

The great poet, dramatist, and literary critic T.S. Eliot was once quoted as saying, “[i]t is the literature we read with the least effort that can have the easiest and most insidious influence upon us.”¹ Eliot, referring to the modern novel in his aforementioned quote, believed that by reading this type of literature, one is at first blind to the fact that there is no intrinsic value within this type of literature, which includes, but is not limited to, the genre of fiction.² By someone being subjected solely to an intake of fiction, one is ultimately depriving his or herself of a deeper and more realistic understanding of the culture in which they live. In fact, Anita Gandolfo, in an effort to give more explanation to what Eliot was trying to say, states that “[a]s the world becomes more chaotic and moral questions become more complex...fiction provides a safe haven of order and simplicity.”³ This safe haven, however, is not to be viewed in a positive light, but more like a crutch for those weak-minded people who cannot bear to face what reality really has to offer. In other words, what these two authors are trying to prove is that fiction offers nothing more than an emotional escape from the trials and tribulations of reality, and more specifically, their own lives. However, though it is possible to view the genre of fiction in such a negative manner, as exemplified in the previous quotes, there is also another way of looking at the genre of fiction, particularly from a Christian perspective. According to men such as Northrop Frye, who is considered to be one of the greatest literary critics of the twentieth century, and Leland Ryken, professor of English at Wheaton College, “the imagination [as triggered through the reading of fiction]...[is] a

¹ T.S. Eliot, “Religion and Literature,” *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 103.

² Though T.S. Eliot uses the general term “literature” within his quote, I will be referring specifically to “fiction” when I am referencing the type of literature that Eliot spoke of.

³ Anita Gandolfo, *Faith and Fiction: Christian Literature in America Today* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 164.

valid form of knowing and expressing [the] truth.”⁴ In addition, “[t]he construct of the imagination tells us things about human life that we don’t get in any other way,”⁵ and a good fiction novel can be as true or real as the news on the television.⁶ It is for these reasons that people often use the imagination, which can be ignited through the reading of fiction, as a means by which one can “deal with truth, both in their daily lives and in their specifically religious experiences.”⁷ Using fiction as a means by which to understand and deal with truth and culture (reality), however, is not the only reason for fictions legitimacy as a means to spread the Christian message. According to Paul Messbarger, fiction is also a vehicle through which the reader can reinforce their ideologies.⁸ If this statement proves true, then propagating a Christian worldview through fiction would be an excellent attempt to either strengthen already existing Christian ideologies, or to offer Christian ideologies as alternatives to non-Christian beliefs. Finally, over the years, particularly within the past twenty years, fiction and its loyal following of readers has been on a significant incline, with fiction authors selling more books than any other author from different genres. Therefore, if one is striving to spread the Christian message, fictional literature is an appropriate medium through which this task can be accomplished.

According to William Mallard, in his work on the reflection of Theology in literature, he states that a “literary work [including fiction] not only looks out upon the real world, [but] it penetrates it to a degree, to that same extent brings it to richer

⁴ Leland Ryken, *Windows to the World* (Probe Ministries International, 1985), 57.

⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 27-28.

⁶ Ryken, *Windows to the World*, 62.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Paul R. Messbarger, *Fiction with a Parochial Purpose: Social Uses of American Catholic Literature, 1884-1900* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1971), 20.

expression, and helps to complete it.”⁹ This statement goes back to the previous point that literature, or in this case fiction, can open the imagination and aid in one’s coping with the world around them, ultimately helping the reader to deal with truth and life in general. By literature, viz., fiction, not only giving a richer expression to reality, but also aiding in its completion in the readers mind, one is able to understand the world around them in a much more subtle way. Murray Krieger further supports this claim and has even suggested

A poetic image of the relationship between the interpretive world of a literary piece and the real world, viz., the transformation of a mirror into a window. The literary work takes various materials from existence and mirrors these within itself as world; the mirror in turn then becomes a window offering a fresh perspective upon the real world.¹⁰

In this poetic image, the idea that literature, including but not limited to fiction, can give the reader a look at the world around them is further strengthened. Through the mirrored image, which literature reflects of the real world, the reader is able to not only learn about their world, but is also able to come to an understanding about the way reality is in a more subtle, and less threatening manner. Using fiction as a means by which to mirror the world in which the reader resides, however, is not the only way that fiction enables people to deal with truth. Aside from dealing with the truth of the world, fiction also aids the reader in understanding their own lives and how one can fit within this ever-changing universe. In order to understand one’s self, and our place within the world, Sallie TeSelle postulates that fiction and its reflection of the world can “give [the reader] confidence...and an image of man and the world which could help them to do their own

⁹ William Mallard, *The Reflection of Theology in Literature: A Case Study in Theology and Culture* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1977), 97.

¹⁰ Ibid.

job of celebrating [their] finite reality.”¹¹ In other words, through the reflection of the world that literature gives to the reader, one is able to take the image of man given and apply it to their own lives, ultimately coming to an understanding that one’s place within the world is not an infinite stay. Literature has thus in its own way, explained certain pieces of reality, which might have otherwise gone unexplained. Since it is true, therefore, that literature can give the reader a better understanding of truth and reality, it is completely understandable why a Christian author would strive to incorporate a Christian worldview, even within the genre of fiction. If people do, in fact, gain a better understanding of reality through literature, then it is the responsibility of the Christian to make sure that the reader’s understanding of reality and truth is accurate. Because, even though “the particulars of the story are fiction...the realities they portray are true,”¹² and literature is ultimately a “picture of human experience that enables us to understand life better.”¹³ Therefore, whether giving the reader perspective on the world or giving the reader a better understanding of the self, and keeping in mind that “the particular world of a work, with its various characteristics, enables the works illumination of reality,”¹⁴ then literature, specifically fiction, becomes a perfectly acceptable means through which one can spread the Christian message.

In addition to fiction being able to help the reader deal with truth and come to a better understanding of reality, fiction is also, according to Paul Messbarger, “designed to

¹¹ Sallie TeSelle, *Literature and the Christian Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 43.

¹² Ryken, *Windows to the World*, 55.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁴ Mallard, *The Reflection of Theology in Literature: A Case Study in Theology and Culture*, 96.

give metaphoric reinforcement to ideology.”¹⁵ In other words, whatever ideologies the reader may possess, regardless of how miniscule, they will either be strengthened or confirmed through the reading of well-written literature. One may be wondering, however, how this has anything to do with spreading a Christian worldview through fiction. In order to understand how the persuasive power of literature can reinforce ideology, and how this can have an affect on the reader, one must first understand what a work of literature will always incorporate within itself. According to Leland Ryken,

Works of literature [always] embody a worldview—a set of basic premises about reality, values, and morality. Any complete analysis of literature includes discovering the contours of a work’s worldview and then comparing it to one’s own.¹⁶

If a work of literature will always incorporate a worldview within the text, then one can be sure that whatever piece of literature one decides to read, that person will be subjected to the worldview, values, and morality, which the author has decided to include. This is why T.S. Eliot, based on his essay “Religion and Literature,” argues that one should always make a distinction between religion and literature. The priority of religious writing should be more theological, and if one is striving to be more religious, in a sense, then a one should know what is appropriate to read and what is not; or to quote Eliot, one should know what one “ought to like.”¹⁷ In other words, Eliot, if one were to summarize what he was saying in his essay, was trying to say that the Christian would have no need to read fiction, much less attempt to spread the Christian message through fiction.

However, though one can sympathize with Eliot’s point of view, in this day an age, one

¹⁵ Messbarger, *Fiction with a Parochial Purpose: Social Uses of American Catholic Literature, 1884-1900*, 20.

¹⁶ Ryken, *Windows to the World*, 131.

¹⁷ Robert Detweiler and David Jasper, eds., *Religion and Literature* (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2000), 10.

must never forget the persuasive power of a story and the lasting effect that it can have on people.¹⁸ This literary power is “a power over which we do not have ultimate control, since it can catch us off guard, tell us things about ourselves we would prefer not to know, and liberate us to move in directions we would never have imagined.”¹⁹ Knowing then that literature has this kind of power over the reader, it stands to reason that the Christian author should give the reader an alternative direction to that given by the non-Christian community. If the Christian community does not spread the Christian message through literature, specifically fiction, then the reader is left with only a secular worldview, which, as has been discussed previously, will have profound effects on how he or she views the world and life in general. If the Christian community hopes to make an impact on culture, then it must use every avenue possible, especially when certain mediums have more influence than others, i.e., literature, specifically fiction. The imagination is a powerful tool, and if Christians ever hope to spark someone’s imagination in order to shape their beliefs, values and ideologies, then it is imperative that one uses the one medium that has been seen to have the most profound effect on the imagination, literature (including fiction). Therefore, aside from helping readers to understand truth and reality, since the persuasive power of literature also gives metaphorical reinforcements to ideologies, it is perfectly acceptable to use fiction as a means to spread the Christian message.

¹⁸ This lasting effect that fictional stories can have on people can easily be seen through the impact that the *Left Behind* series and *The DaVinci Code* had on people. Many people began to base their theological beliefs on what was written. Not to mention the fact that the *Left Behind* series sold an estimated 65 million copies.

¹⁹ Robert McAfee Brown, *Persuade Us To Rejoice: The Liberating Power of Fiction* (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1992), 29.

In 2004, the Barna Group conducted a survey, in which, they were able to determine the number of people within the United States that were unchurched.²⁰ After conducting the survey, the Barna Group concluded that between the years of 1991 and 2004, there was a 92% increase in unchurched people, resulting in 75 million people being considered as unchurched.²¹ With this many people not attending church, the dilemma then becomes a matter of how the Christian message will reach these people if it does not reach them at church. An appropriate and practical way to spread the Christian message to these people, then, is through fiction literature. In 2008, beginning on March 11th, the Harris Poll Group conducted a survey to find out what type of books people most often read and/or buy. After surveying thousands of people, 18 and over, the Harris Group determined that out of all the genres available, fiction²² was the most popular, with over 80% of Americans reading books within this genre, and the average individual reading at least 3 of these books per year.²³ This popularity with fiction among American readers can be explained, says Anita Gandolfo, by the fact that “fiction functions entirely on the literal level, much like television drama, and viewers can just as easily be readers as watch television. In fact...fiction...can [even] be more satisfying than television viewing.”²⁴ If fiction can often times be more satisfying than television watching, and one is seeking a way to reach those people who are unchurched, then spreading the

²⁰ The following is how the group defined unchurched: An adult (18 or older) who has not attended a Christian church service within the past six months, not including a holiday service (such as Easter or Christmas) or a special event at a church (such as a wedding or funeral).

²¹ The Barna Group, Ltd., “Unchurched,” 2004, available from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=38> (accessed November 2008).

²² This genre was divided among three subgenres: 1) Mystery, 2) Thriller, and 3) Crime, but each was still under the heading of fiction.

²³ Harris Interactive Inc., “Over One-Third of Americans Read More Than Ten Books in Typical Year,” 2008, available from http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=891 (accessed November 2008).

²⁴ Gandolfo, *Faith and Fiction: Christian Literature in America Today*, 161.

Christian message subtly through a medium that most people find entertaining, is a great way to teach people about Christianity and its values without making people feel as if they are sitting through a church service. If people are not attending church, for one reason or another, then it becomes the task of the Christian to spread the Christian message to these unchurched people however they can. If fiction is the genre that most people tend to read, then it is the one genre that the Christian message should endeavor to infiltrate first. It is for this reason, the sheer popularity of fiction, that it is an appropriate medium through which the Christian message can be spread.

In conclusion, though certainly there are numerous other reasons that can justify a Christian using fiction to spread the Christian message, the justification can also be found in the three reasons, which have been previously given. First, fiction is an appropriate means through which to spread the Christian message because fictional literature helps people to gain a better understanding of reality, truth, and the self. Since fictional literature gives people a better understanding of these things, then it is the responsibility of the Christian to make sure that the reader has been given a correct understanding of truth and the self. And the only way to guarantee that fictional literature is giving the reader a correct understanding is if the author presents a Christian worldview throughout the story. Secondly, fiction is an appropriate means through which to spread the Christian message because the persuasive power that fictional literature can have tends to give metaphorical reinforcement to ideologies. As with the first reason, since fictional literature gives metaphorical reinforcement to ideologies, then one must be sure that the ideologies presented throughout the book are Christian ideologies, in order that the reader might gain an understanding of correct ideologies. Furthermore, if the reader has even

the slightest form of Christian ideologies, then fictional literature also has the power to strengthen these ideologies. Finally, fiction is an appropriate medium through which to spread the Christian message due to the large number of people that actually read books in this genre. As was said before, over 75 million Americans are unchurched, but being unchurched does not mean that people do not still read fictional novels, even if they present a Christian worldview. Since the majority of readers enjoy reading fictional novels, then it stands to reason that this should be the one genre that the Christians want to be sure to penetrate with a Christian message. The millions of people who read fictional novels, who might not otherwise hear, would be presented with a Christian worldview. Therefore, it is for these three reasons that fictional literature is an appropriate medium through which one can spread the Christian message.