Should Adventist Academies Teach Literature?

In many regions, the teaching of literature, including fiction, is still a controversial and contentious topic in Adventist schools.

By Shirley A. McGarrell

The Power of Literature

The appeal of stories makes them a powerful tool for education and communication. Eisner says: “[T]hey instruct, they reveal, and they inform in special ways.” 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. 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 humaness.

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

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. 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. Gaebelien 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.” 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, 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 intermixture in reading.”

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. 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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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.”

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.”

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. 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-
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 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
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. Contemporary 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 lives of others. They thus discover that things are not always “black” or “white,” but are more often “gray”—the color that fiction frequently addresses. The teachers also agreed that literature helps students 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 literature, 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 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...
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