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Barometrical Literature

Leather-bound or paperback, by printing press or quill pen, books hold an important place in human society. For centuries the written word, be it novel, poem, biography, or drama, has offered insight about the society from which it springs. Using literature, one can follow the changes in society's morals and beliefs. One will see that the degeneration and hopelessness prevalent in modern and contemporary classic literature is a direct result of man's abandoning God's truth. By first observing changes in author's worldviews, and then by studying the literary works from different eras, the Christian will conclude that popular literature provides a glimpse of an era's principles, and ultimately, that true hope is only found in the Gospel.

The worldviews of authors throughout the centuries have differed from one another and progressively changed. Two examples are George Herbert (1593-1633) and Kate Chopin (1850-1904). According to Anderson and Hicks in *Introduction to English Literature*, "Herbert, one of the most important of the Metaphysical poets, was known for his saintly life and intense devotion to God" (220). Conversely, Chopin believed that "truth rests upon a shifting basis and is apt to be kaleidoscopic" (qtd. in Clark). Both authors made marked contributions to anthologized literature, yet they held extremely different worldviews. Other examples exist as well, such as the contrast between C.S. Lewis and Samuel Beckett. Earlier in life Lewis denied the truth of the

Gospel. However, after coming to Christ he wrote wholesome and encouraging literature.

Beckett, a member of the Theatre of the Absurd and author of *Waiting for Godot*, not only denied the reality of God, but also questioned his own existence (Dickstein).

Differences are not only apparent from person to person, but also from one era to another. Following the course of literature through history, from the ancient epics to the contemporary stream of consciousness, one can see how each era's two or three steps away from truth culminate in a total abandonment of Biblical principles. Returning to the examples of Herbert and Chopin, who lived approximately three hundred years apart from each other, one glimpses such a change. While it is said that "Herbert's poems are unusually tranquil and serene to be written in so turbulent an age," Chopin's writings explore such topics as lust, adultery, and abandonment of family (Anderson, Hicks 220). In one of her most anthologized works, *The Awakening*, Chopin ends the story with her protagonist committing suicide. "Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her [the protagonist].... but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone" (152). Another change in worldview was seen during the 1800's. Several key writers of the time proposed and promoted the worldview of transcendentalism, which quickly gained prominence. Still seen in Disney movies today, transcendentalism advocates a freedom from the "rigor of our conventions of religion and education which is turning us to stone" (Emerson). This implies transcendentalism's view of the Bible as restrictive of personal expression and freedom. Instead of consulting God's Word to find the answer to life's tough questions, transcendentalism sought to eliminate those questions by "raising man to the level of nature" (Emerson).

Digression in the morals of literature is the direct result of the digression in the morals of society. The darkness and lewdness found in much modern and contemporary literature indicates

sadly depraved societies. For example, by 2014 over seventy million copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey* had sold in the UK, Commonwealth, and United States alone (Russon). Such a clear desire for sensually indecent literature indicates a society far from God's truth and should touch the heart of Christians.

Sometimes slowly, but always surely, man has been pushing away from God. An increasing digression in morals and a lack of joy and fulfillment in so many lives are clearly seen in the study of literature. Through the years, literature has changed because the worldviews of authors have changed. Many authors have abandoned God's Word in their search of truth, and have thus missed the real answers for which they were searching. "Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (*Holy Bible*, Romans 1.21-22). True joy, lasting fulfillment, and enduring peace come only by Christ. As literature through the years acts as a barometer for society, so let each man test his own worldview, ideals, and life against the ever enduring truth of God's Word.

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