all elements of the poem.

As can be seen, Marvell deserves the description that he is the "major minor" poet of the Restoration period. Although we will discuss the poem's rich form in class, it will be beyond the scope of this paper. Having interpreted the poem, we would then discuss the assignment. Using Peter Elbow and Standy Fish's learning and reader response strategy, the teacher will draw out from students their emotional response to the poem.

As cited in Basaninyenzi's article in 10CC, this strategy will place the student's identity at the center of the reading to freely assert his/her values and beliefs (4). From the assigned writing and reading materials students would come to conclude that the poem's worldview is counter to theirs. We would then continue to discuss the other two negative carpe diem poems.

To the Virgins, to make much of Time
Robert Henrick (1591 – 1674)

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.
Old time is a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
The higher his a-getting,
The sooner will his race be run,
And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer,
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,
 And while ye may, go marry;
 For having lost but once your prime,
 You may forever tarry.

SONG

Edmund Waller (1606 – 1687)

Go, lovely rose,
 Tell her that wastes her time and me
 That now she knows,
 When I resemble her to thee,
 How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young,
 And shuns to have her graces spied,
 That hadst thou sprung
 In deserts where no men abide,
 Thou must have uncommended died.

Small is the worth
 Of beauty form the light retired,
 Bid her come forth,
 Suffer herself to be desired,
 And not blush so to be admired.

Then die! That she
 The common fate of all things rare
 May read in thee,
 How small a part of time they share
 That are so wondrous sweet and fair!

The Carpe Diem Motif

A superficial reading might create the impression that Henrick is urging the “Virgins” to go marry and therefore is giving a positive counsel. However, a more thoughtful reading reveals that the counsel is not based upon any love or affection that the virgins and the men have for each other. Instead, they are advised to jump into marriage with any man who comes in order to forestall dying without ever having enjoyed themselves.

After reading all three poems, the class will come to the conclusion that, in all these poems, the common elements are:

Time is fleeting
 Beauty wanes
 Love fades
 Death is inevitable and final

And enjoying life in the present, as far as this theme is concerned, means indulging in pre marital sex.

This conclusion definitely shocks students and I have had students ask me at this point the justification for reading such a poem in a Christian classroom. This is certainly an opportunity for the teacher to probe the minds of students to discover what they presume a Christian university's curriculum should be. For it is relevant to discuss whether the teaching of literature is still worth our while seeing that many poets and writers have veered from the old classical themes and now concentrate on the meaninglessness and hopelessness of life, the finality of death, or the genre of stream-of-consciousness, the theater of the absurd with its accompanying plot-less stories. Should the literature teacher be arrested in the past teaching only the old? Definitely the answer is a resounding no for the student lives in the world, and will have to be equipped to face real life issues.

This will lead us into a discussion of the lead questions in the Lesson plan. Answers to the suggested questions will demonstrate that the Christian worldview differs from the non-Christian perspective. Marvell's philosophical outlook is contrary to a Christian worldview. His, as well as that of Henrick's, and Waller's belief in the finality of death is opposed to the Christian belief in resurrection and judgment and if death is not such a finality after all, then students ought to know what should dictate the way they live their short allotted time. This lends a completely different perspective to the Christian approach and calls for another set of questions and positive carpe diem poems.

Study Questions For Positive Carpe Diem Poems

- I. Compare and contrast the idea of "seize the day" with Christ's statement in John 9:4 - "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day:: the night cometh when no man can work."

- II. Discuss the idea of the shortness of life coupled with the fleeting aspect of time from a Christian point of view. (You may read Ps 30:5 for ideas).
- III. Justify the idea of enjoying life in the present. Is it biblical?
- IV. Compare and contrast the idea of brevity of physical beauty and the finality of death juxtaposed with biblical concept of beauty and the Christian hope of resurrection. What is the biblical concept of love?

In doing this exercise, students will agree that, Paul's admonition is very appropriate: "whatsoever things are true,noble, ...just....pure, ...lovely, of good report, ...praise worthy – think of these things". Philippians 4:8. This message is re-echoed in the words of Col. 3:2 "set your affections on things above". The Psalmist who had already discovered this notion prayed: "Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things, and revive me in your way" Ps. 119:37. And again declares, "I will set no wicked thing before my eyes." And Jesus himself adds in John 14:30: "...for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me".

It is therefore pertinent that the Christian student consciously reject this call to sensual indulgence because he/she subscribes to a different philosophy. This is why the teacher must not be content after teaching only the secular themes on which the work stands. For in order to integrate our faith with our teaching, we must understand the zeitgeist - the spirit of the age - implying the value systems and thoughts of the age, in relation to biblical revelation.

Reasons For Integrating Faith With Learning

W. H. Auden has called our modern century "an age of anxiety." Indeed, this is an age in which the television has become the greatest schoolmaster and with his utterances comes the information that we are not good enough till we are handsome and

pretty or powerful and filthy rich. This is the computer age where the world is at our fingertips. Life is completely shifting towards materialism even in third world countries and values of spiritual and eternal realities are gradually dwindling: juvenile suicides, child pregnancies – babies giving birth to babies – and gang robberies are becoming the order of the age. Philosophical theories driving literary works propagate anti-Christian beliefs and urge readers to abandon Christian morality. They urge the young to lax morals. It is therefore equally important, even of prime importance, to prepare students for their final destiny as we prepare them for their future lives here on earth. The classroom approach to such anti-Christian literary thought will require astuteness from the teacher. Christian teachers cannot afford to leave students to believe that this is the best way to live their lives. For the Christian theist, as defined by Arthur Holmes, “values are more than feelings and are not at all relative” (32). We must therefore value what God values and cultivate Christian morality.

By now, students would have completed the other assigned reading that puts Christ at the center of the work enabling students to discover and identify the missing elements in the secular concept of *carpe diem*. From there, we will now go to the teacher’s intentional effort to impose the Christian mind on the concept. Students would have completed assigned readings on Milton’s biographical data, the poem “On His Blindness,” “On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three,” and, “Ecclesiastes 12.”

On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-Three
John Milton (1608 – 1674)

How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,
 Stolen on his wing my three and twentieth year!

My hasting days fly on with full career.
 But my late spring no bud or blossom showeth.
 Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth.
 That I to manhood am arrived so near.
 And inward ripeness doth much less appear.
 That some more timely-happy spirits endueth.
 Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow.
 It shall be still in strictest measure even.
 To that same lot, however mean or high,
 Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heaven;
 All is, if I have grace to use it so,
 As ever in my great Taskmaster's eye.

When I Consider How My Light Is Spent
John Milton (1608 –1674)

When I consider how my light is spent
 Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
 And that one talent which is death to hide,
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
 To serve therewith Maker, and present
 My true account, lest he returning chide;
 "Doth God exact day labor, light denied?"
 I fondly ask: but Patience to prevent
 That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
 Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
 Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
 They also serve who only stand and wait."

Ecclesiastes chapter 12
(The Narrated Bible)

Be happy, young man, while you are young,
 and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.
 Follow the ways of your heart
 and whatever your eyes see,
 but know that for all these things
 God will bring you to judgment.
 So then, banish anxiety from your heart
 and cast off the troubles of your body,
 for youth and vigor are meaningless.

Remember your Creator

In the days of your youth,
 before the days of trouble come
 and the years approach when you will say,
 "I find no pleasure in them"—
 before the sun and the light
 and the moon and the stars grow dark,
 and the clouds return after rain;
 when the keepers of the house tremble,
 and the strong men stoop,
 when the grinders cease because they are few,
 and those looking through the windows grow dim,
 when the doors to the street are closed
 and the sound of grinding fades;
 when men rise up at the sound of birds,
 but all their songs grow faint;
 when men are afraid of heights
 and of dangers in the streets;
 when the almond tree blossoms

and the grasshopper drags himself along
 and desire no longer is stirred.
 Then man goes to his eternal home
 and mourners go about the streets.

Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
 Or the golden bowl is broken;
 before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
 or the wheel broken at the well,
 and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
 and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher.
 "Everything is meaningless!"

Now all has been heard,
 Here is the conclusion of the matter:
 Fear God and keep his commandments,
 for this is the whole duty of man.
 For God will bring every deed into judgment,
 including every hidden thing,
 whether it is good or evil.

Christian approach to Carpe diem: Integrating Faith and Learning:

In all the three poems above, time is just as much important as it is to the secular

minded person. Youth is of much essence as well. The days are passing fast and death is also inevitable.

Though Milton is not worried about beauty waning, he is worried about lack of sight. When Milton laments the passing of time and his lack of sight during the prime of his life, he does not resolve his problem by rushing into pleasure seeking or immoral acts. He resolves that God holds one accountable for what he has endowed within the person.

In the same vein of thought, Ecclesiastes does lament the passing of time, failure of strength, sight, and beauty, but these things are not too catastrophic. Students will discover that in 1 Peter 3:3, beauty is an inward adornment that is not easily lost. Neither is love something you choose to give today and withhold tomorrow. It is a principle to live by. Therefore, Solomon uses the aging process and fleetness of time in addition to the inevitability of death as a springboard to invite readers to a higher moral standard. These Christian writers add a new component by introducing resurrection and judgment to the equation. For Milton and Solomon therefore:

Time is fleeting
 Beauty wanes
 Death is inevitable but not a finality
 There is resurrection and accountability after death

The doctrine of resurrection and judgment makes a world of difference as to how one would want to “seize the day.” As Paul says, “if there is no resurrection, then let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32).

The difference between the secular outlook on life and the Christian worldview is related to their understanding of death. Because the secular minded person believes

death to be what Shakespeare calls:” the be-all and end-all,” s/he believes that under this sentence of inevitable death, s/he must desperately pursue pleasure.

The Christian however, realizing that God will bring every deed into judgment, believes in seizing the day by “giving every flying moment something to keep in store.”

One Christian poet, in contemplating this theme, has written a modern positive carpe diem poem captioned, “THE DASH” (I am most grateful to Dr. Humberto Rasi who graciously sent me this poem.)

“THE DASH”

I read of a reverend who stood to speak
 At the funeral of his friend.
 He referred to the dates on her tombstone
 From the beginning...to the end.
 He noted that first came the date of her birth
 And spoke of the following date with tears,
 But he said what mattered most of all
 Was the dash between those years...
 So, when your eulogy is being read,
 With your life’s actions to rehash,
 Would you be proud of the things they say
 About how you spent your dash?

Conclusion

That “Coy Mistress,” “Song,” and “To the Virgins,” are the greatest examples of the carpe diem motif should make students realize that contemporary standards of greatness no longer depend on great literature being works of virtue or having redemptive qualities but rather that which subverts it. Consequently, students must be reminded that, as Ryken has said, “human creativity did not escape the effects of the fall.” The philosophy of the secular minded person often drives what is perceived as great within society. But to the Christian, literature that is designed to serve humanity and glorify God has a nobler purpose than literature composed to make its author famous or wealthy.

Literature designed to encourage selfishness, immorality or designed coarsely should be rejected by Christians. In the words of James Sire, “when decadent morality is portrayed as normal, this morality seeps into the consciousness of viewers...[and] their sense of morality is also unwittingly eroded” (176). Christians must reject this normalcy.

Nor indeed, could this lesson have been divorced from moral values for the very nature of the fleetness of time challenges the Christian to be circumspect with life’s choices. I believe that a Christian teacher has a calling and a challenge to goad his/her students on heavenward and should make every effort to meet this challenge.

Carpe diem by all means! But, “remember you will give an account to the Master” is the part that is missing in the secular worldview. Through carpe diem, the student in a literature class must come to discover the lasting friendship in God and his eternal riches that he has promised through life everlasting. And it is the Christian teacher who provides that missing link by integration of faith with learning. There is a resurrection that we look forward to and the poet John Donne has said it best.

Death Be Not Proud
John Donne (1572 – 1631)

Death be not proud, though some have called thee mighty and dreadful,
 For thou art not so, for those whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow
 Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me;
 From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
 Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
 And soonest our best men with thee do go,
 Rest of their bones, and soul’s delivery.
 Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
 And dost with poison, war and sickness dwell
 And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,
 And better than thy stroke; why swell’st thou then?
 One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
 And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.

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