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The Need for Christian Authors in Mainstream Fiction

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Ashley Starnes

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Chapter I: Introduction

The heart of man is not compound of lies,
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,
his world-dominion by creative act:
not his to worship the great Artefact,
man, sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build
gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our right
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we're made.
-J. R. R. Tolkien

Once upon a time, stories were among the most common tools used to convey moral, philosophical, and religious ideas, being a form that encourages unbiased and critical examination. This tradition is an ancient one, dating back to the earliest civilizations. Looking back to works like Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica*, story was recognized as an effective and unique teaching method, and not only for children.¹

[I]n the past, stories were not only told for the entertainment and instruction of children; they performed that dual function for the adults as well. From the epics of Homer, Virgil, and Dante, and Milton to the verse romances, tales, and dreams of Spenser, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, premodern literature walked hand in hand with the art of storytelling. No hard and fast distinction was made between children's literature and adult literature, fairy tales and 'serious' fiction; all drank from the same narrative well. The creating and telling of stories could be as much a vehicle of truth as science or math or philosophy.²

¹ Wilbur Samuel Howell, "Aristotle and Horace on Rhetoric and Poetics," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 54, no. 4 (December 1968): 325-339. doi:10.1080/00335636809382908.

² Louis Markos, *On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 12-13.

Plato's dialogues also contain much teaching of this type. For example, in his cave allegory (versions of and allusions to which can be found in several modern stories from C. S. Lewis's *The Last Battle* to the 1999 film *The Matrix*), he tells a story in the form of dialogue that paints a vivid picture involving men who believe the shadows they have watched since birth are the "real" thing and know nothing of the people casting the shadows or the fire that creates them until he is shown the truth. The story is short but absorbing and arguably more impactful and memorable than if Plato had simply declared his point. Many other philosophers and teachers have taken a similar approach, including those who told stories and parables in the Bible. Jesus even chose to teach this way on many occasions, weaving parables and allowing his audience to ruminate on the meaning. His were not the long novels or interconnected mythologies referenced previously but those parables can be thought of as a smaller-scale form of these longer, more involved stories.

We have access to a striking amount of mythology and number of fables belonging to various ancient cultures, most obviously ancient Greek, Egyptian, Norse, along with other such well-preserved and expansive mythologies. Additionally, many of these stories were not overtly religious in content. However, they still managed to encourage their audience toward the values prized by those cultures and addressed all manner of insecurities and questions possessed by their readers.

A good example of this type is the still well-known story of Icarus from ancient Greece. To summarize the pivotal section of this tale, Icarus and his father, Daedalus, were imprisoned in a labyrinth and the former thought of a way to escape—homemade wings fashioned from wax and feathers. He warned Icarus not to fly too high because the sun would melt the wax and cause him to fall. While flying away, Icarus became arrogant and ignored his father's warning, flying

closer to the sun and suffering the consequences. The story itself is engaging and does not seek to explain itself outside of the plot; the reader is instead provided with a more visceral experience of the dangers of hubris (and secondarily of the failure to heed the advice of one's elders). It is profoundly effective as a short story without ever blatantly or explicitly stating that hubris is a sin or dangerous, and it works all the better for it because the story engages both the rational mind and the imagination.

Reading a story like this provides an emotional depth to the content that is difficult to create by simply stating that some trait or action is bad because of x, y, and z. The latter may be more concise and easily relayed, but it may not resonate with the recipient in the same way that a story can. Direct and concise ways of communicating still need to be employed, of course. However, in modern times, it seems that many Christians have focused on these more direct kinds of statements to the neglect of more imaginative forms of communication, not always dismissing them but giving them less attention and credence than they deserve.

For the past several hundred years, but especially in the twentieth century, Western culture has increasingly accepted a very limited view of the world, in which only the things that can be measured or experimentally verified are considered to be real or true. In this materialist view of the world, reason and imagination have little to do with each other.... The imagination can fail us; it can lead us into error. Some Christians have, on that basis, attempted to suppress the exercise of the imagination or the enjoyment of imaginative literature. But the attempt to suppress it is doomed to worse than failure, for if the imagination is neglected or abused, it will not die, but it will be stunted, and may grow twisted, distorting or diminishing the spiritual and mental health of the whole person.³

Many schoolteachers employ fiction as a teaching tool and find that students are more engaged as well as learn and retain more when stories are part of their curriculum, and these conclusions will be addressed in more detail in chapter two.⁴ With so many great teachers

³ Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017), 18-19, 150.

employing this method, it seems unfortunate that such a valuable resource has been either neglected or mishandled by so many Christian authors in the last few decades. Paul Elie describes Christian belief in recent fiction as “something between a dead language and a hangover.”⁵ He is primarily referring to the neglect of good fiction which contains openly Christian elements, but the assessment holds true for fiction of the more implicit kind as well. While there is no shortage of what is generally referred to as “Christian fiction,” it tends to lack the depth and the particular kind of apologetic quality that would appeal to non-Christians. Most Christian fiction not only identifies itself as such up front by publishing through a specifically Christian publishing company (and thereby being located in the Christian section of bookstores and online retailers), but it is also very direct about the Christian message within its pages, sometimes awkwardly so, using church terminology and often all but saying, “Here is the gospel message,” resulting in the genre being embraced almost entirely by those already professing the Christian faith.

There is obviously nothing wrong with Christians providing entertainment and edification for their fellow Christians, and some authors do this well—Frank Peretti, Francine Rivers, some of Stephen Lawhead’s more obviously Christian works fall into this category—making their work quite valuable to and enjoyable for Christian-leaning readers. However, these kinds of works have little apologetic or evangelistic value in that they are unlikely to be read by non-Christians and, if they are, they tend to lack the kind of content that such readers find compelling.

⁴ Karma Gayleg, “The Magic of Stories.” *Exchange* (19460406), no. 236 (July 2017): 40, accessed April 11, 2020. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ehh&AN=124070002&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁵ Paul Elie, “Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?” in *The New York Times*, December 19, 2012, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/23/books/review/has-fiction-lost-its-faith.html>.

Even the novels that try to avoid direct evangelistic messages tend to lack subtlety or depend so strongly on allegory that anyone who has even the most basic knowledge of Christianity can quickly recognize an evangelistic goal on the part of the author. This may not seem like a detriment at face value (and is not always so), but if one considers the kind of baggage that many people in secular American culture bring to the table when thinking about Christianity and its adherents, it is not difficult to imagine that many of those readers choose to abandon a story (especially an otherwise weak story) upon recognizing such aggressive evangelism. Even if they choose to stick with it, there is a good chance that they will at least adopt a defensive posture as they continue reading, resulting in the reader feeling pressured—whether the author intends such pressure or not—hardly encouraging critical engagement with any ideas that might be present in the text. So, this kind of brazen evangelism in fiction, while not intrinsically wrong, caters to a very specific group of like-minded or sympathetic readers, ending up preaching to the proverbial choir.

Skillfully written apologetic fiction⁶ on the other hand has the opportunity to reach a much wider audience and allow readers to think through and experience various ideas as they stand on their own, without baggage-laden language or thinly veiled attempts at conversion distracting them. This is more along the lines of the way Flannery O'Connor defined the Christian novel and Peter Kreeft includes her explanation in his own discussion: The Christian novel is not “a novel about Christianity, Christians, or a Christian world, but ‘one in which the

⁶ The more common term is “literary apologetics.” However, the word “literary” tends to carry a certain weight and involve specific features in academic and critical circles. Since I am here thinking of popular fiction as a medium, “apologetic fiction” seems to fit my meaning more clearly.

truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by'. Light 'looked along' instead of 'looked at.'"⁷

The beauty and effectiveness of fiction is found in this avoidance of direct arguments and references. The unique features found in fiction, when married to thoughtful and non-threatening apologetic elements, can create truly powerful opportunities to reach an otherwise difficult audience. "[A] story cannot *prove* or even *support* any idea. It cannot cite data, for in fiction the data can be invented to suit the author. If it gives detailed arguments or chains of reasoning, it ceases to be a story and becomes a disguised philosophical treatise. What a story *can* do is help us to *understand* an idea and help us see what it feels like to hold that idea."⁸ It allows readers to examine an idea from multiple angles and come to their own conclusions. The author supplies the content; the reader examines it. "The purpose of a storyteller is not to tell you how to think, but to give you questions to think upon."⁹ This approach works especially well for those who have difficulty hearing arguments or lectures with an open mind and for those who have a natural inclination toward stories.

Any genre of fiction is capable of this type of communication. However, it seems that fantasy and science fiction are particularly well-suited to it given their ability to remove readers from real-world environments and introduce them to familiar ideas in unfamiliar ways. This works especially well in a postmodern context wherein so much is based on subjective experience. If an author can provide that kind of experience through his story, the reader is that much more likely to seriously consider whatever ideas are connected to it. They may come to

⁷ Peter J. Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind the Lord of the Rings* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 65.

⁸ Richard Purtill, *Tolkien: Myth, Morality, Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 48.

⁹ Brandon Sanderson, *The Way of Kings* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, LLC, 2010), 806.

varying conclusions about those ideas, but at minimum it provides them the opportunity to think through the ideas more carefully than they might have without such a story serving as an intermediary.

So, what kind of works qualify as apologetic fiction? For the sake of this discussion, a distinction will be made between specifically Christian fiction and fiction that contains apologetic elements or undercurrents. Christian fiction will encompass those stories that are transparently Christian in content, either because Christianity is directly referenced in some way or is paralleled through obvious allegory or word play. This ranges from stories in which a character literally presents the gospel as a relevant plot point to those in which important Christian figures or gospel elements, while never technically named, are still obvious to any reader who is paying attention. One can pull many books off the shelf of the Christian fiction section of a bookstore to find examples of this kind. Apologetic fiction, on the other hand, will include some of the more subtle and creative treatments of Christian ideas and address broader questions, such as the existence of God or the problem of evil. Some stories will be more subtle than others and some even ride the fence between Christian fiction and apologetic fiction as the terms have here been defined. Some of C. S. Lewis' books straddle this fence—*Perelandra* and *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* being examples of this kind.

Tolkien and Lewis both serve well as examples of apologetic fiction partially because they cover multiple points on the apologetic fiction spectrum. At the far end sits Tolkien whose Christian content is diffused, an undercurrent that swells at various times in his story without ever breaking the surface and announcing itself. *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion* (with the possible exception of his creation myth, “The Music of the Ainur,” which

is basically a Neoplatonic reworking of the Genesis creation account¹⁰) all sit at this end. Some of Lewis's work sits at the other end, just to the side of the fence that separates apologetic fiction from Christian fiction, the concepts and symbols still floating beneath the surface but more visible to readers who are acquainted with them. This would include pieces like *The Magician's Nephew* and *Out of the Silent Planet*. Then somewhere in the middle of the apologetic side of the spectrum would settle something like *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* or *Till We Have Faces*.

In apologetic fiction, concepts are woven into the narrative so that the reader is forced to consider a question that may have never even been directly asked. It connects the question not only to the rational mind but also to the emotions and imagination, thereby side-stepping some of the preconceptions people tend to bring to a more academic presentation that might not involve these elements to the same degree because fiction just naturally lends itself to their treatment. This kind of holistic work can be difficult for authors to achieve, but some authors have proven that it is possible and is beautifully effective when done well.

Some Christians have picked up the storytelling torch and serve as brilliant examples of the power of fiction—especially speculative fiction—to immerse readers in the ideas and values of the Christian faith in a way that urges them to consider these ideas on their own merit. They immerse their readers in fantastical worlds, providing glimpses of Christian thought and emotion almost incidentally. More of this brand of apologetic fiction would be of great value, especially in the well-suited speculative fiction genre, in reaching out to readers who tend to be suspicious of or indifferent toward the Christian faith.

¹⁰ Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings: J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 128.

Chapter II: Fiction as a Teaching Tool

The story does what no theorem can quite do. It may not be “like real life” in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region.
-C. S. Lewis

Historical Use of Fiction as a Teaching Tool

Addressing everything from simple social niceties to serious moral issues, stories have long been recognized as having a particular ability to connect with the imagination and emotions, involving the whole person in the learning process instead of stopping short with the rational mind. Beginning in ancient settings with orally shared stories and continuing all the way to modern times with long written novels, stories have been a staple of the human experience and one of the preferred methods of teaching important life lessons and sharing philosophical ideas. In fact, it was not until the Enlightenment and its strong emphasis on reason that fiction was demoted to a certain degree, with some believing that “image and imagination simply clouded and obscured the pure dry knowledge” that Enlightenment thinkers stressed.¹¹

Before this shift, people were generally more cognizant and accepting of “the idea that fables, stories and myths were the medium that most completely embodied the deepest truths we need to know. Thus, most of the wisdom of the ancient world, both Judeo-Christian and Classical, was embodied in myth, story and song.”¹² An unfortunate number of Christians embraced this element of Enlightenment thinking, as well as a distrust of imagination coming out of Calvinism, too tightly and lost a valuable tool in the process. For these Christians, fiction

¹¹ Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

became unnecessary, perhaps even dangerous in its reliance on man's fallen imagination while reason was held up as a more dependable mode of instruction. Malcolm Guite, an author, teacher, and chaplain at Cambridge, recognizes the value of imagination and its connection to the Christian faith as well as the disservice done by those who would devalue it.

In what sense should we speak of the imagination as fallen? In some quarters, particularly in classical Calvinism, the imagination is seen as somehow more degraded and overthrown than the reason. Theology is therefore pursued and presented in highly syllogistic and logical form, as pared of imagery as possible. The problem with this approach is that it privileges one faculty over against another, as though reason were itself somehow less 'fallen' than imagination. This goes together with a misreading of Augustine's doctrine of illumination, which assumes that the Logos, as the 'light which lightens everyone who comes into the world', is to be identified with the light of pure reason rather than a direct intellectual apprehension or grasp of truth that involves imagination as well. The consequence of this has been a church culture that starved the imagination, was suspicious of mystery, but was unaware that, in deifying a logical and syllogistic method in theology, it was in fact creating its own idol.¹³

Some have begun to help remedy this imbalance, including Christian authors who are producing imaginative fiction with significant philosophical and moral content. This would include authors like Lewis and Tolkien, as well as more recent authors like Ted Dekker and Stephen Lawhead. Authors of this kind have leaned into fiction again and some have produced beautiful and thought-provoking works. However, there still exists a great deal of untapped potential waiting for imaginative Christian authors who see the opportunity to engage with readers whose imaginations are open and active, readers who might be moved by such an experience. The pre-Christian Lewis was just such a reader before he graduated to writing his own like works. Upon reading George MacDonald's *Phantastes*, Lewis found "an atmosphere that Lewis describes in *Surprised by Joy* as a 'bright shadow,' 'something too near to see, too plain to be understood,' something that 'seemed to have been always with me,'" ¹⁴ He defined the

¹³ Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, 10-11.

¹⁴ Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings*, 84.

quality as “Holiness” and found that it stayed with him long after he closed the book. “[R]ather than finding ordinary things dull by comparison, he discovered that its enchantment had spilled into the real world, ‘transforming all common things,’” and “baptizing” his imagination.¹⁵

Lewis and Tolkien became two of the best-known writers of this kind of implicitly Christian narrative. They recognized the impact that stories can have upon a person and, noting that they could not seem to find the kind of stories they wanted to read themselves, began writing their own pieces to fill the perceived gap.¹⁶ They imagined fantastic settings, characters, and plots and then allowed their Christian faith to flow naturally through their storytelling rather than consciously addressing it as a concrete or explicit feature of their writing. This approach was and continues to be incredibly effective in encouraging readers to think through their worldviews. This effect is even consciously recognized by some readers as they immerse themselves in these stories. Ralph C. Wood records this of his students: “Many of my students have confessed that they feel ‘clean’ after reading *The Lord of the Rings*. They refer not chiefly to the book’s avoidance of decadent sex but, far more significantly, to its bracing moral power: its power to lift them out of the small-minded obsessions of the moment and into the perennial concerns of ethical and spiritual life.”¹⁷ This circles back to thoughtful fiction’s striking ability to encourage critical, holistic engagement, to pull someone willingly into deeply processing an idea.

It is exceedingly difficult to develop ideas, plots, and characters naturally and thoroughly when the author has conscious ulterior motives in each step of their fictional journey. If Tolkien, for example, had been actively attempting to evangelize his readers in *The Lord of the Rings*, his

¹⁵ Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings*, 84.

¹⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, Letter 159 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 209.

¹⁷ Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 75-76.

story would have been far less interesting, and he would not have been able to do half of the things he did with the story. Imagine for a moment that Tolkien had decided that Frodo would be *the Christ figure* in his story. Not only would Frodo have been a completely different person, but the entirety of the story would have had to change around him. And it likely would have been in a way that would not have been nearly as absorbing because it would result in a lack of suspense regarding his actions and choices. Nor could the reader have identified very strongly with him, admire him certainly but not identify personally. Even non-Christians would recognize on some level that Frodo could not possibly fail in any significant way in his mission. Perhaps the most dramatically different example would be that, even if all the characters made it to the end in much the same way, Frodo *could not* have failed to destroy the One Ring and the reader would know this, if not consciously then intuitively. There would be no shock, no intellectual or emotional examination of what that failure suggests and thus nothing to draw from it other than to simply recognize him as the story's Christ figure.

Yet, there is so much more to consider in that section of text, so much more that can be done with a story when its author focuses on the story itself rather than actively attempting to draw religious parallels. Readers can engage more fully when the author is openly feeding their imaginations, allowing the more subtle ideas to flow alongside and out of the characters' journeys. This kind of organic and nuanced storytelling gives readers the credit due them and avoids making them feel as though the author is actively guiding them toward a specific conclusion. Tolkien's careful writing of Frodo illustrates this well and the point holds for most fictional characters and scenarios.

[There is] an important difference between Frodo and Christ. Frodo is no mere allegorical stand-in, but a rounded character in his own right. On the very brink of success, his free will having taken him as far as it can, he renounces the quest and claims the Ring for his own. It becomes clear that his ability to cast it away has been eroded by the task of

bearing it so far. His assertion of ownership over the Ring signifies the loss of his self-possession, and the words he uses betray this: he says, ‘I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The ring is mine.’

Note that he does not say, ‘I choose...I do,’ but rather “I do not choose...I will not do.’ Behind this choice of words lies a great weight of tradition—indeed, a whole theory of ethics. The Christian reader may discern an echo of St. Paul’s words: ‘I can will what is right, but I cannot do it’ (Rom. 7:18-19). What is being suggested is that ethics, or right behavior, hinges on *what we have the power to do*. Frodo sees himself as choosing—choosing to claim the Ring. But in fact he has lost the power not to claim it. Christian ethics is about attaining freedom, which does not mean the freedom to do whatever we want but rather the *power to do the right thing*.

Tolkien wrote of Frodo’s failure that it reflected the fact that the power of Evil in the world cannot, in the end, be defeated by us on our own, however ‘good’ we may try to be. By implicitly denying the heresy of Pelagianism (the idea that we can become good entirely by our own power), Tolkien is simply being realistic about our situation in a fallen world. This is not pessimism, however; for while we cannot save ourselves, *we can yet be saved*.¹⁸

In this way, subtlety and complexity can sometimes do a kind of heavy lifting that would be difficult with a more overt style of fiction.

The overt approach in Christian fiction is only effective insofar as non-Christians read the works *and* do so without carrying any significant baggage into it, the latter being a rare feat in modern culture. The authors who follow this route have reintegrated imagination but are often more heavy-handed in their application of Christian themes and ideas than most non-Christians (and even many Christians) will tolerate. The works sometimes take on a condescending or patronizing tone rather than one of speculation, the author laying out relevant concepts in a direct form within the story. This is usually, at best, unnecessary or redundant and, at worst, a tragic distraction or deal-breaker to readers who are sensitive to feeling led. This is not to say that these stories lack an audience, or value for that matter. They can be edifying and entertaining to some Christians. The point is that their audience is highly unlikely to include non-Christians, resulting

¹⁸ Stratford Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2012), 56.

in a general lack of *apologetic* value. This kind of writing would include such works as Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness* and Francine Rivers' *The Last Sin Eater*.

The transparent style of some of these authors appears to be borne of noble intentions. There are those authors (and readers for that matter) who feel that being more direct about the religious elements in a story is, in a sense, more honest than the subtlety employed by others. There are other authors who are actively attempting to evangelize, and still others whose straightforwardness is simply the way that their imaginations work, making it entirely unintentional and simply part of their style. The first reason, while admirable in itself, is a little misguided and will be addressed more directly in chapter four. The second is a worthy goal and can work when the stories reach their intended audience, and the third is no problem at all, really, so long as the author is happy with the audience they attract. The major question here becomes whether or not they are, indeed, attracting their desired audience. Some certainly are. Others may not be.

As a rule, readers want to come to their own conclusions about things, especially things that they see as significant, and giving them the space to do that within a story's framework is likely to yield better results than holding their hand through it. This is not to say that the author's view should not come through; of course, it should. In fact, it is very difficult (if not impossible) to write a complex story and not give some indication of one's relevant views. However, in writing for most non-Christians as well as Christians who prefer more subtle treatments, it may be more effective for these to show up as part of the story itself—to be seen in characters' attitudes and experiences or in shifts of tone, rather than as something akin to an aside. In fact, this was one of Tolkien's major objections to Arthurian legend—it was openly Christian. "Tolkien believed that while myth and fairy tale must reflect religious truth, they must do so

subtly, never depicting religion as it appears in ‘the known form of the primary “real” world.’”¹⁹ Of course, there will be some readers who walk away from a well-crafted story without giving it the thought it deserves. However, that is a commentary on the type of reader they are, not on the effectiveness of said story. You cannot force people to be thoughtful, but you can provide thoughtful people with material to explore and many will do just that when presented with an immersive and well-crafted story.

The result of prioritizing reason over imagination (even in fictional realms) instead of viewing them as complementary faculties has been that Christian thought is largely absent in the domain of contemporary fiction. There is an ongoing, vast, and profound discussion of morality, of philosophy, of worldviews going on but with which Christians are largely failing to engage without even realizing it. Actually, many non-Christian authors appear to possess a firmer grasp of how this kind of writing works than some of their Christian counterparts. Orson Scott Card, for example, points out:

There's always moral instruction whether the writer inserts it deliberately or not. The least effective moral instruction in fiction is that which is consciously inserted. Partly because it won't reflect the storyteller's true beliefs, it will only reflect what he BELIEVES he believes, or what he thinks he should believe or what he's been persuaded of. But when you write without deliberately expressing moral teachings, the morals that show up are the ones you actually live by. The beliefs that you don't even think to question, that you don't even notice-- those will show up. And that tells much more truth about what you believe than your deliberate moral machinations.²⁰

There is a need to recognize that non-Christians have no reason to seek out “Christian fiction” and largely do not do so. Expressly Christian fiction serves a purpose, but it is not so much to reach non-Christians as to edify and entertain those who already basically agree with

¹⁹ Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings*, 125.

²⁰ Scott Nicholson, "CARD'S GAME: An Interview with Orson Scott Card" (1998).

Christian teachings. Even Christian authors whose works might be enjoyed by a secular audience—think Stephen Lawhead’s *Bright Empires* series or Ted Dekker’s *Circle* series—are somewhat handicapped by the Christian fiction label and by having their books published through specifically Christian publishing houses because it lands their books squarely on the Christian fiction shelf of both online and brick and mortar stores. This is very convenient for Christian readers but, to most non-Christians, searching out the Christian fiction section would seem as nonsensical as a vegetarian seeking out a video on how to cook the perfect steak (and for some just as offensive).

This publishing question is a difficult one since it is not as though publishers are going to suddenly change the kinds of books they accept. Perhaps Christians who can and want to write in a more subtle or implicit style should seek to publish through secular publishing houses or even self-publish, which is becoming more and more popular and affordable among authors and gaining wider readership thanks to digital books. The authors who desire to stick to Christian publishers while writing in this style may have a more difficult time, but the problem does not seem insurmountable. It may require more time and extra (or better) training but a Christian publisher has every reason to embrace a book that is exceptionally written, even if it is more subtly Christian than most of their other works, so long as there is nothing in it that would offend Christian sensibilities. In fact, enough books of this kind and caliber might begin to bridge the gap between overtly religious fiction and popular secular fiction.

In the attempt for Christian authors to interact with people of other views, fiction can and should be a wonderful kind of neutral ground, thought-provoking but non-threatening, something that does not preach religion but may move people toward it.²¹ Mark O’Connell says of Christian

²¹ Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring*, 177.

writer Marilynne Robinson: “She makes an atheist reader like myself capable of identifying with the sense of a fallen world that is filled with pain and sadness but also suffused with divine grace.”²² This is the goal. The storyteller’s job is to “creep past the ‘watchful dragons’ that guard the conscious reason that excludes these things as unbelievable; to open the back door of the heart when the front door of the mind is locked; to appeal to the wiser, deeper, unconscious mind, what Jung called the ‘collective unconscious.’”²³ Some storytellers will have more success than others at opening that back door but it seems worth the effort if they succeed at all.

Fiction’s Effectiveness as a Teaching Tool

What makes good fiction so valuable as a teaching tool? What are its distinctive accomplishments? What is the relationship between reason and imagination? One might be tempted to believe that anything worth learning can be most effectively learned through more direct means—reasoned arguments and simple memorization—but there are good reasons to believe otherwise. Stories possess unique features that allow them to engage the whole person and encourage ideas to settle deeply in the mind and heart. They excite both the reason and the imagination “not because they lay out coherent systems of effects, nor because reading them will make you or me behave better now, or tomorrow, or next week; but because this is one of the essential ways by which we humans reflect on our own possibilities—and failures.”²⁴

²² Mark O’Connell, “The First Church of Marilynne Robinson,” *The New Yorker* (May 30, 2012), accessed April 12, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-first-church-of-marilynne-robinson>.

²³ Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien*, 48.

²⁴ Mark Kingwell, “The Ethics of Ethics and Literature.” *World Literature Today* 88, no. 5 (September 2014): 26 (accessed August 13, 2018). <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=97558497&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

They have the ability to provide both clarity and complexity in moral and ethical issues and to provide emotional context for just about any idea, including what Rudolph Otto referred to as the numinous (a concept that is challenging to properly convey even in story form much less through simple description but which is deeply relevant to spiritual experience). This is an experience of the “wholly other” that involves a blend of impressions—the fearful, the miraculous, the sublime, the uncomprehended.²⁵

Reason and imagination are the two innate faculties that allow us to learn, and the two are inextricable and unavoidable, regardless of any attempt to prioritize one over the other. Imagination qualifies as a cognitive function no less than reason, a fact recognized by many famous thinkers including Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. C. S. Lewis went as far as to call imagination “the organ of meaning” and stated that imagination “is not the cause of truth, but its condition.”²⁶

Thus, imagination is related to reason, and necessarily so; not related in the way that the two sides of a coin are related to each other, but related in the way that a building’s foundation is related to the structure that is built upon it. Reason is dependent on imagination...

[I]magination is constantly at work in everyone, whether we realize it or not. It is not possible to have even a minimal grasp of propositional knowledge without the effective working of the faculty of imagination. However, as a robust mode of knowing, imagination has been cut off from reason and neglected as a means of communicating truth.... Western culture has increasingly accepted a very limited view of the world, in which only the things that can be measured or experimentally verified are considered to be real or true.²⁷

²⁵ Richard L. Sturch, “Fantasy and Apologetics,” *Vox Evangelica* 14 (1984): 69, access April 12, 2020, https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol14/fantasy_sturch.pdf

²⁶ Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith*, 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

This limited, materialist view of the world has resulted in a marked neglect of imagination and the kind of teaching it can accomplish, specifically in terms of more abstract topics like ethics and morality, and it leaves many people to philosophize about important and complex issues without ever having experienced the uniquely personal but panoramic perspective that well-crafted stories can provide. “[F]iction enhances the application of ethical theories by portraying moral issues in ways that make awareness of ethical situations more clear.... Clearer awareness often requires a richer appreciation of how something affects multiple individuals in multiple contexts, and this appreciation can be acquired effectively by reading fictional stories....”²⁸

Those who have studied the impact of storytelling on learning have found that “stories are the most profoundly social form of human interaction, communication and learning, and also aid with storing, retrieving and conveying information.”²⁹ These are well-established advantages of employing stories—whether true or fictional—as a teaching tool, even before formal research was done on the subject, and to ignore that seems irresponsible or, at least, misguided. Direct reason has its vital and rightful place but is lacking something if what it communicates fails to impact its recipients. Imagination can fill that gap when not unjustly devalued. After all, imagination is no less a part of the *imago Dei* than reason: “[O]ur fallen imagination is shadowed and finite, but like reason it is also, under God’s grace, illuminating and redemptive. Imagination informs reason and is in turn informed by it.”³⁰

²⁸ David Swanson, “Fictional Stories with Ethical Content: Guidelines for Using Stories to Improve Ethical Behavior.” *Ethics & Behavior* 26, no. 7 (October 2016): 546, accessed April 11, 2020. doi:10.1080/10508422.2015.1081095.

²⁹ Gayleg, “The Magic of Stories,” 40.

³⁰ Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, 15.

So, what is it about stories that make them such effective teachers? The answer lies in their holistic nature. A good story speaks to the whole person—the imagination engaging the rational mind as well as the emotions, sometimes even (indirectly) the physical body if the author manages to take the reader far enough, causing sensations such as that punch-to-the-gut moment when you are blindsided by a well-done twist. This multifaceted approach allows readers to experience an idea rather than simply encountering it at the intellectual level.

An effective story makes us feel—that emotion word—that we are experiencing something ourselves, not just hearing a report on something—because we are. At the least we are witnesses and often we find ourselves participants. The story is not over or past—no matter how long ago the setting or in what tense it is told—because we are experiencing it in real time as we read or listen.... [S]tories engage us because they make an appeal to every part of us: emotions, intellect, body, and will. And they do so not atomistically but holistically. An appeal to the emotions is, at the same time, an appeal to the intellect, with a bodily response and a call to the will often not far behind.³¹

This differs significantly from a simple factual discourse which might begin and end with a direct rational assessment. Both methods are valuable but tend to vary in their effectiveness depending on their audience and the information being relayed.

When it comes to ideas that really affect the world and the people in it, adding a healthy dose of imagination to interact with the rational mind can be a great help in absorbing their depth and breadth. Imagine attempting to convince someone, in a way that has a lasting impact on their view and behavior, that faithfulness in marriage is the correct and desirable route without ever appealing to emotion. You can point out that God commands it, argue that it best serves the needs of the individuals involved and perhaps even society at large, maybe point out that it

³¹ Daniel Taylor, "Didn't Our Hearts Burn Within Us?: The Use and Abuse of Emotion in Storytelling," *Christian Scholars Review Fall 2016* (October 1, 2016): 28, accessed August 13, 2018, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=33h&AN=33h-8F36889B-99CC765B&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

connects directly to other positions they have already adopted such as the importance of following through on agreements, perhaps even indicate the practical consequences of infidelity. Adding imagination to the scenario fills in the blanks. With it they can involve their imagination in what the experience of a faithful marriage would be like as well as imagine the pain caused if they choose the opposite path.

This is a rather simplistic example, but it provides a sense of imagination's role in the formation of belief. An idea becomes a part of the whole person instead of being limited solely to the rational mind. This is not to say that they could not adopt the desired position without involving the imagination, but it would not reach as deeply as it would by including emotional context and encouraging empathy. Stories can be wonderful at providing this emotional dimension, allowing readers to experience the traumas and the eucatastrophes that teach important lessons without yet having met their equivalent in the real world. Eucatastrophe in particular is something that good fiction (especially fantasy) is able to communicate. This was Tolkien's word for the good catastrophe or happy ending in story, and he felt strongly about its value, insisting that eucatastrophe is neither "escapist" nor "fugitive."

In its fairy-tale³²—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies...universal final defeat and in so far as is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.³³

³² References to "fairy tales" or "fairy stories" in this paper are being used synonymously with fantasy and science fiction for the most part because they are of the same kind. Lewis and Tolkien used the term somewhat loosely. In a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis called *The Hobbit* a fairy tale, and Tolkien doubted that there could be a precise definition of fairy stories in "On Fairy Stories," because what they share is a kind of "Magic" indescribability. So, while they would not necessarily include all stories now labeled fantasy or science fiction as fairy stories, there would be significant enough overlap to justify treating them all together here.

³³ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (HarperCollins, 2001), 69.

Readers get to have these experiences (eucatastrophes, dyscatastrophes, and the full spectrum in between) in a context that allows them to really focus on them, and on the ideas behind the experiences, rather than needing to focus on actively reacting to the events as would be required in a real-world scenario. The more a story leans into the imagination, the more the emotional part of the mind is engaged.

Stories are inherently didactic. All the good and great ones want to teach us something.... But any wisdom or teaching or argument or insight in a work of art must grow out of rather than be imposed on the materials at hand. It is fine, even desirable, for a story to be didactic, but it must not feel so. If it does, our emotions flee.³⁴

This is how human beings are wired. We consist of both intellect and emotion and learn best when utilizing both. Lectures and other direct forms of learning can use both and will generally lean toward reason on the continuum between reason and imagination, while story will lean toward the other. This is something at which stories excel, whether those stories happen to us or are simply communicated to us.

To stop at story would be a mistake because more direct communication is often needed, particularly in the case of more complex topics; people need to discuss and seek more direct answers to a variety of questions and issues. Stories, however, serve well as both starting points and supplementary material, raising questions as well as hinting at and illustrating possible answers and solutions. Peter Kreeft points out that God himself sees the value of teaching through story. "God must have known that literature is a more effective teacher..., for when he chose to teach mankind its most important theological and moral lessons, He did so not primarily through abstract eternal truths but through historical events, through acts. The Bible is primarily literature, not philosophy; ...narrative, not explanation."³⁵ There are plenty of examples in the

³⁴ Daniel Taylor, "Didn't Our Hearts Burn Within Us?" 41.

³⁵ Kreeft, *Philosophy of Tolkien*, 21.

Bible of more direct teaching as well and the observation above may be a bit of an overstatement, particularly if the implication is that narrative is *always* a better teacher, but it is certainly noteworthy that so much of the Bible was provided in a narrative form, indicating its value as a teaching tool.

Christians should be well aware of the power stories can have in changing the mind and heart, having myriad examples of parables and tales from Scripture in addition to other sources.

[M]uch of the alienation and confusion of values in our culture results from approaching knowledge solely through reason. We tend to teach just the facts, not the meaningful context, the web of truth, in which they hang. The result has been a fragmentation of culture and a loss of community. In the past, meaning has been drawn from the myths and rituals of a culture. But our pseudoscientific arrogance has caused us to relegate our mythology, as Tolkien says, 'to the "nursery," as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the play-room.' Reason may answer the question 'What?' but only imagination can answer the question 'Why?' The post-industrial assumption that humankind needs only cold, hard facts and scientific reason is culturally disastrous and psychologically naïve.

... If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit some of the greatest educational failures were those lessons one found in Sunday school, or in similar settings, where the 'Thou shalt' and especially the 'Thou shalt not' were didactically drummed into our heads. There was rarely an imaginative, meaningful context, except when stories were told, *not* interpreted.³⁶

Employing fiction provides that imaginative context. It encourages critical thinking as well as profound feeling, teaching in a compelling way that possesses its own unique approach and blend of the rational and emotional. Instead of adopting the attitude that reason should be idolized, and imagination neglected (an attitude that is intrinsically non-Christian) believers should be embracing imagination alongside reason as dual faculties of the *imago Dei*.

³⁶ James Prothero, "Fantasy, Science Fiction, and the Teaching of Values." *English Journal* 79, no. 3 (March 1990): 33, accessed April 12, 2020, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/237287140?accountid=12085>.

Providing Reference for Difficult Concepts

Some ideas are easier to communicate than others, and this is especially true when the idea involves a unique emotional element. Well-written fiction provides one of the best ways of encountering these, being something more than a rational explanation by giving emotional reference to those who have no personal experience with the ideas (and giving those who do a refresher). Everyone knows what emotions like anger, fear, and excitement feel like to at least some degree and can sufficiently imagine what it would be like to intensify those feelings, but what of more obscure or complex experiences? Rational explanations and tangential emotional referents for these fall far short of letting a reader know what it would really be like to experience them, but fiction can navigate around this difficulty.

Perhaps the best example to use in illustrating this is what Rudolph Otto, in his treatise on the concept of the holy, referred to as the numinous, the wholly other. This is the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the experience of a thing simultaneously fearful and captivating.³⁷ “The numinous is not a projection of something *inside* the personality; it comes from a radically different *beyond*.”³⁸ It involves emotion but is more than that, which means that prior internal emotional references can only get someone so close to the real sense of it.

Obviously, an actual experience of the numinous is infinitely preferable to any attempt to awkwardly stitch the relevant pieces together, the latter being a bit like imagining what it would be like to feel affection by combining contentment and loyalty; it lacks something substantial. In fiction, though, the best authors can evoke this sense in readers through their fictional

³⁷ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 31.

³⁸ Jesse J. Thomas, “From Joy to Joy: C. S. Lewis and the Numinous,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (2000): 111, accessed April 12, 2020. <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001278335&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

landscapes, providing a meaningful personal experience of it even though that experience occurs outside of a real-world setting. In fact, one could argue that it is easier to meet the numinous in fiction than in reality, first because we tend to be more attentive to such things as readers and second, because of its nature, we are less likely to happen across in daily life. Having experienced it through fiction, though, it becomes more readily recognizable when we do meet it in the real world. The fictional experience can point us toward its reality.

Lewis and Tolkien both had an obvious understanding of and draw toward the numinous, and this is recognizable in their fiction. Tolkien's Middle-Earth seems to possess a constant undercurrent of the numinous which he brings to the forefront in passages like the fellowship's visit to Lothlorien. Lewis's style is to meet the numinous more abruptly as readers encounter it in places like the creation of Narnia in *The Magician's Nephew* and in *The Last Battle's* apocalyptic events. *Till We Have Faces* provides Lewis's most expansive and effective portrayals of the numinous, though, pulling readers into it in multiple places. Perhaps the most poignant example comes near the end of the story in Orual's dream about Psyche in which the reader sees that, while both Orual and Psyche had experienced the *tremendum* element of the numinous, Psyche alone had experienced the *fascinans* element that allowed her to respond appropriately. Orual needed that experience before she could move forward.

Here the reader joins Orual as both spectator and participant in a ritualized re-enactment of the Psyche myth, which in Lewis's hands becomes a redemption story much like the story of Parsifal or Galahad discovering the Grail—and much like the story of Christ's Passion. Orual is a seeker who has had to endure purgation and suffering in order to confront the numinous event at last...³⁹

³⁹ Ed Chapman, "Images of the Numinous in T.H. White and C. S. Lewis," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 4 : No. 4 , Article 1 (1977): 8, accessed April 12, 2020, <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol4/iss4/1>.

Orual's dream could have been simplified or summarized, as could Tolkien's moving descriptions of Lothlorien or the vivid imagery of creation in *The Magician's Nephew*, but to little effect. It is Lewis's artful description of the fictional event that makes the numinous accessible to the reader. The tone, the detail, the depth, the emotional element all come together to impact readers on an additional level, to pull them into the experience and invite them to encounter the numinous. This kind of apologetic fiction, especially in the oft denigrated genre of speculative fiction, should be embraced by authors who are interested in communicating their worldviews.

Chapter III: Fantasy and Science Fiction's Unique Suitability to Apologetics

Creative fantasy, because it is mainly trying to do something else (make something new), may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds. The gems all turn into flowers or flames, and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you.⁴⁰

-J. R. R. Tolkien

The Unfounded Prejudice against Science Fiction and Fantasy

All genres of fiction can be apologetic because they can all call on the imagination to raise the same kinds of relevant questions and issues. However, fantasy and science fiction, which may be referred to jointly as speculative fiction, are particularly well suited to the apologetic task and yet are the kind of fiction most often dismissed. There exists a significant percentage of the population which views speculative fiction as childish, escapist, somehow less-than realistic fiction, or even dangerous, suggesting that it encourages its readers to break from reality. There are pieces of truth in this but not enough to justify the derisive attitude, an attitude which should be corrected so that this kind of apologetic fiction may reach its full potential.

There are, of course, those who misuse speculative fiction. However, the same is true for other genres and, ultimately, for anything in life that may be used as a distraction. The dismissal of fantasy and science fiction by these people “is purely a prejudice, and prejudice is selective. That’s why we teach *Beowulf* or ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ without blinking, but we associate contemporary fantasy and science fiction with sword-and-sorcery aficionados and wide-eyed Trekkies.”⁴¹ When this bias is rejected and its misunderstandings remedied, it

⁴⁰ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics* (HarperCollins, 2006), 147.

⁴¹ James Prothero, *Fantasy, Science Fiction, and the Teaching of Values*, 32.

becomes obvious that “science fiction and fantasy can be taken quite as seriously as a Hemingway novel or an Eliot poem.”⁴²

Lewis and Tolkien both recognized this ill-deserved prejudice and were vocal about their disagreement with it. Tolkien remarks that “fairy-stories...have been relegated to the ‘nursery’, as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the playroom, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused,”⁴³ and goes on to point out that the association of fantasy with children is nothing more than a fad. W. H. Auden had a similar opinion. “There are good books which are only for adults, because their comprehension presupposes adult experiences, but there are no good books which are only for children.”⁴⁴ Adults have enjoyed fantasy for as long as stories have been around and children are no more naturally fond of them than adults, the adults rejecting them for no other reason than a false grasp of maturity.⁴⁵ We are prone to think of children as being unique in their sometimes overzealous desire to achieve maturity, but adults are perfectly capable of the same error, throwing away intrinsically good things like imagination and play for the sake of “behaving like an adult.” When, in reality, “[f]airy tales are “the entirely reasonable things.... Compared with them religion and rationalism are both abnormal, though religion is abnormally right and rationalism abnormally wrong. Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense.”⁴⁶

Regarding the charge that speculative fiction is somehow misleading, Lewis goes as far as to turn this objection back on the critics, explaining how he believes that realistic stories are

⁴² James Prothero, *Fantasy, Science Fiction, and the Teaching of Values*, 32.

⁴³ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 130.

⁴⁴ W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords* (New York: Random House, 1973), 291.

⁴⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 130.

⁴⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 44.

more likely to create false beliefs and expectations in people than fantasy, and his reasoning is difficult to ignore.

I never expected the real world to be like the fairy tales. I think that I did expect school to be like the school stories. The fantasies did not deceive me: the school stories did. All stories in which children have adventures and successes which are possible, in the sense that they do not break the laws of nature, but almost infinitely improbable, are in more danger than the fairy tales of raising false expectations.

... We long to go through the looking glass, to reach fairy land. We also long to be the immensely popular and successful schoolboy or schoolgirl, or the lucky boy or girl who discovers the spy's plot or rides the horse that none of the cowboys can manage. But the two longings are very different. The second, especially when directed on something so close as school life, is ravenous and deadly serious. Its fulfilment on the level of imagination is in very truth compensatory: we run to it from the disappointments and humiliations of the real world: it sends us back to the real world undivinely discontented. For it is all flattery to the ego. The pleasure consists in picturing oneself the object of admiration. The other longing, that for fairy land, is very different. In a sense a child does not long for fairy land as a boy longs to be the hero of the first eleven. Does anyone suppose that he really and prosaically longs for all the dangers and discomforts of a fairy tale?—really wants dragons in contemporary England? It is not so. It would be much truer to say that fairy land arouses a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods; the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted. This is a special kind of longing. The boy reading the school story of the type I have in mind desires success and is unhappy (once the book is over) because he can't get it: the boy reading the fairy tale desires and is happy in the very fact of desiring. For his mind has not been concentrated on himself, as it often is in the more realistic story.

I do not mean that school stories for boys and girls ought not to be written. I am only saying that they are far more liable to become 'fantasies' in the clinical sense than fantastic stories are. And this distinction holds for adult reading too. The dangerous fantasy is always superficially realistic. The real victim of wishful reverie does not batten on the *Odyssey*, *The Tempest*, or *The Worm Ouroboros*: he (or she) prefers stories about millionaires, irresistible beauties, posh hotels, palm beaches and bedroom scenes—things that really might happen, that ought to happen, that would have happened if the reader had had a fair chance. For, as I say, there are two kinds of longing. The one is an *askesis*, a spiritual exercise, and the other is a disease.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," In *Of Other Worlds*, ed. by Walter Hooper (28-30).

This is an excellent point and one that is not necessarily obvious upon a superficial consideration of the issue; realistic fiction is more prone to be misleading or negatively escapist than fantasy and science fiction because its realism is shallow (or at least questionably mixed with unrealistic elements).

The objection seems to be another example of giving one side too much credit and the other too little. People can tell, assuming there is no underlying psychological disorder, the difference between the real world and a fantasy world. It is not always so easy to see how ostensibly realistic fiction could diverge in unhealthy ways from the real world and serve as poor examples for readers to follow. As Samuel Johnson points out,

Many writers, for the sake of following nature, so mingle good and bad qualities in their principal personages, that they are both equally conspicuous; and as we accompany them through their adventures with delight, and are led by degrees to interest ourselves in their favour, we lose the abhorrence of their faults, because they do not hinder our pleasure, or, perhaps, regard them with some kindness for being united with so much merit.⁴⁸

So, the inherent danger of speculative fiction is no more or less than that of its realistic counterpart and, in a pinch, could even be considered the less dangerous of the two.

Lewis and Tolkien also discussed with one another the accusation that speculative fiction is escapist. Both authors take issue with people who demand constant attention to the here and now: “I never fully understood it till my friend Professor Tolkien asked me the very simple question, ‘What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?’ and gave the obvious answer: jailers.”⁴⁹ These men recognized the value of

⁴⁸ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, No. 4. (31 March 1750), accessed April 12, 2020, <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/johnson.rambler.html>

⁴⁹ C. S. Lewis, “On Science Fiction,” In *Of Other Worlds*, ed. by Walter Hooper, 59-73 (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1975), 67.

positive escape and differentiated between it and a more toxic activity that detractors call by the same name.

I have claimed that escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which 'Escape' is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all. In what the misusers of Escape are fond of Calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic. In real life it is difficult to blame it, unless it fails; in criticism it would seem to be the worse the better it succeeds. Evidently we are faced by a misuse of words, and also by a confusion of thought. Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter."⁵⁰

Tolkien's language here may strike some as hyperbolic, but his point is valid. The reader of fantasy (or science fiction) is not abandoning the real world by mentally visiting another. If anything, one could argue that this kind of temporary escape provides the relief needed to come back to reality more emotionally centered and with fresh eyes, having experienced truth from a new angle. It is really no different from any kind of hobby in which one may participate—golf, gardening, guitar—they all provide an escape, and a healthy one when enjoyed appropriately. All kinds of reading are an escape, just to different places.⁵¹

The peculiar idea that reading realistic fiction is somehow less escapist than reading speculative fiction is likewise untenable because, however much the setting complies with the real world, the story is still fabricated. There is no way to evade that fact unless one abandons fiction altogether (and some do but that will be addressed in the next chapter). Short of such complete rejection, speculative fiction must be allowed to sit with its realistic sibling and all of

⁵⁰ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 147-148.

⁵¹ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 68.

the other healthy ways that people briefly escape from the stress of the real world. One might even argue that fantasy and science fiction are one of the most productive of these activities since well-written specimens can simultaneously address significant real-world issues while still providing that effective escape to magical fantasy worlds with their numinous experiences or speculative visions of the future with accompanying moral and ethical dilemmas.

Setting Allows Removal of Cultural and Philosophical Baggage

The fantasy and science fiction genres also possess an inherent apologetic advantage in addition to those fundamental strengths belonging to fiction as a whole. This advantage can be found in precisely the feature that causes many to dismiss them as childish or frivolous—the fact that the stories’ settings are significantly different from the “real world.” Far from being a liability, this is what allows readers to examine (or reexamine) ideas with which they are too familiar, or which carry too much emotional baggage or cultural bias. For example, if an author addresses something like racism in a realistic story, it must be addressed in terms of skin color and include real-world information (e.g. actual stereotypes and opinions) because it is too close to us. Readers know what it looks like in the real world, know the details of it, and can carry too much emotional baggage to approach it without a strong and immediate bias.

In speculative fiction, though, an author can come at the subject from a different angle and allow readers to approach it almost as if they had no prior context for it. Take Brandon Sanderson’s *Stormlight Archive*. Racism is an important running theme in the series, but it is set in an unfamiliar world and one of the physical traits used to separate people is eye color rather than skin color, complete with a caste system used to justify the subjugation of one to the other and with characters of varying opinions on all sides. J. K. Rowling addresses the same issue in a

more simplified manner in the *Harry Potter* series with the relationship between purebloods, half-bloods, and muggle-borns. We see the effect of it on characters we know and that fosters empathy and outrage. In fact, the first time the popular slur for muggle-borns comes up, there is nearly a large-scale brawl and the character at whom the slur was directed did not even know what it meant yet. The reaction instead came from characters around her taking offence on her behalf.⁵² Readers are invited to process these situations as if they are being introduced to the underlying issue for the first time, something Viktor Shklovsky and others since have called “defamiliarization.”⁵³ They begin to develop indignation and question the logic and morality of that society’s racism alongside the characters and without ever needing to reference its real-world counterparts. Readers will draw out parallels, of course, whether consciously or unconsciously, but it provides a space in which to examine the idea from all sides without immediately getting defensive or defaulting to a particular side.

In addition to moral and ethical concerns, other, more directly apologetic, topics can be given imaginative treatment as well. To use the above examples again, Sanderson’s *Stormlight Archive* contains its own religion, complete with devout clergy, atheists, agnostics, and various other positions on the spectrum, and there are several intelligent discussions between these characters that bring up the question of God’s existence and what that existence (or lack thereof) could mean. The author’s Mormon faith is not apparent to the reader. Nor does he choose a character and make him or her obviously right from the get-go; there are no straw men to be torn down with simplistic comments. The devout believer has reasons for his belief and the self-

⁵² J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1999), 112.

⁵³ “Betraying Reality: Defamiliarization’s Effect on Fantasy Worlds.” *Caietele Echinox* 31 (December 2016): 1–8. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=119764088&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

professed heretic has hers and the result is a story that strongly encourages the reader to examine these issues and pull them into the real world. Rowling's world is less direct in its discussion of religion but brings up issues like the nature of evil and the desire for immortality on multiple occasions, questioning the misguided desire for physical immortality and considering elements of life after death.

Speculative fiction is also an effective tool for examining simpler and more basic concepts, from the appreciation of nature to a sense of the supernatural.

[Science fiction and fantasy] can help us see through other eyes; reveal possibilities outside the range of our limited, workaday lives; and satisfy deep-seated human desires to “hold communion with other living things” and to encounter true “otherness.” Both realist literature and works of fantasy are able to excite our imaginations. But in giving us “sensations we never had before” and enlarging “our range of possible experience,” fantasy is indisputably superior to realist literature.... How does fantasy help us rediscover wonder and delight in “the other”? It does so by helping us pierce what Tolkien calls the “drab blur of triteness and familiarity.” By juxtaposing the enchanted with the familiar, the magical with the mundane, fantasy provides vivid contrasts that help us see the world with fresh eyes. Having encountered ents and towering mallorns, we forever see ordinary elms and beeches differently. Rock and tree, leaf and branch, shadow and sunlight become again, as they were in childhood, wondrous and strange. The blue ocean and green earth once again become “mighty matter[s] for legend.” We pierce what Lewis calls the “veil of familiarity” and begin to see the world as elves see it: as miraculous and charged with the grandeur of Ilúvatar the Creator.⁵⁴

Those who appreciate speculative fiction do so in part for this very reason; they appreciate the fresh lens provided by the form and know that while they are “escaping” from reality for a time, they are simultaneously immersing themselves in its deeper aspects, shedding the superficial trappings of the day-to-day to reach beneath them and embrace their essence. If a reader can meet and accept important ideas in fiction—the possibility of a higher power, the supernatural,

⁵⁴ Gregory Bassham, “Lewis and Tolkien on the Power of the Imagination.” In *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness and Beauty*, ed. by David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas and Jerry L. Walls (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 246-248.

objective morality—this can serve as a momentous step toward considering these ideas in the real world.

Lewis cites a personal example from the time before he converted to Christianity. Regardless of his intelligence, rationality, and attempts to arrive at truth, he possessed a pre-existing bias against belief in the crucifixion that he could not overcome even though the core idea was appealing to him.

Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself...I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere *except* the Gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho' I could not say in cold prose 'what it meant'.⁵⁵

It was the idea presented in fantastical contexts that allowed him to recognize its beauty and see its implications during a time when he was unable to accept it in relation to the reality of Christian doctrine.

Holly Ordway, a professor at Houston Baptist University, is another example of this kind. Describing herself as a hostile atheist before her conversion, she explains that certain stories bridged the chasm between that hostile atheism and Christian faith.

“[W]hen I was so firmly an atheist, I found the very idea of faith so repellent that I would not have listened to the arguments that ultimately convinced me [to become a Christian].... As a child and young adult, I read fantasy, fairy tales, and myths, and I especially fell in love with the Chronicles of Narnia and The Lord of the Rings. I didn't know that I was encountering God's grace through those books, but in fact I was.... Eventually, I realized that this question of 'faith' was more complex, and more interesting, than I had thought...and I decided to learn more. There were a lot of questions that I needed to ask and have answered before I came to accept Christ, but imagination opened the door.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, letter from September 22, 1931 (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 368.

⁵⁶ Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 9-10.

Not only did fiction open the initial door, it continued to be a help further down the path when she struggled with the idea of the Incarnation. She went back to Narnia and studied Aslan, resulting in the removal of her final stumbling block to faith. She records: “my imagination was able to connect with what my reason already knew, and I was able to grasp, as a whole person, that it could be true: that God could become Incarnate.”⁵⁷

My own experience was somewhat similar. From around the age of twelve I wavered between atheism and agnosticism, largely ignoring most religious views, and outright denying Christianity. I actually found the faith rather grating and looked on it and those who professed it with some disdain. I considered myself a logical person but had not yet learned how fervently the heart can guard the mind, for better or worse. The only Christian (or even theistic) ideas that I allowed to reach me at all during this time were found in fiction. Lewis and Tolkien were the most Christian of these influences, but some secular fiction had an impact as well, including Susan Cooper’s *The Dark Is Rising*, in which I encountered my first strong taste of the numinous. There were small glimpses from secular works; Lewis supplied more and Tolkien, perhaps, the most. It was these kinds of stories that tempered my hostility and showed me something that *felt* true and important. When I encountered the same quality again to varying degrees in multiple religions, it caught my attention and prompted me to study them in some depth, before abandoning them for lack of evidence. When I encountered that felt element of truth and significance later in the gospel, but more strongly and backed by logic and evidence, I was finally able to give it a fair hearing. I was not eager to accept Christianity as true, but I was now open to the possibility, and that sent me quickly down the path to faith.

⁵⁷ Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 10.

Others have experienced similar reactions, which makes psychological sense. Humans tend to form opinions about things very quickly and when we have negative experiences or frequently hear negative things about a subject, our thoughts on it tend to follow suit without our ever pausing to think it through before the bias has settled in. “A modern man may have no good intellectual grounds for rejecting some stories in the gospels (such as those of miracles) which were not equally available to his ancestors. But this does not mean that there are not strong social or psychological causes which may incline him to reject them.”⁵⁸ This is completely unintentional, and most rational people would wish it were not so, but that does not change its inevitability. Humans do not process information in a vacuum and good fiction can, and almost inevitably will, be a valuable tool in clearing away some of the collected sights and sounds that obscure worthwhile ideas.

Accessing an Inaccessible Audience

Fantasy and science fiction’s ability to skirt emotional biases and intellectual barriers opens up into another strength that these genres possess—the willingness of dissenting audiences to give it a fair hearing. Because fiction is not an argument and does not challenge readers’ opinions directly, that is, in a way that results in immediate defensive responses (owing to personal biases and other such obstacles), readers are much more willing to stick with a story and to calmly explore the positions the author works into it. This is even truer with fantasy and science fiction. This is, first, because readers are well aware that they are stepping into a hypothetical world, allowing them to willingly take down their guard and to some degree shed

⁵⁸ Richard L. Sturch, “Fantasy and Apologetics,” 66.

preconceptions. Second, such settings naturally make any emotionally charged concepts less threatening by removing them from their familiar contexts.

No matter one's belief system, fiction is primarily enjoyed as a break from the real world, and people are often willing to entertain ideas from authors with whom they may disagree so long as they do not feel preached at or condescended to. And this is again even truer in the realm of science fiction and fantasy because the people who embrace it tend to be open-minded and approach the work with a willing suspension of disbelief. Non-Christians can jump into stories like Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or Lewis's *Till We Have Faces* without worrying about defending themselves or feeling as though they are being talked down to or sitting through an academic lecture (the latter being valuable in its own right but not always what people are looking for). There is a sense of freedom in this that readers tend to appreciate. Most people like to think; they just don't want to be told *what* to think or feel manipulated into thinking it.

There are countless people who would never walk into a church or read a Bible because they mistakenly think that they already know what Christianity offers and they either do not care, are threatened by it, or view it as superstitious nonsense; they have no motive to listen to the gospel message.⁵⁹ However, that same person may well pick up a work of fantasy or science fiction from an author who, as the reader may or may not know in advance, happens to be a Christian. If that work is well-crafted, the reader receives a glimpse of the Christian faith through that author's lens and may be more willing to examine elements of the faith more closely in the future. This is the unique way that fiction speaks to reality and can connect us to it in a meaningful way. C. S. Lewis suspected "that men have sometimes derived more spiritual sustenance from myths they did not believe than from the religion they professed."⁶⁰ This is

⁵⁹ Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 4-5.

obviously a far cry from conversion but that need not be fiction's goal; it is a worthy enough goal to remove barriers—apologetics, pre-evangelism—and it is significant in a culture that possesses and even encourages so many of these barriers.

In addition to the more informed, rational barriers, there is the widespread and, in some ways, firmer barrier of simple misunderstanding and ignorance.

...Christianity is more often ignored or mocked than thoughtfully discussed. To those who do not know Christ, and unfortunately also to many who do, much 'Christian language' rings empty. Although words like 'grace,' 'sin,' 'heaven,' and 'hell' point to reality, for many listeners they might as well be empty slogans or the equivalent of the user's agreement on an upgrade to your phone's operating system: words that are received without attention, and without a grasp of their meaning. It is this lack of meaning, rather than disagreement with Christian doctrine properly understood, that often presents the most significant barrier to any serious consideration of the Faith.⁶¹

And the beauty of fiction, and of speculative fiction in particular, is that it is capable of challenging or avoiding those barriers and of relaying meaning where meaning has been lost or twisted. For someone who misunderstands the idea of providence as meaning simply that God is a puppet master, finding a legitimate picture of it in the work of someone like Tolkien can provide real illumination, even if the reader does not close the book and say, "Oh, I now know what Christians mean when they refer to God's providence."

One striking example from *The Lord of the Rings* is found in the destruction of the One Ring. Frodo, the hero assigned to the task, fails to follow through and instead the ring is destroyed when Gollum manages to wrench it from Frodo and then falls with it.⁶² And this theme was cultivated carefully rather than tossed in as an afterthought, connecting far back in the story.

⁶⁰ C. S. Lewis, "God in the Dock," In *The Timeless Writings of C. S. Lewis*, 297-532 (New York: Inspirational Press, n.d.), 343.

⁶¹ Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 21-22.

⁶² J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, n.d.), 925.

Gandalf tells Frodo very early on that “[b]ehind [Bilbo’s finding of the ring] there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it,” and he says that he believes Gollum has a significant part to play in the journey to destroy the ring.⁶³ For the reader who is interacting deeply with the text, the idea of providence must come through on some level, inviting them to think it through. This kind of fictional context sticks with the reader and is free to come to mind when next they encounter it in a Christian context.

For those who, despite having heard the word ‘Christianity,’ have never been introduced to the Gospel in a way that makes sense to them (or indeed, that does anything other than depress them!), reading Tolkien may be a revelation in itself. It may enable them to ‘hear’ that Gospel as if for the first time, as the earth-shattering surprise it truly is—a surprise even to the gods who made the music before time.⁶⁴

The same holds true for readers of C. S. Lewis and other authors of this type. They invite their readers into their fantasy worlds, regardless of their current beliefs, and introduce them to novel ideas and new ways of thinking about old ideas, all without contributing to the hostility and caricatures that follow the ideas around in real-world settings.

⁶³ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, n.d.), 54-55, 58.

⁶⁴ Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring*, 145.

Chapter IV. Addressing Objections to Apologetic Fiction

I would claim...to have as one object the elucidation of truth, and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to “bring them home.”

-J. R. R. Tolkien

Opinions on the value of apologetic fiction cover a wide spectrum. There are those who agree, those who are hesitant to embrace the idea for reasons they cannot articulate, and those who bring up specific reasons as to why they believe apologetic fiction is unnecessary, if not dangerous. The last of these groups will be addressed in this chapter. After discussing the issue with many people, certain objections have come up repeatedly, some more often than others, and with varying degrees of clarity. Those proposing these objections have been sincere and well-meaning, but none are immune to reasoned correction.

Objection One: Literary Apologetics Confuses Truth and Fiction

This has been one of the more popular objections over the course of the discussions, though its adherents tend to stumble over the wording when attempting to explain it. The gist of the argument is that, by including Christian elements in a fictional story, readers may mentally consign those elements to the realm of fiction, failing to take them seriously, perhaps even attaching absurdity to them. They say that, for example, providing some version of the crucifixion and resurrection in a fictional setting delegitimizes it in the mind of the reader when they meet its parallel in Christian doctrine.

This objection ultimately fails to withstand critical scrutiny. First, it can only refer to fairly direct parallels, and concrete ones at that, such as the above example or the virgin birth. A story that sufficiently reimagines the themes involved in these kinds of examples—sacrifice,

atonement, providence, divine intervention—would be far enough from the biblical events that there would be no direct or aggressive correlation. Second, given that level of reimagining, it is unlikely that readers would meet, say, the concept of providence or sacrifice used in a Christian way (but without the Christian trappings) and automatically proceed to think of them as something that is possible or valuable within their story but instantly ludicrous in the real world. The mind just does not chop things up in that way. If we think providence is nonsense, we will believe it to be so in both fiction and the real world (even if we allow some suspension of disbelief for the sake of the former); likewise if we lend credence to the idea of providence we will readily embrace it in either context (though perhaps with some skepticism in the case of poorly executed fiction).

The other way to interpret the objection is to have it suggest that, in reading fiction (especially fantasy), people will begin to blur the line between fantasy and reality. This version is only included here because it is a popular charge to level at people who are enthusiastic about the books (as well as games and movies) that they love and because it has a long history. Tolkien was aware of this objection and had much to say on the matter. “Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came. But of what human thing in this fallen world is that not true?”⁶⁵ Some people see avid Tolkien fans (or *Star Wars* or *Dungeons & Dragons* fans, the list goes on) and interpret their intensive conversations and dedication as an indication that they possess a tenuous grasp on reality. Except in cases of pre-existing psychological illness, there is little to no evidence of this. The fact that someone deeply appreciates a well-crafted story suggests nothing in particular

⁶⁵ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 55.

about their mindset—other than perhaps that they may be less concerned than the average person about others’ opinions of them and their hobbies.

Objection Two: Literary Apologetics Does Not Lead Directly to Christ

One objection that has been brought up exclusively by Christians in the course of these discussions is that apologetic fiction does not lead readers directly to Christ and therefore either does not accomplish enough to be of value or else leaves the reader without the necessary guidance to prevent them from choosing a path other than Christianity (since different religions and philosophies do agree on certain points). The first part of the objection is unfair and somewhat myopic. The latter is technically true but with an important caveat.

To claim that apologetic fiction is not worthwhile because it does not contain a full-blown explanation of the gospel involves an innate double standard. One could say this of anything *but* a gospel presentation, but we do not doubt the value of showing love to people or of having conversations about relevant spiritual and moral concepts. Few would seek to assign a label of “useless” or “unhelpful” to the various apologetic arguments for God’s existence or arguments for the validity of objective truth. Apologetic fiction is no different. It provides steps in the direction of Christianity that readers may or may not take. It is important to recognize that many people will not embrace Christianity in a single leap. Steps become necessary for those who have multiple reasons or biases urging them to avoid it.

As for the second part of the objection, that apologetic fiction allows readers to come to conclusions that do not include Christian faith, this is true. This is no argument against it, though, because, as with the previous objection, this is true of anything. There is no argument, no matter how direct or convincing, that is certain to cause its hearers to embrace Christianity (including a

full gospel presentation). Someone could hear a Christian defend the existence of God using a teleological argument, be convinced by that argument, and still choose to embrace some other belief system that allows for God to be thought of as an intelligent creator. That's no reason to abandon teleological arguments. If someone is not willing to hear a complete presentation of Christianity, the best that can be done is to show them the parts they can bare to see and allow them to continue on their course.

Objection Three: Literary Apologetics is Unnecessary because of the Bible

Another proffered objection that has been distinctly Christian is that, because the Bible exists, apologetic fiction is simply unnecessary. While it is easy to point out that this attitude would extend to the entirety of apologetics, that is a much wider argument that need not be explored in real depth here. However, it is worth pointing out that, while “necessary” may be slightly too strong a word, fiction is certainly *helpful* for many people. To convince an atheist, for example, that belief in God is rational, takes care of a significant hurdle that the Bible does not address. Without this step, she has already decided that Christianity is false, and no further progress can be made.

Assuming, though, that those making this objection to apologetic fiction do indeed recognize the value of apologetics in general, they presumably mean that the Bible, with rational argument at its right hand, is all that is required to reach people. This objection fails to take into account the multitude of people who would pay no attention to a gospel presentation or a formal apologetic argument (or have trouble accepting them) but who happily consume fiction on a regular basis. “The sober historicity of the Gospels is valuable in one way, the imaginative

realizations of literary treatments in another.”⁶⁶ If the goal is to reach people, an incarnational strategy involves meeting them on their own turf. If someone is too stressed or distracted to hear you out in the board room, meet them at the local diner. If people don’t want to read an essay, by all means give them a story. To dismiss apologetic literature because the truths within it already exist in more direct formats ignores some significant features of human nature, specifically that imagination is a key faculty in the learning process and that people think and learn best when they are able to see past their own biases and presuppositions. This makes it possible on occasion for fiction to succeed when arguments cannot. Where apologetic arguments primarily engage the rational mind—and are no doubt the best approach for some—fiction excels at engaging the imagination, and to ignore the latter in favor of the former neglects a huge percentage of the population who lead with their imagination and emotions. Understanding that our culture is geared very much in this emotional and imaginative direction is an important step in finding ways to reach it.

Objection Four: Literary Apologetics is Misleading

The objection that apologetic fiction is misleading, dishonest, or manipulative requires more sustained attention than some of the others because it is a rather serious accusation (as evidenced by the rather strong feelings conveyed by those who submitted the objection and the offense taken by those who disagreed). If true, it would mean that literary apologetics is not just frivolous or irresponsible but immoral. Those making this accusation claim that an author, by indirectly including his personal philosophical and spiritual positions in a story, intentionally or

⁶⁶ Donald T. Williams, *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 143.

not, is manipulating readers into adopting those positions on a subconscious level. The response to this is twofold.

First, and most simply, for this accusation to work, it must be applied to all fiction as well as nonfiction. Ordway considered this denunciation of imagination and offers the following: “There is merit to the warning that the imagination can deceive; indeed, it can. But so can reason. Any human faculty can be used for good or for evil, and all language can be used to speak either truth or falsehood.”⁶⁷ The fact is that every person on the planet has opinions, has a worldview, and communicates through that lens. We are not capable of consistent objectivity, nor is it clear what such a thing would look like or if it is even possible. Our positions become more and more obvious the more we interact with the world, and authors are no different. No matter their belief system, authors will naturally include pieces of it through their characters and plots. If the author values honesty, his heroes will be honest people and experience consequences when they deviate from that. If she is a nihilist, her heroes will act based on personal desires rather than a sense of the good or right. A Christian author is no different; he will communicate Christian positions because those positions are part of him. This is not manipulation, and mostly not even conscious. It is merely the natural culmination of a person’s views informing their communications.

Second, this objection is inadequately charitable to most readers. People are, of course, affected by the things that they read but a work of fiction is not going to completely bypass their decision-making process. Fiction encourages the exploration of ideas by immersing readers in scenarios that make them more tangible and relatable, suggesting possible alternatives and solutions. It does not create and cement a fully formed opinion in readers’ minds unbeknownst to them. The closest thing to this that could be legitimately said is that good fiction demands that

⁶⁷ Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 15-16.

readers pay attention to certain ideas, weigh them, and it is hardly a failing to push someone to think.

Objection Five: Apologetic Fiction Is Escapist

Labeling apologetic fiction (and by extension all fiction) escapist is one of the more popular objections leveled against it and has been for decades. “The Australian critic Germaine Greer famously declared that ‘it has been my nightmare that Tolkien would turn out to be the most influential writer of the twentieth century. The bad dream has materialized ... The books that come in Tolkien’s train are more or less what you would expect; flight from reality is their dominating characteristic.’”⁶⁸ Lewis and Tolkien were both familiar with this objection and gave strong arguments against it. The objection was addressed in chapter three, but the relevant responses are worth summarizing here since it is such a popular opinion with such far-reaching implications.

In addition to the positions of Lewis and Tolkien included in the previous chapter, many others defend similar lines of thinking, believing fiction to be a valuable addition to our lives and a natural part of the way we were created, communicating meaning through story.

Every writer, like God, creates a world, determines the laws of its nature, and peoples it with characters whose significant actions give that world its meaning. God’s ‘primary world’ is reflected in our ‘secondary worlds,’ which, far from being mere escape or wish fulfillment, reflect back into the primary world the marvelous quality—the ‘enchantment’—that is really there by virtue of its created, its nonreductionist character, but which familiarity and secularist philosophy work to obscure.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings*, 508.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Mere Humanity*, 44.

Kreeft makes a related observation when he asserts that "[p]hilosophy and literature belong together. They can work like the two lenses of a pair of binoculars. Philosophy argues abstractly. Literature argues too—it persuades, it changes the reader—but concretely. Philosophy says truth, literature shows truth."⁷⁰ Story may well be an escape, but it is so in the positive sense that Tolkien described. It may remove us briefly from our real-world context, but in doing so it provides more tools with which to cope in that context. Tolkien's work was included in a study conducted on the influence of fiction on its readers and the effects people reported were enlightening. Some of the comments included the following:

Two of the ten said that *The Lord of the Rings* had made them aware of 'the forces of good and evil' and gave them models to imitate; four, rather surprisingly, said it gave them a better understanding of the society in which they lived. (This answer was one of those suggested as possibilities by the questionnaire used, which may explain its popularity.) One, significantly, said that it told of 'a way of life more real than we live today... of which I am somewhat envious'.⁷¹

It hardly seems that one can be apprised of these kinds of results and persist in the opinion that all fiction is nothing more than an escape. It *is* an escape, but escape in the best sense of the word, and it is one that accomplishes a great deal more than most other forms of escape in which people participate.

Objection Six: Why Not Stick to Non-Fiction?

The position that non-fictional stories could serve just as well as fictional ones is more a suggestion than an objection but is still deserving of a response because it was brought up many

⁷⁰ Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien*, 21.

⁷¹ Richard L. Sturch, "Fantasy and Apologetics," 80.

times and there is some agreement on both sides that stories can possess apologetic value. Only the value of *fiction* is questioned and so this demands further consideration.

One factor to consider in this discussion is that even true stories must be recorded in such a way as to engage the reader, which means its audience will almost always meet some level of speculation on the author's part. Autobiographies may sometimes avoid this since the author knows what she was thinking and feeling throughout the story but there are limitations to this form, particularly that any given sample is unlikely to contain the sheer number and depth of ideas that can be included in its fictitious counterpart and also that very few people will possess both the kind of personal story that people find captivating *and* the skill to communicate it effectively. Other types of nonfiction stories cannot avoid speculation at all. To pen a story about another person or group requires that the authors put themselves in the subject's shoes in exactly the same way they would with a fictional character that they have created. The fact that there are some dry facts surrounding the nonfictional subjects makes little difference when aspiring to reach readers at the emotional level.

Another factor to consider: Must a story be true to communicate something valuable? Other than possibly providing an accompanying history lesson, why would nonfiction be a more effective communicator than fiction? If anything, fiction frees the reader up to think about the more abstract dimensions of it since they need not be concerned with the fate of real people, which tends to shift focus to the more tangible aspects of a story. I can read Lewis's *Till We Have Faces* and contemplate themes like humility and self-deception; if met with the nonfiction equivalent, though, it would be more difficult to shift the focus away from the characters themselves and their fates. There is something inherent in nonfiction that encourages a different brand of empathy, one that tends to keep the reader camped out in the practical aspects of the

story whereas fiction provides a space in which to envision possibilities without getting caught up in the baggage that comes with real-world history or biography. The tragic or happy ending affects us in a different way from what it does in a work of fiction; that is, it settles differently. We are not as ready to pull the story apart and mull over its features as we are with a piece of fiction because we expect nonfiction to be straight forward. We easily see the points to be taken (or at least expect that we do), acknowledge the ending, and move on. This approach to nonfiction is not even objectionable because it does tend to be the way it is formatted. Fiction encourages a much more analytical attitude, though, and is deserving of that attitude when done well. Nonfiction, while valuable, cannot fully substitute for fiction.

Chapter V. Conclusion

Fiction is a form of discovery, perception, intensification, expression, beauty, and understanding. If it is all these things, the question of whether it is a legitimate use of time should not even arise.
-Leland Ryken

Apologetic fiction, especially of the fantasy and science fiction variety, is a uniquely beautiful and effective tool in the interaction between Christians and the secular world. It has the ability to reach audiences who balk at other attempts of Christians to reach out. The ability to bring someone of a different view along on a fantastic journey and expose them to new ideas (or help correct misconceptions about those ideas) can be such a powerful experience, but only if Christian authors rise to the challenge. Few authors will rise to the genius level of a Tolkien or Lewis, Christian or otherwise, but they can adopt the high-quality, implicit approach that has made their works so widely read and impactful. Why settle for sharing worlds and ideas solely amongst ourselves when, with a bit more effort, thought, and skill, they can be communicated to an audience that is currently hearing every side but ours in the vast symposium of popular fiction? Careful world-building, well-crafted multi-dimensional characters, and a soft touch could create another bridge on which the Christian and non-Christian may meet and relate.

Knowing how effective good storytelling is as a teaching tool and the kind of impact it can have on those who encounter it, there is more-than-sufficient reason to enthusiastically embrace it as a legitimate and perhaps even vital instrument as we attempt to connect with a secular world that often does not want to hear our views in a more direct form. Apologetic fiction is an opportunity for Christian authors to participate in the ongoing discussion between authors and readers as they offer up varying views and insights about the most profound aspects of life. It is an opportunity to be honest without being pushy, to share moral and spiritual vision in neutral territory, and to express truth in the far reaches of alien worlds.

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