BIBLICAL LITERACY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS: BRINGING THE BIBLE BACK INTO ENGLISH LITERATURE COURSES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of the need for biblical literacy in the public school English classroom. For decades in this country, Americans were constantly exposed to the Bible: children learned to read from it and adults focused their prayer with it. Biblical references abounded in political speech and in art. Western authors referenced biblical narrative in their works, expecting readers to be aware of these nuances. In a modern world that ardently espouses the doctrine of “separation of church and state,” the shared intellectual background that individuals once had no longer exists: students reading predominantly Western literature no longer come to the text with knowledge of basic Christian mythology, of prominent biblical characters, or of popular biblical themes. This pretermission hinders a full understanding of a text being studied. This thesis provides a framework for examining example texts of Western literature in light of their dependence on biblical allusion, and adding biblical texts into units of study, not for proselytizing but rather education.

Chapter One investigates the genesis of the high school English literature course. Prominent educational leaders of the late nineteenth century established content that is still widely used to this day. Of the texts most frequently taught in
public schools, five are by British authors and five are by American authors. Both Britain and the United States of America have political, social, and cultural roots in Christianity, roots that certainly are made manifest in literary works. Chapter Two presents an overview of the foundational biblical texts needed to create student success: Genesis, Exodus, and the Gospel of Matthew. Each biblical book presents fundamental characters, themes, tenets, and plot events that are frequently referenced in Western literature. Chapter Three examines biblical influence in works from several literary genres written by both classic authors in the standard canon as well as modern additions to it. Chapter Four asserts that the Bible must be integrated into programs of study for high school English literature classes. In the pursuit of educational objectives, including biblical texts into existing curriculum units provides a foundation with which students may experience the fullness and richness of text that authors intended.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the casual observer, a master’s thesis may appear to be solitary work.
However, to complete a project of this magnitude requires a network of support, and I am indebted to many people. I am grateful to my husband, David Reiner, for encouraging my efforts; my mother, Karen Wagoner, for her unfailing support and willingness to help me revise and edit; and most especially to my mentor, Dr. William J. O’Brien, who, throughout this process, has offered extraordinary guidance, support, patience, and kindness.
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INTRODUCTION

No one in the English-speaking world can be considered literate without a basic knowledge of the Bible . . . our knowledge of Judaism and Christianity needs to be more detailed than that of other great religions, if only because of the historical accident that has embedded the Bible in our thought and language.


There are dozens of religions practiced throughout the world, yet the majority of people who subscribe to a particular faith claim to belong to Judaism, Islam or Christianity. Of these three monotheistic faiths, Christianity remains the largest religion with the greatest number of believers; it is also the most popularly practiced religion in the world.1 With followers of Christianity in nearly every country, the Bible has become one of the most popular and well-known books in print. In fact, no other book has sold more copies worldwide than the Bible; in some estimates, over six billion copies (in numerous translations) have been sold2 and “it is the best-selling book of the year every year.”3 For inspiration, for comfort, for direction, Christians have turned to this holy text time and again.

The reach of the Bible extends beyond the immediate community of the devout and faithful, however. Its influence, particularly in the Western world, can be seen in

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1 Stephen Juan, “What are the most widely practiced religions of the world?,” The Register, http://www.theregister.co.uk/2006/10/06/the_odd_body_religion/ (accessed July 1, 2009).


3 David Van Biema, “The Case for Teaching the Bible,” Time Magazine April 2, 2006
nearly every facet of society. Galleries are filled with art inspired by the figures in the Bible, from the creations of Leonardo da Vinci to those of Salvador Dali. Musicians garner influence from the Bible to produce works: from venerated composers like Johann S. Bach, whose passions and Masses combine scripture with complex melody, to the twentieth century group the Byrds, whose “Turn! Turn! Turn!” introduced the text of Ecclesiastes 3:1 into a mainstream, popular song. Even twenty-first century television shows and novels glean fodder from the pages of the Bible. The opening sequence of the hit ABC primetime drama Desperate Housewives calls on one of the most well-known stories of the Bible: the story of Adam and Eve. The opening sequence was created as follows:

. . . the design studio animated images drawn from famous works of art to show how women from Eve to the present have chafed under the marital bit . . . The sequence begins with a famous Renaissance painting of Adam and Eve animated by yU + co artists in the manner of a pop-up children’s book. In a Monte Python-esque moment, Eve lowers the boom on her disagreeable hubby with an apple the size of a Volkswagen.4

This show is currently entering its sixth season, yet the opening images remain the same. The designers of this opening clearly expect the audience to understand the significance of the images presented.

Similarly, Stephenie Meyer, author of a hugely popular young-adult vampire novel series, also took inspiration from this Genesis story when choosing cover art for

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the initial book in the series, *Twilight*. Rather than include expected images on the cover graphic, Meyer surprised readers with her choice of a pair of hands holding an apple, shown in the image below:

![Twilight cover](image)

As *Newsweek* reporter Chip Kidd asks, “Where’s the blood? Where are the sexy teens?” The fact that an apple dominates the cover of a book about vampires and teenage romance confused many readers. So many wrote to Meyer to inquire about it that she added a response to “What’s with the apple?” to her websites’ frequently asked questions. She responds with the following statement:

5 Gail Doobinin (design) and Roger Hagadone (photograph), *Twilight* cover art, (NY: Little, Brown, 2005).

The apple on the cover of Twilight represents "forbidden fruit." I used the scripture from Genesis (located just after the table of contents) because I loved the phrase "the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil." Isn't this exactly what Bella ends up with? A working knowledge of what good is, and what evil is. The nice thing about the apple is it has so many symbolic roots . . .

Meyers was counting on her audience being familiar enough with the story of Adam and Eve, and with the symbolism of the apple, that they would make the connection between the plot and the images. The reality of this situation, as evidenced by the need to post a response to the inquiries about Meyer's cover, is that there exists a surprising lack of familiarity with some of the most basic and fundamental stories of the Bible.

For many decades, there existed in this country—and in most Western countries—a unified sense of culture. Shared experiences, shared beliefs, and shared values were common. Much of this depended upon a shared frame of reference that was significantly marked by Christianity: its text, its theology, and its traditions. As such, the Christian influence, particularly the Bible, permeated the literature of the West with both archetype and allusion. In a modern world that seems to have a fetish for strict adherence to the doctrine of “separation of church and state,” the shared intellectual background that individuals once had no longer exists: students reading predominantly Western literature no longer come to the text with knowledge of basic Christian mythology, of prominent biblical characters, or of popular biblical themes.

The issue is a basic lack of knowledge of any aspect of the Bible; both New and Old Testaments. As 1400 years of Western civilization is based on biblical references, to not know the Bible is to be handicapped. This lacuna in education creates a need for specialized instruction. The model to be followed is the teaching of Greek and Roman mythology, which has been part of the American education for decades. If Greek and Roman mythology is considered essential to an understanding of Western literature, how much more so is the Bible? The reality of the Bible is a given in Western thought, in all its manifestations. Therefore, the very real dearth of knowledge can only be addressed by specialized instruction, that is to say, biblical literacy. Modern students, who display a startling lack of knowledge of the Bible, not only Genesis and Exodus but also any one of the synoptic gospels, are at a disadvantage when studying texts in the Western literary canon. This thesis will examine the role of biblical literacy and how it should be shaped for a serious academic study of the Western literature taught in high schools today.
CHAPTER I

Knowledge belongs in the schools . . . Belief belongs in the houses of worship.

-Chuck Stetson, Biblical Literacy Program founder

A. Evolution of the study of English in the high school

The study of literature in the English classroom is one that took root only after the Civil War. For the greater part of the nineteenth century, English as a course of study focused on the more technical aspects of the language: “grammar, rhetoric, elocution, or other aspects of language study.”\(^1\) Any study of literature that took place did so with the aim of enhancing studies of the aforementioned language studies. Given the time period and social climate of the country, this type of study was to be expected, as the majority of males in America during the first half of the nineteenth century had occupations that required a tremendous amount of physical skill and training rather than formal education: occupations as boatmen, laborers, brickmakers and in agriculture were some of the most popular jobs American men had.\(^2\) Students enrolled in school often had aims of becoming doctors, lawyers, politicians, bankers, or priests. These were fields dominated either by skill in math and science, or by skill in oration and argument. An intensive study of literature was not seen as something

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that would advance one in any of these jobs. In fact, for most of the nineteenth century, the following was the dominant philosophy:

... the prevailing educational theories ... viewed the mind as a muscle to be strengthened ... [so] the faculties of ‘memory’ and ‘reason’ were to be exercised in secondary schools, and to do this a subject required a clearly defined structure, methodology, and a set of facts with rules to organize them.³

The study of literature was never so precise; textual meaning was, and is, often subjective, depending on what the reader brings to the text; if an author has not commented explicitly on meaning, those who study literature are left with nothing more than supposition—well-reasoned, perhaps, but supposition nonetheless. Serious study demanded something more substantive; in fact, for the majority of educators, “vernacular literature, it was assumed, lacked both structure and rigor, and could be studied by students on their own ... most colleges [reinforced] this attitude, [as they] uniformly ignored literature in English.”⁴ With emphasis on oration, any text to be studied needed to be short and was therefore more easily memorized. Novel-length works were automatically disqualified, though an excerpt from them might be included in a reader or textbook for elocution study. If a reader or textbook did include literature excerpts, British authors like Shakespeare and Milton appeared along


⁴ Ibid.
with American authors like Irving and Longfellow. These writers were so popular, and enjoyed so great a reputation that excerpts from their works were deemed appropriate for study.

Interestingly, through the early part of the nineteenth century, most students “had learned to read using the Bible or other religious material.” After 1820, this practice began to diminish as more ardent calls for the separation of church and state began to take hold. With the wealth of literature present, it would only seem natural for books and book-length works to become the tool for literacy. Instead, more practical writings dealing with history, agriculture, and science were often used to teach young readers. Through the first half of the century, the study of literature fell largely by the wayside.

This educational philosophy began to change, however, after the Civil War, when “many professional educators called for the study of literature in its own right.” These educators began to notice literary passages appearing as a part of college admissions; in 1874, for example, Harvard University added a “British or American


\[\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
novel, play, or long piece of prose or verse as the subject of their entrance examination in composition.”9 This action all but forced public schools to adopt the study of such literature in hopes of ensuring success on such examinations.

While myriad changes were beginning to take place in the English classroom, the National Education Association, a professional organization for educators, had already begun responding to this change and those taking shape in other curricular fields. In 1892, this organization formed the Committee of Ten, a group whose members consisted of high school and college professors from across the country: Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard University, was chosen to chair the committee.10 This committee spent three days in conference, examining current educational practices and developing recommendations for the future of the schools in America. What followed was a lengthy report that changed and, in effect, standardized much of public education. The Committee of Ten put forth, first and foremost, for school systems to embrace a twelve-year course of study: eight years in elementary school and four years in high school.11 In particular, they offered very specific instructions for the teaching of high school English. They were “of the

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11 Ibid.
opinion that English should be pursued . . . during the entire course of four years.”

And for the first time, there was a public directive for a formal, academic study of literature. The majority of the time spent studying English, according to the Committee, should be devoted to literature. In each year of high school, of the five periods given to English study each week, three were to be designated for literature study. The other aspects of English—grammar, composition, and rhetoric—were assigned for study during a specific year. Literature was finally gaining a place of prominence in the curriculum.

The Committee further declared that a conference specifically for the study of secondary schools needed to take place, so they gathered educators in various fields together to “consider the proper limits of its subject, the best methods of instruction, the most desirable allotment of time for the subject, and the best methods of testing the pupils’ attainments therein.” The English conference was held in December of 1892. The educators here again reaffirmed the importance of the study of literature, stating that it, along with the study of written expression, should comprise the “largest share


13 Ibid.
of time and attention” in a classroom. Additionally, this group made recommendations regarding the role of English in determining admission to college. Specifically, the conference members called for the following:

1. the required reading of certain English masterpieces
2. that these masterpieces should represent, with as few gaps as possible, various time periods from the Elizabethan age to the present

While other recommendations were also espoused, these two provided school systems with the most guidance as they began to assess the current state of their English courses. As the components of English literature studies evolved, emphasis on “English masterpieces” became the focus of the canon.

B. Texts in the High School Canon

One of the most striking things about public school English classrooms in the United States is that, despite having no formal, current, national curriculum guidelines, the majority of authors and texts taught are remarkably similar. Most school systems “afford school/districts autonomy to make local decisions regarding particular materials for (e.g., required books) and the sequencing and pacing of courses.”

English departments within schools are at liberty to choose core readings for students

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15 Ibid., 93.
of a particular grade level, and within this circle, individual teachers are often at liberty to include supplemental novels of their own preference.

This is what happens at McLean High School, a public school in McLean, Virginia, where I have been teaching for the last five years.\(^{17}\) The core readings at our school were chosen within the English department. At the end of every school year, the English teachers gather to review core choices and make revisions to the requirements, if necessary. As of 2009, the core readings for McLean students read over the course of four years include *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Great Expectations*, *the Odyssey*, either *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, *The Lord of the Flies*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Scarlet Letter* are approved optional texts for students at McLean.\(^{18}\)

North Carolina English classrooms in public schools operate under a similar philosophy. Teachers and schools retain independence to choose required texts. In 2002, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction conducted a survey to


\(^{17}\) McLean High School is part of the Fairfax County Public School district. Fairfax County Public Schools is the twelfth largest school system in America, with 2009-2010 projected enrollment at 173,573 students. There are twenty-five public schools that offer 9-12 grade studies in this school system. http://www.fcps.edu/statis.htm#fairfaxcounty.

\(^{18}\) English Department Program of Studies, McLean High School, McLean, VA, 2009.
determine what texts were being taught at each grade level.\footnote{According to the NCDPI, “The survey asked for works required by the school or system as well as works used for enrichment and/or independent study. . . Most teachers listed novels and plays but did not include short stories, poems, or short non-fiction works. Thus, this list provides a fairly comprehensive view of texts used for parts of the Standard Course of Study but not of the entire curriculum. \textit{NC High School English Language Arts}, http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/languagearts/secondary/rightdirection/appendix, (accessed July 24, 2009).} In a list of the top twenty-five books used by teachers, only two texts are by authors who were not either British or American. Of the titles on this list, several of the titles are identical to those taught at McLean High school, including \textit{Romeo and Juliet, Great Expectations, The Odyssey, To Kill a Mockingbird, Lord of the Flies, The Great Gatsby, and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn}.\footnote{North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, \textit{Appendix English I, Appendix English III} http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/languagearts/secondary/rightdirection/appendixenglishi, http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/languagearts/secondary/rightdirection/appendixenglishiii, (both accessed July 24, 2009).}

In a study conducted by the Literature Center, researchers discovered that “the ten titles most frequently taught in public, Catholic, and independent schools for Grades 9-12 are remarkable for their consistency more than their differences: the titles included in the top ten are identical in the public and Catholic schools, and nearly so in the independent schools.”\footnote{Arthur N. Applebee, \textit{A Study of Book-Length Works Taught in High School English Courses} (Albany, NY: Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, 1989), 3.} Perhaps even more significant is that on each of these lists, the authors of the top ten texts taught are either American or British.
### Table 1. Most Popular Titles in United States Schools, Grades 9-12, 1988

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Schools (n=322)</th>
<th>Catholic Schools (n=80)</th>
<th>Independent Schools (n=86)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romeo and Juliet</td>
<td>Huckleberry Finn</td>
<td>Macbeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>Scarlet Letter</td>
<td>Romeo and Juliet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>66*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huckleberry Finn</td>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>Huckleberry Finn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julius Caesar</td>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird</td>
<td>Scarlet Letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird</td>
<td>Great Gatsby</td>
<td>Hamlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarlet Letter</td>
<td>Romeo and Juliet</td>
<td>Great Gatsby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>63*</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of Mice and Men</td>
<td>Hamlet</td>
<td>To Kill a Mockingbird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet</td>
<td>Of Mice and Men</td>
<td>Julius Caesar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Gatsby</td>
<td>Julius Caesar</td>
<td>Odyssey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord of the Flies</td>
<td>Lord of the Flies</td>
<td>Lord of the Flies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*percentage significantly different from public school sample, p< .05


What this table demonstrates is that the majority of the texts read and taught in American classrooms come from the Western world. With the exception of Harper Lee, the lone female author on the list, every author on this list is a male of Anglo-Saxon descent.

Though over a century has passed since the Committee of Ten’s English conference, the majority of the texts read still subscribe to the call for English masterpieces from the Elizabethan Age to the present.

### C. Legal Conflicts Regarding Religion in the Public Schools

Because all of these authors come from England or America, where Christianity is the dominant religion, it stands to reason that Christian allusions, archetypes, characters, and themes are a part the literature these authors produce. I am
arguing that a fundamental knowledge of the Bible is necessary to fully understand and appreciate these texts, yet we live in a society that ardently embraces the idea of separation of church and state, particularly in the public schools. Attempting to teach about religion—or any of its facets—in a public school classroom can be a source of apprehension for all parties involved. Teachers, administrators, parents, and even students worry about crossing the line between education and indoctrination. Because the public school is a government entity—funded by local, state, and federal monies; run, in part, by elected school board representatives; districted by stipulations in state laws—espousing personal belief must never enter the classroom of objective instruction. And it is no wonder that trepidation arises out of this area. The history of mixing religion and the public school is one fraught with legal battles. Oftentimes, these cases are high publicized. The roots of this conflict take hold in early challenges to the Establishment Clause.22 Ardent individuals and organizations alike have fought about how far the reach of “separation of Church and State” extends, particularly in the public school where children are impressionable.

In the last seventy years, landmark cases have helped shape interpretation of the First Amendment policies regarding religion in schools. One of the most famous cases is the 1963 case of Abington School District v. Schempp. Edward Schempp filed suit against the Abington School District to contest a school policy that required

22 The term “Establishment Clause” refers to the portion of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”
excerpts from the Holy Bible to be read aloud every day, a practice he claimed put forth a doctrine that went against his family’s religious beliefs and practices. The school policy states the following:

On each school day at the Abington Senior High School between 8:15 and 8:30 a.m., while the pupils are attending their home rooms or advisory sections, opening exercises are conducted pursuant to the statute. The exercises are broadcast into each room in the school building through an intercommunications system and . . . include readings by one of the students of 10 verses of the Holy Bible, broadcast to each room in the building. This is followed by the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, likewise over the intercommunications system, but also by the students in the various classrooms, who are asked to stand and join in repeating the prayer in unison . . . There are no prefatory statements, no questions asked or solicited, no comments or explanations made and no interpretations given at or during the exercises. The students and parents are advised that the student may absent himself from the classroom or, should he elect to remain, not participate in the exercises.  

Though participation was voluntary, Schempp maintained that even sending his children outside the door during this activity, an activity typically reserved for students who misbehaved in class, invited ridicule and alienation. The Court ultimately ruled in favor of Mr. Schempp, asserting that the government, and by extension its institutions, should uphold positions of neutrality; compulsory readings of the Bible were tantamount to belief and were, therefore, unconstitutional. Additionally, the schools could not imply that those who stayed were in any way superior, or that having religion was superior to not having one.

In the 1971 case of Lemon v. Kurtzman, the Supreme Court also determined

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that any “excessive entanglement” in religious matters by any arm of the government was unconstitutional.\textsuperscript{24} In this instance, suits were filed against both Pennsylvania and Rhode Island for providing financial assistance to private schools, both independent and religious. Some of the money provided by the State Superintendents of Public Instruction went to support the salaries of teachers as well as materials used in the classroom. Because the majority of private schools were Catholic, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that such financial support directly violated the First Amendment.\textsuperscript{25}

While this case did not involve a reading of the Bible, it nevertheless impacted the way a government institution deals with matters of religion. This case established what is more commonly known as the “Lemon test.” Any legislation regarding religion should meet the following criteria:

1. A court must first determine whether the law or government action in question has a bona fide secular purpose.

2. A court would ask whether the state action has the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion.

3. The court would consider whether the action excessively entangles religion and government.\textsuperscript{26}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Lemon v. Kurtzman, 403 U.S. 602 (1971).
\item Lemon v. Kurtzman, 403 U.S. 602 (1971).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Though the Lemon test has evolved since the 1970s, it is still the litmus test for determining the constitutionality of the means through which government institutions deal with religion.

What these cases did not do, however, was completely eliminate Biblical reading from public schools: it more sharply defined the parameters within which such reading could occur. Using the Bible for evangelical endeavors or proselytizing is unconstitutional, as is any type of derision directed at the God of the Bible or those who worship him. But there are established legal precedents that allow for the inclusion of the Bible in the curricula of public schools. As a resource for academic study, the Bible can provide insight to an author’s intention and can enhance the study of Western literature.
CHAPTER II

Several pupils thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were lovers; that the four horsemen appeared on the Acropolis; that the Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luther and John; that Eve was created from an apple; that Jesus was baptized by Moses; that Jezebel was Ahab's donkey; and that the stories by which Jesus taught were called parodies.

--Thayer S. Warshaw, English Teacher

_Time Magazine_, March 20, 1964

The study of literature has become central in the American student’s educational journey. The Committee of Ten cemented its status, and schools have embraced the study of literature for over a century. But as to why the study of literature remains such a quintessential element in our culture depends upon who is asked. Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn states that “literature has the power in these frightening times to help mankind see itself accurately.”¹ Author Marian Fairman shares a similar view, declaring that “literature provides an ordered way of reading the human condition.”² Professor Thomas Barden, Director of English Graduate Studies at the University of Toledo, offers a more intricate opinion. In studying literature, he believes we see the following:

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. . . literature is the only part of the educational curriculum that deals directly with the actual world of lived experience. . . Only literary study persists in posing those questions we all asked before our schooling taught us to give up on them. Only literature gives credibility to personal perceptions, feelings,
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² Marion A. Fairman, _Biblical Patterns in Modern Literature_, (Cleveland: Dillon/Liederbach, 1972), 26.
dreams, and the "stream of consciousness" that is our inner voice. Literature wonders about infinity, wonders why God permits evil, wonders what will happen to us after we die. Literature admits that we get our hearts broken, that people sometimes cheat and get away with it, that the world is a strange and probably incomprehensible place. . . .

By studying literature we can learn how to explore and analyze texts. Fiction may be about die Lebenswelt, but it is a construct of words put together in a certain order by an artist using the medium of language. By examining and studying those constructions, we can learn about language as a medium. We can become more sophisticated about word associations and connotations, about the manipulation of symbols, and about style and atmosphere. We can grasp how ambiguous language is and how important context and texture is to meaning. . . . It is as serious students of the writer's art that we begin to see how the tricks are done.

. . . When we begin to see literature as created artifacts of language, we become more sensitive to good writing in general. We get a stronger sense of the importance of individual words, even the sounds of words and word combinations.³

To move beyond a superficial reading of text, students must understand literature in this way. They must do more than understand simple plot and remember character names. As an educator, one of my goals is to move students to a deeper reading, one that allows them to appreciate the richness and beauty of the complexities of a work of literature. I seek to equip them with the skills to explore such readings with my help in the classroom and on their own when they leave. Time is an enemy of the English teacher: faced with a minimum number of books that must be taught, with texts that must be rotated between classes,⁴ and with students of widely different ability levels,
there is only a certain amount of time during which a work can be covered. Adding all of the necessary background information, even at a basic level, eats away at that time, leaving less time to study the novel itself.

In order to do this, I teach students that they need to be aware of more than just the words on the page. That many factors, from the events an author experiences to the social, political, religious and economic climate in which he or she lives, influence a specific text. When I teach Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, one of the things I feel that students need to understand before they read this text is the social structure of Victorian England. To understand the central struggles that plague Pip as he yearns to be viewed as a “gentleman,” students need a basic understanding of the class structure of Victorian England, the prejudices that existed between members of individual classes, and the factors preventing movement from a lower class to an upper class. Because I know that students have not yet studied this point in time in their history classes, I must supplement their knowledge to help them more fully appreciate the text.

Additionally, at every school in which I have taught, all freshmen students undergo a comprehensive study of Greek mythology. The rationale for this is

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approximately 30 copies. In order for each English teacher to use the texts, a schedule of who’s teaching the text, when, and for how long is drawn up to minimize conflict.
straightforward: authors frequently make reference to classical literature\(^5\), so students need to be informed about the stories and characters from which these allusions are drawn. For example, before students read Homer’s *Odyssey*, they must have completed a study of the major Olympians of the Greek pantheon. Because so many deities appear in Homer’s work, not to know the domains over which each god or goddess rules, as well as the particular personality quirks of each would limit the contextual understanding of the student while he or she reads the text. To know that Athena, for instance, is the goddess of wisdom helps a student understand why she has such an affinity for the clever Odysseus. Athena is a pivotal character whose direct intervention allows Odysseus to make his journey home, and students need context to appreciate what makes her so interested in Odysseus’ journey in the first place.

In this same vein, attention to biblical literacy must be paid, particularly in a high school literature course, for when “students . . . study the Bible in literature, they [examine] ways in which later writers have used Bible literature, language and symbols. Much drama, poetry and fiction contains material from the Bible.”\(^6\) Unfortunately, the reality educators face is that a shrinking number of students can confidently be declared “biblically literate.” Poll after poll shows that most students

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\(^5\) Because the term “classical literature” is often used interchangeably with “classic literature” I wish to clarify that for the purposes of this paper, “classical” will refer to great works of ancient civilizations, particularly Greek and Roman literature, story, and myth.

fail to reach “the level of knowledge similar to that defined by high school English teachers as necessary to a good education.”\textsuperscript{7} According to a study conducted by Marie Wachlin and Byron Johnson and published in 2005, forty out of forty-one English teachers surveyed declared that “biblical knowledge confers a distinct educational advantage on students.”\textsuperscript{8} Individual teachers proffered specific comments, and a teacher, who is only identified as being from Illinois, said the following in response to a question that pondered whether or not Western literature was loaded with Biblical references:

Well, obviously. So many people learned to read with the King James Bible, it’s pretty hard for them not to be steeped in allusions. And that’s one of the things that I say in my class—that since the Bible is one of the major teaching tools for 300 years, that colors the thinking as well. It’s not just the allusions—the whole thinking, the whole mindset.\textsuperscript{9}

Nearly every teacher polled expressed similar views.

Even post-secondary educators express similar sentiments. In a 1986 study conducted by Annie Juhasz and Leslie Wilson, college professors were asked what book they would like incoming freshmen to have read before starting classes, and


\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., 9. The study sampled English teachers from 10 states. Thirty schools were public; four were private. Schools sampled were from various levels of socio-economic status.

\textsuperscript{9}Ibid.,10-11.
these professors named the Bible more often than any other text. If students miss biblical allusions, they are, quite simply, missing part of what an author has to say. Some part of the meaning of the literature studied is lost. And teachers do not have time to comb through every text explaining every allusion; nor do they want to. My goal is to give students the skills and the knowledge to make these discoveries and connections on their own.

Certainly, familiarity with the entire Bible would be preferable, but there are specific books of that Bible that would help students find the majority of biblical allusions made in the Western literature studied in secondary schools. The book of Genesis is one of the most frequently referenced in the literary canon. Additionally, the book of Exodus and the Gospel of Matthew provide much fodder for Western authors. With a strong foundation in these three biblical books, students will be better equipped with the educational tools needed to enhance their study of Western literature.

A. The Book of Genesis

The stories in the book of Genesis are some of the most often quoted, referenced or alluded to in Western literature. Plot, characters, and themes from this text offer much inspiration for authors.

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The book of Genesis begins with the creation of the physical world, creating something out of nothing. It is here where God utters the now familiar phrase, “Let there be light.”

God creates the heavens and the earth, the waters, and all creatures that inhabit these domains. Once God has the natural order in place, God finally creates the humans, establishing their place of superiority in this physical world. All of this work takes place over the course of six days, and God takes the seventh day to rest.

Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, are given a home in the utopian Garden of Eden. Here, all life was in harmony, and these proto-humans were surrounded by abundance. They would spend their lives in bliss provided they abide by the rules God established, particularly the commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This idyllic existence in the Garden of Eden has become, for many authors, the embodiment of the perfect world, the symbol of perfection that humankind once had and strives to achieve again. The garden itself has certainly become one of the most prolific mythic elements of the Genesis text.

Adam and Eve’s life in paradise is eventually spoiled by the wily cunning of the serpent, who beguiles Eve and convinces her to taste the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In this portion of the story, yet another legendary element has arisen and worked its way into the Western consciousness. The fruit that

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11 Genesis 1:3
Eve consumes is unnamed in the text itself, but popular tradition dictates that this notorious fruit was an apple. Some scholars suggest that that this association came about because of what author Guy Davenport calls a “linguistic pun.”\textsuperscript{12} That is, in Latin,\textsuperscript{13} the word for “evil” and the word for “apple” are identical: \textit{malum}.\textsuperscript{14} One can easily see why the apple may have assumed such prominence in this story and consequently in Western literature. Errors in translations are common mistakes, and when the words are identical, one cannot know the intended meaning. Given the circumstances of the story, it is easy to see where the tradition of calling the fruit an apple may have begun.

This tradition may have garnered further support by Renaissance artists, who, like authors of their time, began to blend elements of Classical mythology in their works, even when the central focus of the work was a Christian subject. Apples were popular in ancient Greek myths: Zeus and Hera were given an apple tree on their wedding day, the Trojan War can be traced back to a contest involving an apple, and Heracles was tasked to pluck three golden apples from the Garden of Hesperides

\textsuperscript{12} Guy Davenport, \textit{Objects on a Table: harmonious disarray in art and literature}, (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998) 57.

\textsuperscript{13} While some of the earliest Bibles were written in Hebrew and Aramaic, Jerome translated the Bible into Latin somewhere between 382 and 405 CE. This Latin text, the Vulgate (which translates roughly to “common text”), became the primary version of the Bible for Roman Catholics for nearly fifteen hundred years http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/vul/index.htm

\textsuperscript{14} The Latin “\textit{malum}” refers to the apple, not the tree. It also refers to evil as a substance, a noun (that is, \textit{an} evil, as opposed to the adjective form, \textit{an} evil act). Translations from Latin to English were found via the University of Notre Dame’s on-line Latin dictionary and grammar aid, http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl?evil, accessed August 30, 2009.
during his penultimate labor. This fruit already had associations with love, desire, and temptation, and artists of all kinds capitalized on this fact. One painting in particular, Hugo van der Goes’ *The Fall of Man*, clearly and in great detail depicts the temptation scene in the Garden of Eden. Prominently, behind Adam, Eve, and the Devil, stands an apple tree.\(^{15}\) Linking the apple with humankind’s exile from the Garden of Eden has cemented this symbol’s place in Western culture, for “the fall of man has been used and continues to be a structural pattern for imaginative literature.”\(^{16}\) This particular story, with its emphasis on all that humankind has lost, continues to be recycled throughout Western literature.

The tragic loss Adam and Eve suffer when they are expelled is compounded when they realize that the world they now inhabit is cruel and harsh, for they were “sent into a barren world of remoteness to one another, and of futility in relation to the divine creator . . . In this fallen world, however, they can still remember they had within their grasp a divine destiny; the glory of that original vision of life never quite fades, adding a terrible irony to man’s tragedy after the fall.”\(^{17}\) The world after the fall becomes representative of loss: death, consequence, and the burden the physical life now carries.

\(^{15}\) Van der Goes was a popular artist, and there are some reports that this particular painting contributed to a decline in the demand for apples among illiterate and unlearned Christians. http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/maia/history.html, accessed August 30, 2009.

\(^{16}\) Marion A. Fairman, *Biblical Patterns in Modern Literature*, (Cleveland: Dillon/Liederbach, 1972), 39.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 51.
Chapter Four in the book of Genesis introduces Cain and Abel, two more iconic figures from this saga. This story sets up the classic “brother against brother” narrative, inciting violence and loss once again. The conflict begins when the two brothers bring offerings before God. Cain, being a tiller of the soil, brings “fruit of the ground” while Abel, the shepherd, proffers “of the firstlings of his flock, the fat portions.”\(^\text{18}\) God prefers Abel’s gifts, thus angering Cain. Incensed by this sense of rejection and fueled by jealousy, Cain proceeds to lure his brother away from anyone else and murder him. When God questions Cain as to Abel’s whereabouts, Cain utters the now infamous response, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”\(^\text{19}\) God, of course, knows that Cain is guilty and condemns him to a life of wandering. Cain now loses his family, his home, and his livelihood. Yet again, the theme of loss arises in the Genesis text, as the protagonists are exiled from all that they know. Despite all this loss, Cain manages to settle in the land of Nod and find a wife. Together they have a child, and despite all that he has lost, Cain begins his new life.

The epic tales of Genesis continue with Adam’s future generations, most importantly with the story of Noah and the flood. While many religions and cultures recount flood narratives as part of their mythologies and traditions, in the West it is the

\(^{18}\text{Genesis 4:3}\)

\(^{19}\text{Genesis 4:9}\)
Judeo-Christian flood story that dominates the imaginations of authors.\textsuperscript{20} In this portion of the Genesis narrative, God finds humankind no longer displaying any sort of goodness and vows to destroy humanity and all creation with a world-wide flood. God’s experiment with humans seems to have failed, and God wishes to wash away all traces of them. Yet there remains a modicum of hope in Noah, whom God finds “blameless”\textsuperscript{21} despite the rest of humanity’s pitfalls. God chooses to spare Noah and his entire family from the impending doom. To survive, God instructs Noah to build an ark and to bring aboard this vessel Noah’s family as well as “two of every living, of all flesh . . . to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.”\textsuperscript{22} Noah and his family face tremendous loss: all of their friends will die, all of the land they own and have cultivated will be flooded, all of the animals save the ones on the ark will drown, and their homes will be destroyed. In the face of all of this, however, Noah remains faithful and obeys God’s command.

When the ark is filled, God floods the entire world for forty days. As the waters begin to subside, Noah sends out a bird in search of evidence of dry land. When this bird, a dove, eventually returns to the ark with an olive leaf in its mouth,

\textsuperscript{20} The Biblical Flood story dominated creative literature of the West for centuries, and it still proves to be a source of inspiration for modern writers. Hollywood screenwriters draw on this story for inspiration, most recently with the blockbuster \textit{Evan Almighty}, directed by Tom Shadyac. In this depiction, Morgan Freeman, as God, declares Evan, played by Steve Carell, to be the modern day Noah. The 2007 film chronicles Evan’s journey to leave his job to build an ark before an impending flood, a two thousand-year-old update of the story.

\textsuperscript{21} Genesis 6:9

\textsuperscript{22} Genesis 6:19
Noah has evidence that the flood waters are receding. When, at last, the land is dry, God commands Noah lead all the inhabitants of the ark out so that they can “be fruitful and multiply on the earth.” Despite all that they have lost, Noah and his family are given the chance to begin again. They are, in many ways, similar to Adam and Eve: they have lost their original home and all that is familiar, cast out into strange lands, and given the task to populate the world. This pattern is established, and it has continued to appear in the works of Western literature.

As the narrative of Genesis continues, however, a new pattern centered on the protagonist emerges. Abram, soon to become Abraham, is given a direct command by God to “go from [his] country and [his] father’s house to the land that I [God] will show you. I will make of you a great nation.” There is no calamitous event that precipitates the travel, no reason other than God’s command, yet again the theme of loss is entwined in this narrative. Here, “the combination of command and promise implies that the Lord’s fulfillment of the promise will follow upon Abraham’s fulfillment of the command.” To receive God’s blessing and promise, Abram must leave the community that is familiar to him, the home that he knows. He and his family—including his cousin Lot—gather all of their possessions and head out for the land of Canaan. When they arrive in Canaan, they soon discover that a famine has

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23 Genesis 8:19
24 Genesis 12: 1-2
spread across the land, so Abram and his family go to Egypt “to reside as alien[s].”

Abram once again loses his home, albeit temporarily. This time, he knows that he will return to the land God has promised him, and when the famine is over, he and his family return to the land of Canaan. Abram settles there, and Lot settles in the land of Sodom.

Abram establishes himself in Canaan and experiences great success there. He is wealthy and prosperous. Even though God assures Abram of his reward, Abram is disturbed by the fact that Sarai, his wife, has not borne him any children, for without offspring, God’s promise of a great nation stemming from Abram seems impossible to come to fruition. Despite the fact that the Lord promises Abram that his descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in the sky, Abram is swayed by the pleading of Sarai to lie with Hagar, Sarai’s Egyptian slave-girl. Sarai believes she is doomed to be barren for the course of her life, so she offers Hagar to Abram, believing that perhaps the child of the slave-girl will count as her own issue, therefore helping Abram fulfill his destiny. When Hagar does, in fact, conceive, Sarai is offended by Hagar’s contempt and casts her out of her home. An angel of the Lord appears to Hagar in the wilderness and orders her to return to Abram. She does, and births a son she calls Ishmael. The original pattern established in Genesis emerges here; the pattern of initial loss and gain plays out with both women. Sarai loses her assurance that she will play a role in the prophecy, and Hagar ultimately loses her home in Abram’s tent.

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26 Genesis 12:10
God eventually fulfills his promise to Abram, but not before God orders both Abram and Sarai to undergo very specific changes. Abram must lose his identity, becoming Abraham, which bears a similarity to “the Hebrew for ancestor of a multitude, referring to nations whose ancestry was traced to Abraham.” He, and all the other males in his household, must also be circumcised as a sign of their covenant with God. Once again, a character experiences a loss of the old life, and in this case, the old name, to start a new life. Sarai, too, must change her name. God demands that she become Sarah, and it is not until she adopts this new identity that she is able to finally conceive a child. Despite her old age, she bears a son and this child is named Isaac.

When Isaac is a young boy, God decides to test Abraham’s faith. God calls to Abraham and commands him to “take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” Abraham does not question this extraordinarily difficult task; instead, he packs his things and sets off with his son to the mountains God shows him. When Abraham reaches the appointed place, he builds an altar, binds his son, and lays him upon the altar. As Abraham pulls out his knife, ready to sacrifice his son, the voice of God calls out from heaven and orders him to stop. Because Abraham has been faithful, obeying God’s command and demonstrating that

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28 Genesis 22:2
he would not withhold his only son from his Lord, God stops the sacrifice and allows Isaac to live. Western authors influenced by this story have used this pattern of sacrifice in many of their texts.

The story of Isaac continues in Genesis, as Isaac becomes a man, marries Rebekah, and fathers twin boys, Esau and Jacob. The dynamic between these two brothers is a reflection of the animosity between Cain and Abel, the first siblings. These two brothers are set against each other even in the womb, and God tells Rebekah that “the two peoples born of you shall be divided.” 29 There is no harmony between these two men, and this hostility between them remains throughout most of their lives. Much of this is due to the fact that Jacob bargains Esau’s birthright away from him. Esau comes in from working in the fields and declares that he is famished. He demands that Jacob give him some of the stew that Jacob has made. Jacob then demands that Esau sell Jacob his birthright before Jacob will give any stew. Because his is so famished, Esau agrees, not believing the birthright to be of any use to him.

When Isaac is old and near death, he calls to Esau, asking his firstborn son to hunt some game and prepare a food for him. Unbeknownst to both Isaac and Esau, Rebekah overheard this conversation and moves to help the younger son, Jacob, receive the blessing Isaac is about to bestow. She and Jacob take two kids from the flock, make a stew, and fashion a guise for Jacob out of Esau’s garments. When Jacob takes the food to his father, he lies, claiming that he is Esau. Isaac, believing his

29 Genesis 25:23

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oldest son is in front of him, blesses Jacob, giving him dominion over all of the land, the servants, and the household. Esau is furious and though he receives a slight blessing from his father, he vows to “kill [his] brother Jacob” when his father is dead. To prevent the death of her beloved son, Rebekah warns Jacob of Esau’s plan and sends him to the land of her brother Laban, far away from Esau’s fury.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Jacob must leave his home, losing the comfort and security of his life there. But like his father and grandfather, he must lose everything in order to fulfill the destiny God has in store for him. During his journey to Haran, the land of Laban, Jacob has a dream in which God confers a similar promise from him as God did with Isaac: Jacob is destined to father a great nation. Like his forbearers’ offspring, Jacob’s offspring, too, will be many and prosperous.

When Jacob reaches the land of Haran, one of the first people he encounters is Rachel, daughter of Laban. Jacob falls instantly in love with her and is determined to marry her. Before Rachel can become Jacob’s wife, Laban demands seven years of service to him from Jacob. Jacob readily agrees, as he is willing to do whatever he must to wed Rachel.

When Jacob’s seven years have come to an end, he arranges for the marriage to Rachel to take place. Jacob goes to his tent believing he will be intimate with Rachel. Laban, however, deceives Jacob, taking “his daughter Leah . . . to Jacob, and he

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30 Genesis 27:41
Jacob, who has so artfully deceived others in his life, is now the victim of deception himself. Still wanting to marry Rachel, Jacob works another seven years for Laban so that he will give his younger daughter to Jacob. In the fourteen years Jacob spends with Laban, not only does he have two wives but also their serving-maids as well. He is now well positioned to fulfill the destiny promised to him by God.

From this point, the Genesis narrative brings back the pattern of sibling rivalry, though this time, it arises between sisters, Leah and Rachel. Leah, unloved by Jacob, is the first wife to give Jacob children. God sees the dynamic between in this family and “opened [Leah’s] womb; but Rachel was barren.”  

Leah conceives and bears Jacob four sons during this time. Rachel, with no children for her husband, “envied her sister.” Desperate to give Jacob a child, Rachel does what Sarah did a generation before and offers her serving-maid, Billah, as a surrogate wife. Billah is able to give Jacob two sons, and Rachel is content that she has contributed. Not to be outdone, however, Leah then offers her serving-maid, Zilpah, to Jacob as another wife, for Leah has not given Jacob any more children after the first four sons. Like Billah, Zilpah conceives two sons with Jacob. Leah ultimately conceives two more sons and a

31 Genesis 29:23
32 Genesis 29:31
33 Genesis 30:1
daughter for Jacob, and God remembers Rachel and finally opens her womb, allowing her to conceive Joseph.

With his large family firmly established, Jacob takes leave of Laban in order to journey back to the land where he was born. Upon returning, Jacob must face his brother, Esau, whom he deceived so many years ago. He has no idea if Esau still harbors resentment and hatred, so Jacob is anxious upon arrival in Edom. On the night before he is to meet his brother, Jacob has an encounter with a divine being. He wrestles with the being all night, until this strange man pulls Jacob’s hip out of joint. Before the divine man departs, Jacob requests a blessing from him, and this man acquiesces, saying, “You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”34 Like his ancestors, Jacob must lose his identity and adopt a new self; and in losing the old, he gains an entirely new life, one that was promised by God.

As dawn approaches, Jacob is anxious to meet his brother; he does not know how the brother who once threatened to kill him will now react upon seeing Jacob again. Jacob approaches with an air of supplication, continually bowing as he approaches Esau. Jacob’s hesitation, however, is not necessary. Esau runs “to meet [his brother] and embrace[s] him,”35 falling on his knees and kissing Jacob’s neck.

34 Genesis 32:28

35 Genesis 33:4
The two reconcile, and Jacob settles his family in the land of Bethel. Here, starting his new life, Jacob receives affirmation from God regarding the blessing he is to receive:

Your name is Jacob: no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name . . . . I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you and kings shall spring from you. The land that I gave to Abraham and to Isaac I will give to you, and I will the land to your offspring after you.  

Jacob’s place in the patriarchal destiny is now firmly established. His children will inhabit the land, dividing into the original twelve tribes of Israel.

The final story in the book of Genesis is one that focuses yet again on the necessary loss that precedes substantial gain and reward on behalf of God. Here again, a story of sibling rivalry is presented, this time amongst the offspring of Jacob. Joseph is the beloved son of Jacob, loved more than any of his brothers. It is Joseph who receives the famed “coat of many colors” from his father, while none of his brothers receive any similar gifts. This blatant favoritism angers Joseph’s brothers, and “they hated [Jacob] and could not speak peaceably to him.”

Joseph further antagonizes his brothers by telling them of a dreams he has that appear to prophecy Joseph’s dominion of his brothers. Because of these dreams, Joseph’s brothers come to loathe him and are “jealous of him.”

Like Cain, and like Esau, this band of

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36 Genesis 35:10-12
37 Genesis 37:4
38 Genesis 37:11
brothers conspires to kill their brother. Reuben, the eldest brother, voices objection to this plan, so the brothers decide rather to sell Joseph into slavery.

Yet again, the protagonist loses his home, his family, and in this case, his freedom. Joseph is taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard. Joseph initially prospers in Potiphar’s house, as God blesses him, like God did for Joseph’s forefathers. This comfortable situation does not last long, for Joseph soon becomes the prey of Potiphar’s adulterous wife. When Joseph rejects her advances, she maliciously claims that Joseph attacks her, so Potiphar has Joseph thrown in jail. All too soon Joseph loses his home and the favored position that he had established there. In jail, however, Joseph quickly finds favor with the chief jailer and is given the responsibility of caring for all of the other prisoners.

All the loss that Joseph has experienced is nonetheless facilitating his move into Pharaoh’s house, for in jail, Joseph correctly interprets the dreams of two of Pharaoh’s servants; when the cupbearer returns to Pharaoh, he tells his king of Joseph’s gifts. Because Pharaoh himself has had troubling dreams that neither he nor his counselors can interpret, he calls on Joseph to explain their meaning. Joseph informs him that they will experience seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh is so pleased with Joseph’s abilities that he adopts Joseph into the Egyptian court. Joseph is given authority by Pharaoh, who renames him Zaphenath-paneah declares to him “without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all
the land of Egypt.” Again, Joseph must lose so that he may gain.

When the famine finally sets in, the Egyptians are well prepared with stores of plenty saved in accordance with Joseph’s predictions. The famine not only affects Joseph and the Egyptians, but also those as far away as Canaan and Bethel. Joseph’s brothers and father are also suffering the effects of the famine, and Jacob ultimately sends his sons out in search of food. The brothers come to Egypt to buy grain, and they unwittingly find themselves before Joseph, who immediately recognizes them. The brothers, however, do not recognize Joseph as the brother they sold into slavery years ago. Because he can act as a stranger to them, Joseph deceives his brothers in their initial dealings, as if to test their character. Several times, he gives his brothers extra money after they buy grain, and each time the brothers return the money to Joseph. Finally satisfied, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers and invites them to move their families to Goshen, where Joseph can ensure their survival during the famine. Jacob accompanies his sons, for he longs to see the son he thought was lost to him. The entire family is reunited in Egypt, where Joseph enjoys prosperity and satisfaction all the years of his life.

B. The Book of Exodus

Knowledge of the book of Exodus is yet another quintessential element for students studying Western literature. While this book focuses on a sole protagonist—
Moses—the character struggles and literary themes that arise in the particular book are, like those of Genesis, repeated and alluded to throughout Western literature. The theme of loss, particularly as it pertains to identity, dominates Exodus.

The narrative of Exodus begins approximately four centuries after the death of Joseph. All of Israel has prospered in Egypt, and the ever-growing population of Israelites threatens the current Pharaoh, who never knew Joseph and has no regard for his descendants. To combat this perceived danger, Pharaoh enslaves the Israelites, hoping to diminish their numbers. His plan, however, does nothing to slow the growth of these people, so Pharaoh demands the death of all newborn Hebrew males, declaring, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw in the Nile.” Pharaoh’s desperate attempt to stop the Israelites from producing further progeny results in mass infanticide.

One woman, married to a descendent of Jacob’s son Levi, refuses to let such a fate befall her son. She hides her child as long as she can, and when he grows too big to hide, she places him in a basket and leaves him in a patch of reeds, hoping he will be found and saved. It is the daughter of Pharaoh who, in fact, finds this basket and rescues the infant, adopting him as her own son. Pharaoh’s daughter unknowingly hires the child’s mother to nurse and raise the infant. When the child is grown, he is brought to Pharaoh’s daughter and named Moses. Not only has Moses’ mother now

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40 Exodus 1:22
truly lost her son, he has also lost his true identity; no longer a Hebrew slave, Moses takes his place as a prince of Egypt.

Despite a royal Egyptian upbringing, Moses does not feel any kind of connection to the people around him. He even kills an Egyptian man who is savagely beating a Hebrew slave. Forced now to flee and escape Pharaoh’s vengeance, Moses leaves his home and takes refuge in the land of Midian. Yet again, Moses loses his home and becomes an alien in a foreign land. He settles in this land, takes a wife, and works as a shepherd for his father-in-law. It is here in this post as a shepherd that Moses first encounters the voice of God calling him to a new destiny: savior and liberator of his people. One day when Moses is out in the wilderness, the angel of God appears before him as an image of a burning bush. The angel then commands Moses to relieve the suffering of the Hebrew people, bringing them “up out of [Egypt] to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Though Moses is initially skeptical of his ability to rescue the Israelites, he ultimately accepts his destiny, confidant that the Lord will be with him throughout this endeavor.

Moses then takes his family and leaves Midian, returning to Egypt to fulfill his destiny. God has promised to work wonders through Moses so that he may convince Pharaoh of the Lord’s true power. When Moses reaches the Israelites, he performs these wonders and earns the trust and support of his people. Accepted as their representative, Moses sets up his first audience with the Pharaoh. Moses has but one

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41 Exodus 3:8
demand of the Egyptian ruler: “Let my people go.”  Pharaoh scoffs at this request and responds by bringing further injustices on the Hebrews. Rejected and bitter, Moses cries out in defeat to the Lord. God hears his cries and reminds Moses of the covenant the Lord established with the patriarchs of Genesis—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God then instructs Moses to take another audience with Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelites.

Moses, along with his older brother Aaron, returns to the Egyptian court to claim freedom for the Hebrew people. On this visit, the Lord allows Moses to perform signs of God’s awesome power. Though Pharaoh’s magicians initially perform similar feats, eventually, the power of God’s work becomes unmatchable, and the magicians fall silent, awed by God’s power. Pharaoh, however, continually rejects Moses and Aaron. It is not until Moses calls forth the final plague, killing Pharaoh’s son, that Pharaoh relents and releases the Israelites from their bondage. The Israelites themselves were spared the death of the firstborn child because the destroyer of God passed over any house that marked its door with sacrificial blood, as Moses instructed them to do. As the Israelites cast off their shackles, God declares a new beginning for

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42 Exodus 5:1

43 Moses and Aaron perform a total of ten signs before Pharaoh on numerous visits. The signs Moses and Aaron produce come in the form of plagues and are now known as the Ten Plagues of Egypt. They are as follows: turning water to blood, an infestation of frogs, a swarm of gnats, a swarm of flies, livestock disease, storms of hail and thunder, a wind of locusts, a darkness of sand and dust, and finally the death of all firstborn Egyptian children.
them. They will lose their old ways and adopt new customs, with new rituals and new rules, and they will take up residence in a new land, Succoth.

What appears to be a haven for the Israelites, however, turns out to provide only a brief respite, for Pharaoh’s heart is again hardened against the Hebrews, so He sets out to recapture the slaves he released. With a massive army of soldiers, the Egyptians quickly catch up to the Israelites. The Lord has promised to protect them, so God gives Moses the power to part the waters of the Red Sea. Through Moses, God drives back the raging waters and creates a swath of dry land by which the Israelites can escape. The Egyptian army follows them, but God creates a panic among them. God then takes advantage of their confusion and instructs Moses to collapse the parted waters. The entire Egyptian army is killed, thus confirming the power of the God of Israel.

The destruction of the Egyptian army enables the Israelites to travel freely toward a new land. They wander for forty years, looking for habitable land and subsisting on manna God provides. During this time, the Hebrews turn to Moses as the sole authority: he is the interpreter of God’s will and the arbitrator for internal disputes. Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, persuades Moses to “look for able men among all people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain.” ⁴⁴ These men will be made officers, relieving Moses of the burden of being the lone authoritative

⁴⁴ Exodus 18:21
figure for the people. They help establish a new order for governance, a hierarchy of elders who help maintain stability and ensure justice within the community.

When the Israelites finally come to the wilderness of Sinai, God again calls on Moses to guide his people into a new way of life. This time, on Mount Sinai, the Lord declares the Ten Commandments to Moses. They are as follows:

1. You shall have no other gods besides [the God of Israel] . . .
2. You shall not make for yourself a false idol . . .
3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God
4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy . . .
5. Honor your mother and your father . . .
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal . . .
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet . . . anything that belongs to your neighbor.\textsuperscript{45}

These commandments require the Israelites to adopt a new system of faith and worship. God also gives Moses instructions for the construction of the tabernacle, of altars, and of the court. Never before has God issued such directives, and now they are a central part of the new life the Israelites will lead.

\textsuperscript{45} Exodus 20:1-17
Moses’ communing with God takes place over forty days, and during this time, the Hebrews become impatient and restless. They are eager for Moses to return with a sign of their God, for they yearn for a tangible symbol of God’s presence among them. In Moses’ absence, the people turn to his brother Aaron for guidance. They bring all of their gold to Aaron, who molds the metal into the shape of a calf, the symbol of strength and fertility. Satisfied, the Hebrews commence worship of this idol, blatantly disregarding the covenant they previously established with God.

When Moses descends Mount Sinai, he is overcome with rage upon learning of the Israelites’ blasphemy. He breaks the tablets he was carrying in two—tablets on which were inscribed the new commandments for the people of Israel—a poignant symbol of the broken covenant with God. He then chastises his people and destroys their golden idol. Because the Lord favors Moses, he acquiesces to Moses’ plea for intercession and creates a new set of tablets inscribed with the covenant. The bond that the Israelites broke has been reforged; they regained what they had lost. The Israelites proceed to build the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. Moses has now done all that God has asked of him, and the Israelites are poised to follow God to the Promised Land.

C. The Gospel of Matthew

Like Genesis and Exodus, the Gospel of Matthew is an important text for students to read, not only for the characters and themes it presents but also for the
phrases that have become part of both the popular and academic cultures. Many of the insights and much of the wisdom Jesus proffers in this text are just as important as the still-echoing themes of loss and redemption that also arise in this story. The quotations attributed to Jesus that follow in this portion represent those that frequently appear in Western literature.

Like Exodus, the Gospel of Matthew focuses on a sole protagonist: in this case, Jesus the Christ. Because the author of this gospel is concerned with legitimizing Jesus as a Jew, the story begins by tracing Jesus’ ancestry back fourteen generations. Matthew links Jesus to some of the most prominent patriarchs of Israel’s history, including Abraham, Jacob, Jesse, and King David. By doing this, Matthew places Jesus among those who are favored by God and who are called on by God to lead the nation of Israel. Matthew, however, also highlights the fact that Jesus’ mother, Mary, is a virgin when she conceives. The fact that Jesus has no human father furthers his future status as “Messiah.” The circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth set him apart from the other great men of Israel’s history, and this event is particularly significant in terms of its influence on Western literature. The emphasis on the unique birth, the prophesied child, the one on whom all hope rests are all ones that Western authors have repeated in their stories.

This child is also so special that his birth is celebrated beyond his immediate community. Upon hearing of the Jesus’ birth, magi from the East journey to
Jerusalem to pay homage to “the child who has been born King of the Jews.” The fact that these men come from lands so far away also reaffirms Jesus’ status as an emerging universal king. His reach and power will extend to the entire world.

Yet again, because there are those who are threatened by his potential power and seek to destroy him at all costs. The magi who come to visit seek the whereabouts of the child from the ruler of Jerusalem, King Herod. When Herod learns of this prophesied child, he immediately grows fearful of what he perceives to be a threat to his reign. He instructs the magi to find the child and then to return to him with news of his whereabouts. The magi, however, are warned in a dream to avoid Herod, so they return home along another route. When Herod learns of the magi’s deception, he sets out to destroy Jesus through any means necessary. In what has become known as the Massacre of the Innocents, Herod gathers all children who are two years old or younger and cruelly slaughters them. In this mass carnage, he hopes the future King of the Jews has been destroyed.

An angel of the Lord also appears to Joseph, Mary’s husband, in a dream and warns him that Herod seeks to kill the child and to flee to Egypt. As it did for the Joseph of Genesis, Egypt provides a haven and a refuge for the favored one of God. And like so many before them, Joseph and Mary must lose the comfort of the home and community that they know to gain the life that God has in store for them and their child in the future. Once Herod dies, the angel of God visits Joseph again to tell him

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46 Matthew 2:2
that it is safe to return to the land of Israel. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus return to the land of Galilee in the town of Nazareth.

The Gospel of Matthew does not provide details on Jesus’ childhood; rather, it picks up with the preparations for Jesus’ public ministry. John the Baptist appears in Judea, telling the world to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” He seeks to prepare a spiritual path for the coming of Jesus by baptizing people in the waters of the river Jordan. John is the man whom the people see as the prophet, yet Jesus himself comes to John to be baptized. Though John feels he is unworthy to baptize Jesus, he does so, and when he does, “a voice from heaven declares, ‘This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” This voice from heaven serves as yet another indication of Jesus as divine. This baptism serves as a model for Western authors: it is a rite of passage through which the chosen one presents himself before the master of the day and moves to take his place.

After Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit leads him into the wilderness where he will fast for forty days and forty nights. During this time, Jesus is also tempted by the devil; the test of the righteous is one that has occurred in both Genesis and Exodus, and it occurs here again with Jesus. Matthew continually stresses the link between Jesus and the early Hebrew patriarchs, and this test to prove Jesus’ worth is yet another narrative element to which Western authors make reference in their works.

47 Matthew 3:2

48 Matthew 3:17
The devil tempts Jesus three times. The first occurs at the end of the fast: knowing Jesus has denied himself food and drink for so long, the devil attempts to persuade the famished Jesus to use his divine power to turn stone into bread. Jesus refuses, stating that “one does not live by bread alone but by the word that comes from the mouth of God.” The devil then proceeds to tempt Jesus twice more, but each time, Jesus refuses to yield. The pattern of temptation emerges as a prominent theme in the gospel from this point forward, and it is one that has been picked up frequently by Western authors.

Jesus public ministry actively begins upon his return from the wilderness. He begins garnering his apostles, those who will follow him, devoting their lives to his cause. He first comes upon Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. Jesus finds these two men fishing in the Sea of Galilee. He instructs them to drop their nets immediately, for he “will make [them] fish for people.” The two brothers do not hesitate, leaving their nets and joining Jesus. Like the protagonists of both Genesis and Exodus, these men must lose their current identities to gain a new life in service to God. Jesus also finds two more brothers, James and John, who choose to abandon their livelihood and take up a new life with Jesus Christ.

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49 Matthew 4:4

50 Matthew 4:19

51 This John should not be confused with John the Baptist, who, at this point in the narrative, had been arrested and jailed. The John whom Jesus recruits is the son of Zebedee, and unrelated to John the Baptist.
As Jesus gains more followers, his fame spreads throughout the land. People flock to him, pleading with him to heal their sick and following him to hear his teachings. Wanting a respite from the masses, Jesus and his apostles take refuge on a mountain. Jesus takes this opportunity to instruct his disciples as to the characteristics of a virtuous life. He first proffers the nine beatitudes, which outline the qualities of the virtuous as seen by God. Among those that are most commonly found in Western literature are the following:

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
3. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  

As Jesus continues his teachings, both to the apostles and to the crowds who gather before him, he adopts a style that is full of metaphor and parable. These literary devices have been recreated in various forms throughout the writings of the West. For example, Jesus tells his apostles to be a light unto the world. Just as “a city built on a hill cannot be hid,” neither can the good example of disciples living a life given in glory to God. Jesus continues his instruction by offering his reflections on Jewish law. Here, he challenges the apostles to abandon traditional interpretation of the law in favor of the new one he offers. The undercurrents of loss still appear in this narrative,

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52 Matthew 5:3

53 Matthew 5:14
as Jesus continually pushes his followers to lose their old ways, their old beliefs, and their old lives in favor of all that he offers. Jesus reverses the idea, for example, that one should love his neighbor and hate his enemy; instead, Jesus commands his followers to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” He tells them to love the loathed, reminding them that it is easier to love only those who love them. Instead they should aspire to love like their heavenly father, who offers love to all. Jesus also presents the idea that that which the apostles desire is within their grasp, for if they “ask, it will be given to [them]; search, and [they] will find; knock, and the door will be opened.” One of the most popularly quoted sayings of Jesus comes in the form of the “Golden Rule”: “in everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”

After Jesus finishes his Sermon on the Mount, he actively begins his ministry of healing the sick. A leper comes before him and begs Jesus to heal him. Jesus immediately does so, publically demonstrating his innate, divine power. When Jesus goes to Capernaum, a centurion of the Roman legion approaches him and requests that Jesus heal the centurion’s servant. Impressed by the centurion’s faith, Jesus acquiesces. This episode continues to reinforce Jesus as a divine and universal king, one to whom even those outside the tribe of Israel can turn. Jesus appeals to both the

54 Matthew 5:44
55 Matthew 7:7
56 Matthew 7:12
social outcasts and the foreigners, for he even makes it a point to welcome the despised into his folds. Jesus invites Matthew, a tax collector, to follow him. Tax collectors were among the most hated people of the time, yet Jesus openly welcomes this man. Jesus serves as a model of inclusion, one who circulates among the downtrodden and garners support from the lowly.

The reputation Jesus acquires may inspire the masses, but it threatens the power of those who, like Herod, fear that Jesus will cause them to lose their authority in the land. When Jesus commissions his disciples to go out and heal the sick, he warns them that he is “sending [them] out like sheep in the midst of wolves.” They must be willing to sacrifice their reputations, their comfort, and perhaps their lives in order to carry out his will in the world. This directive only furthers the tension between Jesus and the local authorities; as it escalates, the Pharisees begin to openly criticize Jesus and his ministry in an attempt to discredit him. They claim, for example, that Jesus is able to cure demoniacs because he himself is in allegiance with them; that is, they assert that he is a leader of the demons and therefore capable of commanding them to leave a body. Jesus responds to this defamation by telling the Pharisees that “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.” When the Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign of his

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57 Matthew 10:16
58 Matthew 12:25
divine power, Jesus chastises and rebukes them. He attempts to unite the people, but at every turn, he faces obstacles and opposition.

Despite the growing unrest in the ruling authority, Jesus continues to preach to the people. Even the death of John the Baptist cannot stop his ministry. Jesus is deeply sorrowed by the news of his teacher’s execution, and though he attempts to withdraw from the crowds, they nevertheless follow him. Jesus has compassion on them and heals their sick. Though his disciples urge him to send the crowds away, Jesus declines, instead ordering his men to feed the crowd. The disciples protest, as they only have five pieces of bread and two fish with them. There is no way to feed all who have come. In yet another demonstration of his divine power, Jesus blesses this food and enables the disciples to miraculously feed over five thousand people. He is able to do what no one else can, in the face of impossible odds, and confronted with enormous doubt. Despite this miracle, the Pharisees continue to doubt Jesus’ authenticity as the Messiah, and Jesus warns his disciples against the fallacious rumors of the Pharisees. Simon Peter boldly asserts that he knows Jesus to be the living son of the Lord, and Jesus is so pleased with this faith that he declares Peter “the rock” on which his church will be built.\textsuperscript{59} And while this reassures the disciples of their place and purpose in the world to come, Jesus now openly declares the fate that must befall him: crucifixion and resurrection.

\textsuperscript{59} Matthew 16:18
Even though Jesus is aware of the incredible sacrifice he must make, he continues his public teachings. Jesus tells the people that all that is needed is “faith the size of a mustard seed”\textsuperscript{60} to accomplish what others deem impossible. Jesus also says that they must relinquish all of their material possessions if they wish to strive for the same perfection that their heavenly Father exhibits, for “it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.”\textsuperscript{61} Amid the protests of his followers, Jesus reinforces the idea that what they must give up is more than material; their desire for greatness must also be abandoned. Though much will be lost, so much more will be gained in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus himself models this philosophy, for “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”\textsuperscript{62} In the face of such a terrible end, Jesus nonetheless continues his mission. The grim yet steadfast acceptance of his fate further serves as inspiration for Western authors. Often, a protagonist is aware of the fact that continuing a journey will lead to death, but the sacrifice for the good of others is a prolific motif in Western literature.

While the early actions and sayings of Jesus are important for students to know, it is the end of Jesus’ life that stands out as most influential. From Jesus’ highly celebrated arrival in Jerusalem to his disgraceful crucifixion in Golgotha, the

\textsuperscript{60} Matthew 17:20
\textsuperscript{61} Matthew 19:24
\textsuperscript{62} Matthew 20:28
cycle of events over the course of this narrative week provide the basis for character, plot, and theme in numerous Western works. The narrative recalling the last week of Jesus’ life begins as Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem. Signs of adulation and praise mark Jesus’ arrival in the town, as the masses cut branches from trees and spread them along the road Jesus will travel. The people hail him as the “Son of David” and declare him a prophet. Once in Jerusalem, Jesus goes to the Temple; outraged by the trade taking place in the house of worship, he drives out all the businessmen. With the temple now cleansed, Jesus is able to the sick and lame who come to him for healing.

The chief priests, elders, and Pharisees grow ever more wary of Jesus as his popularity swells with every miracle he performs. They begin to publically question his authority, so Jesus attempts to mollify them by proffering parables to help clarify his purpose and ministry. He pointedly informs them that they themselves do nothing to advance the kingdom of God. Angered, the men want to arrest Jesus but are fearful of upsetting the masses who love of him. The local authorities again endeavor to engage Jesus in a debate, asking Jesus a series of questions about Jewish law. When they ask which commandment is the greatest, Jesus tells them that they “shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’ . . .

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63 Matthew 21:9
and a second is like it: “love your neighbor as yourself.” His responses halt the questions, so Jesus turns to the crowd and reminds his followers to be mindful of the hypocrites who attempt to exalt themselves, for only the humble will be exalted. 65 Jesus then retreats to the Mount of Olives with his disciples, where he recounts to them the prophecies surrounding the end of days.

While Jesus is taking refuge with his disciples in the mountains, the chief priests and elders are conspiring to have him arrested. Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, aids their cause. Judas approaches the priests and inquires what they will give him if he betrays Jesus; “they pay him thirty pieces of silver.” 66 That evening, Judas rejoins Jesus and the other disciples at dinner. Here, Jesus announces that he is aware of the fact that someone among them will betray him. Although Jesus names no one specifically, Judas vehemently asserts that he is not the one who has done this. Jesus accepts Judas’ response and continues the Last Supper. He and the disciples celebrate a Passover feast, breaking bread and drinking wine. Jesus declares that the bread they eat is “his body” and the wine they drink, “his blood.” 67 After the meal, Jesus continues to inform the disciples what the next few days will hold for

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64 Matthew 22:37-39
65 Matthew 23:12
66 Matthew 26:15
67 Matthew 26:26-27
them all. He predicts that they all will desert him and that Peter, one of his most beloved apostles, will deny him three times before the rooster crows in the morning. These coming betrayals prove highly disturbing to Jesus, so he retreats to the garden of Gethsemane and confesses his fears and doubts to God. In the midst of this prayer, Judas comes to him and greets him with a kiss, for Judas has told the priests that “the one I kiss is the man; arrest him.” 68

The Roman soldiers arrest Jesus and bring him to Caiaphas, the high priest. Only Peter follows them. The chief priests interrogate Jesus, looking for him to perjure himself in some way, but Jesus refuses to respond to their accusations. Because witnesses come forth and proffer testimony, the priests find Jesus guilty of blasphemy. Peter, waiting outside, is recognized by some in the town; each time they approach him, he denies knowing Jesus or being one of his apostles, thus fulfilling Jesus’ prophecy. The next morning, the elders and priests bind Jesus and hand him over to Pontius Pilate, the ruling Roman officer of the region. Here, too, Jesus refuses to respond to the questions of Pilate, so Pilate symbolically washes his hands in front of the crowds, declares himself to be innocent of Jesus fate, and acquiesces to the whims of the masses, who demand Jesus be crucified.

Once Jesus is returned to the Roman soldiers, they flog him, strip him, and mockingly clad him in a purple robe and a crown of thorns. They spit him and beat him before removing the robe and taking him to Golgotha to crucify him. They hang

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68 Matthew 26:48
Jesus on a cross amongst two other criminals also being crucified. The crowds continue to mock him even as he hangs on the cross. Like Satan in the wilderness, the crowds urge Jesus to demonstrate his power and save himself from this fate. Jesus, however, refuses to respond to them. Jesus hangs on the cross all day, but at noon, the sky turns dark and it remains so for the next three hours. Then, at three o’clock, Jesus cries out to God, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

A follower of Jesus asks Pilate for Jesus’ body, and it is wrapped and laid in a tomb. This man rolls a great stone in front of the tomb to seal it. The next day, the chief priests posts guards in front of the tomb to ensure that none of Jesus’ followers surreptitiously steal the body in an effort to feign the truth of Jesus’ promise of resurrection. Not only do the guards take watch, but they also seal the tomb entrance to ensure that no one can enter.

Three days later, after the Sabbath, two women come to the tomb to grieve. When they arrive, an angel of the Lord appears to them, rolls the stone away, and tells them that Jesus is not here: he has been raised from the dead. He shows them the empty tomb and instructs them to deliver this news to the disciples. Jesus then appears to them, greets them, and gives them the same instructions. Jesus finally joins with the disciples and sends them out into the world, to “baptize [all] in the name of

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69 Matthew 27: 46

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the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." His final command before he ascends to the Father is to spread the message of his teachings to the world.

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70 Matthew 28: 19

71 The characters, plot, themes, and phrases in this gospel are not the only elements that frequently appear in Western works. It is worth noting the emphasis on the number three or its multiples in the gospel text. Early in the text, three magi seek the Christ child; Satan tempts Jesus three times in the wilderness; Jesus proclaims nine beatitudes during the Sermon on the Mount; he gathers 12 apostles; Judas has been paid thirty pieces of silver; Peter will deny Jesus three times; Jesus will rise from the dead after three days; Jesus himself a physical manifestation of a triune God, the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Western authors frequently incorporate the number three or its derivatives into their texts, for the number three has come to note divine perfection.
CHAPTER III

According to one estimate, [Shakespeare] alludes to Scripture some 1,300 times. As for the rest of literature, when your [student] reads *The Old Man and the Sea*, a teacher could tick off the references to Christ’s Passion—the bleeding of the old man’s palms, his stumbles while carrying his mast over his shoulder, his hat cutting his head—but wouldn’t the thrill of recognition have been more satisfying on their own?

--David Van Biema, *Time Magazine* April 2, 2006

Whether they are studying John Steinbeck’s imaginative retelling of the Genesis narrative in *East of Eden* or encountering Patrick Henry’s warning to the American colonists to “suffer not . . . to be betrayed by a kiss” from the King of England, students need a frame of reference in which to infer meaning from these words. With a solid foundation in Genesis, Exodus, and the Gospel of Matthew, students are well equipped to study the Western texts that dominate the high school English curriculum.

A. Classic Fiction

Though British author William Golding has written over a dozen novels, it is his first, *Lord of the Flies*, for which he is most well-known. This perennial work is the story of British preparatory school boys marooned on a deserted island. Devoid of all societal norms, these boys celebrate the freedom to do whatever they wish, whenever they wish. Any lingering sense of order and propriety slowly gives way to chaos and anarchy as the boys begin to socially regress, denigrating to more primitive, animalistic creatures who survive on bloodlust and power. Golding’s work is, in many
ways, a “frightening parody on man’s return to that state of darkness from which it took him thousands of years to emerge.”¹ Golding accomplishes this in part because of a heavy reliance on both Genesis and Gospel narratives; *Lord of the Flies* is riddled with biblical echoes, and it is essential for the reader to understand these allusions if the full meaning of Golding’s work is to be understood.

Golding opens his narrative with the boys scattered all over the island. Their plane has crashed, and they are unaware of what exactly has happened to them. Survivors wander, slowly discovering one another and mutually exploring the island. The island is covered with lush foliage, exotic birds, and dense, raw jungle—no evidence that humans have ever been here can be found. In many ways, it seems Edenic. Like Adam and Eve, who simply appear in the midst of a beautiful garden full of wildlife and plants, the boys arrive on the island from “out of nowhere.” And just as Adam and Eve were, in a sense, child-like—naïve, no example to follow, no wisdom provided by age and experience—so are the boys on this island. As the boys explore the island, it is if they are seeing all its wonders for the first time.

The arrival of the humans on this island also reinforces the Genesis-inspired notion that it is man himself who spoils the beauty and perfection of the world in which he lives. The plane that crashed created “a long scar [that] smashed into the

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Man’s implements are responsible for the marring and physical destruction of this island paradise; the cycle of the Genesis narrative is repeated here, as Adam and Eve were certainly responsible for marring the perfection of their home in Eden. Despite the beautiful surroundings, Golding alerts his readers to the fact that this place will serve to corrupt the boys.

Frequently in the first chapter of this novel, Golding describes the boys as wearing no clothes: “the naked crooks of [a character’s] knees were plump”3; before entering an inviting pool of water for the first time, Ralph, the novel’s protagonist, removes “the snake-clasp of his belt, lug[s] off his shorts and pants, and [stands] there naked, looking at the dazzling water.”4 When Adam and Eve first stood in the Garden of Eden, they, too, were naked. They do not sew clothing until they have been corrupted by the sin they commit. In both stories, this detail serves to reinforce the fact that these characters are neophytes to the world; they are inexperienced and immature. The fact that Ralph’s belt is snake-like is also another allusion to the Genesis story of the Fall of Man, as it was a snake that tempts Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit. The image of the snake on Ralph’s belt evokes this connection with evil and corruption.

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.,10.
Golding also patterns his main characters, in part, on those found in biblical narratives. The relationship between the protagonist, Ralph, and his antagonist, Jack, certainly evokes the relationship between Cain and Abel. When they first meet, a quiet kinship forms between the two. They explore the island together, crashing through the forest, clearing rocks, and chasing wild pigs. Their behavior evokes that of brothers playing together. Their friendship, however, is tainted by jealousy from the start. The boys decide that they need a figure of authority about them, a chief to rule. Ralph’s only competition for chief comes from Jack. Jack wants to be chief, but the boys look to Ralph because he holds the conch, the symbol of power and authority. Someone calls for a vote, and Ralph handily wins. As the boys cheer, “Jack’s face disappear[es] under a blush of mortification.”5 Jack has offered himself, but the boys find his offering inadequate, much the same way that the Lord finds Cain’s offering inadequate and rebukes him for it. The jealousy that manifests in Jack mirrors that of Cain’s as he was jealous of Abel’s favor with the Lord. As the story continues, the relationship between the boys continues to deteriorate until finally, Jack and his supporters are combing the island, looking to find and kill Ralph, as Cain sought to kill Abel.

Golding also takes inspiration from the Gospel narratives other characters, particularly Simon and Piggy. Both of these characters embody purity and goodness, and both fail to be corrupted by the savageness that overtakes the majority of the boys,


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even Ralph. Together, they serve as Christ-figures, both being sacrificed by those in whose midst they live. Piggy is the voice of reason, the one who attempts to turn the boys to the proper path. He reminds them of what should be done, the actions they need to take, yet no one listens to him. Like Jesus, Piggy is often at odds with the authority figures. Indeed, at times they openly rebuke just as the elders and Pharisees ultimately shunned and reproached Jesus. Piggy is never fully embraced by the group. They use him for his spectacles, the only device they have with which to start fire. In a similar vein, the crowds flock to Jesus when he is able to perform miracles for them, yet they ultimately abandon him and call for his death. At the end of the novel, when Piggy confronts Jack’s raucous tribe that has ceded from Ralph’s rule, he pleads with them to abandon their hunting and killing in favor of rules and accord. Instead of heeding Piggy’s advice, the group heaves a large boulder off a cliff directly above the spot where Piggy stands:

The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist. Piggy, saying nothing, with no time for even a grunt, traveled through the air sideways from the rock, turn over as he went . . . [he] fell forty feet and landed on his back across the square red rock in the sea . . . when [the water] went, sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone.6

Like Christ, Piggy is killed in a horribly gruesome and cruel way. He is killed publically, so that all those assembled witness the act. The fact that Golding has Piggy

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falling forty feet also reinforces his status as a Christ-figure, for Christ spent forty
days in the wilderness.

It is in the figure of Simon, however, where a reader finds the strongest
connection to the Christ. When Golding first introduces Simon, the reader sees that
this character is like the other boys yet not like them. Simon has fainting spells, which
mark him as different. The rest of the boys never quite understand him. He frequently
retreats to a small glade in the forest, just as Christ withdrew from the crowds on
occasion. Simon appears to have knowledge about the island that the other boys do
not or cannot see. When Ralph and Jack are discussing the nightmares of the younger
children, it is Simon who attributes it to their location, “as if it [isn’t] a good island.” 7
It is Simon who dares to recollect the notion of a “beastie or the snake-thing” 8 that
frightened the group when they first arrived on the island. When the boys finally do
come face-to-face with the beast of the island—the remains of the pilot who
parachuted from the plane—it is Simon who suggests they climb back to the mountain
to meet it. He is willing to confront the evil that may exist, seeing no other option for
them. Like the Christ, Simon alone sees that the evil cannot be ignored; it must be
dealt with. When Jack and his hunters kill the pig and leave its head on a

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8 Ibid.
stick as a sacrifice to the beast, thus creating the Lord of the Flies, it is Simon who interacts with it and is able to see it for what it truly is: a reflection of the horrible savagery that resides in all humans. The Lord of the Flies appears to chide Simon and mock him, much the way the devil does when Jesus is alone fasting in the wilderness.

As Simon staggers back down to the beach, he comes upon the boys in the middle of a frenzied celebration. They have finally killed a pig and are dancing wildly on the beach, watching the hunters reenact the death of the animal. The chanting of the boys only enhances this grisly scene: “Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!” In the darkness and in the intoxicating excitement of the ritual, the boys mistake the emerging figure of Simon as that of the beast they saw on the mountain. They close in on Simon as he stumbles into their circle and stab him incessantly, convinced in their madness that they must kill him. Even as he is being killed, Simon tries in vain to tell them that the beast they fear is only the skeleton of the man who once piloted their plane, but they do not listen. He is cruelly sacrificed as a result of their folly. In this moment, however, the beast of the island, the dead pilot, is lifted out of the trees, over the boys and blown out to see. Only after the death of Simon is the evil removed, and it only after the death of Jesus that Satan is conquered.

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9 The phrase “Lord of the Flies” is a translation of the Hebrew for Beelzebub, a mighty demon who resides in Hell. He is sometimes considered to be the Devil himself.

Finally, in what comes as close to an apotheosis as Golding’s setting allows, Simon’s dead body slowly washes out to sea with an almost divine glory:

The tide swelled in over the rain-pitted sand and smoothed everything with a layer of silver . . . . The water rose farther and dressed Simon’s coarse hair with brightness. The line of his cheek silvered and the turn of his shoulder became sculptured marble. The strange attendant creatures [the phosphorescent algae], with their fiery eyes and trailing vapors, busied themselves round his head . . . Softly, surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellations, Simon’s dead body moved out toward open sea.\(^\text{11}\)

In his death, Simon is deified. The glowing algae encircle his head like a halo, and he is carefully removed from the sullied world that would not let him live. Like Jesus, he attempts to deliver a message but will not be heard. Like Jesus, he is cruelly tortured and killed.

While *Lord of the Flies* is certainly not meant to be read solely as a Christian allegory, its biblical influence is undeniable. Understanding Golding’s use of Christian allusion highlights the moral themes present in the work, particularly that of the loss of innocence and the savage, dark nature of humanity.

**B. Non-fiction**

The literature that students read is certainly not limited to fiction. Non-fiction essays, memoirs, and speeches have long been a part of the English curriculum. These works often hail from some of America’s most well-known figures, figures like Martin

Luther King, Jr., Maya Angelou, and Joan Didion, and these authors, too, make reference to the Bible in their works. Some of the most commonly taught non-fiction works come from the speeches for Abraham Lincoln. He has been hailed not only as one of America’s best leaders but also one of its most gifted writers. His elegant prose is noted for its beauty as well as its brevity. His speeches are so well-constructed that the College Board included Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address as one of the texts of the 2002 AP English Language and Composition exam.¹² Students were asked to examine the rhetorical strategies Lincoln used to achieve his purpose. Given just one month before the end of the Civil War, Lincoln was addressing a country whose people were left bitter and exhausted by a war that had ravaged the country for four years. Many expected Lincoln to deliver a scathing diatribe, a verbal attack against the Southern states fighting so desperately to secede from the Union. Instead, Lincoln offered a brief speech espousing the need for reconciliation, for unity, and for charity—all overtly Gospel themes. Speaking to a largely Christian audience, Lincoln knew these themes would resonate with those who heard his words. For students today, knowledge of the Bible, particularly the Gospel of Matthew, is essential for understanding all for which Lincoln calls.

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Lincoln opens his speech with a tone that is unaffected. Rather than place blame and alienate half of the country, he seeks instead to draw them in. He knows that “all dreaded [civil war]” but that “all sought to avoid it.” The deliberate use of the world “all” implies that every person belongs to the body. In a distinctly Christ-like manner, Lincoln embraces every person, even those who do not agree with him, and those whom his supporters would have shunned. He further welcomes all parties into his fold by reminding them “both read the same Bible and prayed to the same God.” Lincoln directly appeals to the common thread of Christianity embraced by nearly all of the United States’ population at the time, and he acknowledges the widespread of Bible use.

Lincoln then refers to the book of Genesis as he notes the irony of the current situation in the country. He declares, “it may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in writing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces.” This statement is a direct reference to Genesis 3:19, in which God tells Adam that his punishment for disobeying Him is to toil and sweat in the fields. Lincoln speaks here of slavery, astonished by the fact that “soldiers [could] read their Bibles and come up with such a ‘strange’ practice as slavery, which went against all


\[\text{\textsuperscript{14}}\] Ibid.
percepts taught in the Bible.” Adam’s act has brought about the Fall of Mankind, and it is this same severity of judgment that Lincoln imparts to his audience, which certainly would have been familiar with passage from Genesis.

Immediately after this quotation, Lincoln moves directly into an allusion from the Gospel of Matthew: “but let us judge not that we be not judged.” This is nearly a direct representation of the words Jesus spoke during the Sermon on the Mount. Here, he espouses the moral beliefs that his followers should uphold. Lincoln proffers these words to both North and South: neither should judge the other without examining transgressions they themselves have first committed. By directly quoting Jesus, Lincoln avoids presenting himself as a moral dictator, seeking instead to remind them of the directives of the savior the majority of the country collectively worships. Those who disagree with Lincoln’s philosophies could take issue if this directive came only from him, but the fact that it comes from Jesus Christ confirms its authority.

Lincoln’s next words remind his audience that they, in their limited human understanding, cannot fully comprehend the ways of God. They must accept the fact that God alone knows God’s rationale. The President reinforces this belief by quoting the Gospel of Matthew, declaring, “Woe unto the world because of offences! for it


must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" The will of God abounds at every turn, but humans foolishly believe they have knowledge of divine will. Slavery, secession, and civil war may be these offenses that happen in the world, but more deserving of reproach is the person who facilitates these happenings. Lincoln further acknowledges, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." Humans should abandon judgment, for it is a task left to the Lord, the only one Lincoln sees as worthy to condemn human action.

By invoking these words from the Bible, Lincoln hopes to call forth a spirit of compassion in all Americans, as the country begins to heal the wounds left by the war. Though he speaks on the steps of the White House in front of a group of Northern sympathizers, Lincoln inspires healing and forgiveness in everyone. Forgoing judgment allows the country to heed Lincoln’s call for manifestation of the gospel message: “malice toward none . . . charity for all; . . . firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right” As Jesus invited all—even the despised—to come to him, so, too, does Lincoln invite all back to the Union he fought so hard to preserve. To be

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19 Ibid.
devoid of Biblical knowledge when reading this speech is to have one’s insight into
Lincoln’s rhetorical strategies and purpose arrested.

C. The Short Story

Short stories comprise yet another genre for students to analyze. While many teachers include canonical authors like Leo Tolstoy, Edgar Allan Poe, and Flannery O’Conner in a short story unit, many of us include personal favorites as well. Henry Gregor Felsen’s “The Gentle Rain” is a story I read at an AP English Literature and Composition training institute. I had never and still have never come across the story in an anthology, yet I was profoundly moved by the story itself and have used it in my classroom since I read it. The majority of this story focuses on a lone fighter pilot determined to exact revenge on a city whose people he fought against in an unnamed war. This pilot yearns “to punish the city whose approaches were littered with the charred remains of [his] best friends, and whose very name had made [him] sick with fright a hundred times.”20 As he flies to the city, his plane loaded with bombs, he develops a God-complex, believing himself to be akin to God, if not God himself, for he has the power to grant life or death to all of the people below. An understanding of the God described in both the book of Genesis and the book of Exodus is imperative to comprehending the full depth of the pilot’s delusions.

The fact that the pilot claims to be akin to God implies that it is the Judeo-Christian god to whom he refers. The use of the capital “G” refers to the appellation given the Christian god. The pilot does not feel like a god, any divine being; he feels like God, the one, powerful being who created the heavens and the earth, the one who gave life to Adam and all humans. This God is the god of Genesis and Exodus. A god who delivers justice with fire, flood, and other destructive acts to those who commit wrongdoings. This pilot has armed himself with “fire bombs,” so that he, too, may punish the wicked below.

As he initially approaches his target, the pilot leisurely circles the city thousands of feet in the air. He imagines the people below in the following state:

A cowering, miserable beaten . . . people cringing in their holes, awaiting my violent vengeance. An entire city hiding its head from the wrath of one being in the sky above . . . . That was the moment I knew what it was like to escape the limits of mortality, and to look down with the eyes of God.22

The pilot’s sensation stems from an understanding of a wrathful God: the God who floods the entire world to wipe out wickedness; who punishes Sodom and Gomorrah with a storm of sulfur and fire; who inflicts the twelve plagues upon the people of Egypt. The God of Genesis and Exodus is a being who enacts swift, violent, yet righteous justice. There is little, if any, warning that such vengeance will occur. It is this God whom the pilot so desires to emulate.


22 Ibid.
This God of Genesis and Exodus was a figure who inspired both awe and fear, and the pilot imagines the people below view him as just this sort of god. As he dives down on one roof, he imagines the terror enveloping the inhabitants of the house. He imagines the prayers that the frightened people offer to God, prayers he interprets as prayers to him, himself. As his arrogance grows, he begins to ponder how he will respond to these prayers: “Was I a God of wrath, or a God of mercy?”  

The pilot again relies on the understanding of the Old Testament God as a terrible yet loving being—one who destroys the entire human population save Noah and his family, yet who establishes a covenant with Noah to never again perform such an act; or one who allows the Israelites to wander for forty years before ultimately leading them to their promised land. The pilot continually dives down, house after house, withholding the release of the bombs at the last possible instance. He wants the people to recognize the awesome power he has. At last, however, the pilot spares all the people in the city he now claims as his own. He releases his bombs in the wheat field next to the city, as a reminder of what devastation could have taken place. He, like the Judeo-Christian God, has been a god of mercy, one who “ha[s] not betrayed the supreme trust . . . placed in [his] hands.”

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24 Ibid.
When the pilot visits the recently occupied city a month later, he still retains this same, arrogant God-complex. He longs to find “a Noah or Moses to whom [he] could reveal my identity, and [his] works.” Both of these biblical figures were ones through whom God revealed tremendous works. These men both speak directly with God and earn favor with God. They are instrumental in bringing about the will of God. The pilot seeks a special one, a prophet of his own.

The tragic resolution of the story—the instant death of all the children hidden in the charred wheat field—highlights the limited understanding available to humans. Man is not God. Man does not have omnipotence. This irony Felsen intends his reader to grasp will only be fully appreciated if students have a frame of reference with which to view the God to whom the pilot compares himself.

D. Poetry

In my experience, poetry tends to be one of the hardest genres to teach to high school students. They find it much of it complicated and unappealing. To combat this, teachers reach for the familiar and the straightforward, and this often involves using the work of Western poets. John Donne’s “Holy Sonnet X” is one a poem often included in high school anthologies. It is a relatively uncomplicated poem in terms of its subject, yet Donne clearly expected his reader to have a thorough understanding of the Gospel message necessary to comprehend the meaning of the poem. The miracle

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of the Christ’s resurrection and his subsequent power to conquer death are the subject of Donne’s sonnet.

The poem opens with the its most oft-quoted line: “Death, be not proud.”

The capitalization of the word “death” combined with the use of apostrophe serves to personify death. Death has become a being, no longer existing as a simple force of nature. The speaker of the poem then goes on to inform death that “though some have called thee/ Mighty and dreadfull . . . thou art not so.” The speaker has no fear of death, a position certainly put forth by the message of the Gospel, for Jesus has conquered death. In the crucifixion and subsequent resurrection of the Christ, humans have been given the gift of an eternal life for the soul.

The speaker continues to view death with obvious contempt as he informs death of its impotence: “For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow, Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me.” Those that death believes it kills simply do not die, for Christians believe in “the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” This concept of eternal life beyond this corporeal existence is a central tenet of the Christian faith brought to light in the Gospel readings, and the speaker confidently espouses such beliefs. Death is a necessary experience for any human if


27 Ibid.

28 These words are taken from the last lines of the Nicene Creed, a common prayer in both Catholic and Anglican churches.
one is to move on to eternal life. Death, in fact, must be a pleasurable experience, if “rest and sleepe,” which are lesser shades of death, are enjoyable in and of themselves.\(^29\) Death, then, becomes a thing of welcome. Once the death of the physical body occurs, the soul can be delivered to its eternal home.

The speaker further extols Jesus’ dominion over death, as death is slave to many masters—“Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men”\(^30\)—yet Jesus is ruler of them all. Many implements can call death forth; sickness, poison, and warfare all result in death, but death must be preceded by some event. It has no power in and of itself. Jesus comes of his own accord. The human body may be subject to the effects of death, but Jesus is not, and neither are the souls of those who have faith in the power of Christ’s resurrection.

Donne’s final couplet reaffirms the Christian perspective that death has no power. As humans, “wee wake eternally / And death shall be no more. death, thou shalt die.”\(^31\) Ironically, it is death that will die. Death’s power has been stripped, which Donne cleverly asserts by no longer addressing death as a proper noun. In de-capitalizing “death” though still referring to it as a being, he has taken away any status death may have held.


\(^30\) Ibid.

\(^31\) Ibid.
E. The Works of William Shakespeare

There is, perhaps, no author read more consistently by high school students than William Shakespeare. He has been hailed by many critics as one of the greatest writers of all time, and it seems that no study of English literature is complete without the reading of his plays and sonnets. Indeed, of the top ten most frequently read book-length works in high school English, four are plays written by Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Hamlet,* and *Julius Caesar.* This section will examine one of these texts, *Romeo and Juliet.*

To find a course of study for freshman literature that does not include *Romeo and Juliet is something of a rarity.* The play is well-suited for students in their first year of high school; they are approximately the same age as Romeo and Juliet, and they experience many of the same wild emotions. While the plot of this story may not mirror stories of the Bible, the language Shakespeare employs certainly mirrors that of the Bible. In addition to speaking directly of religious beings, Shakespeare borrows much of his phrasing from *Genesis* and particularly the *Gospel of Matthew.*

Throughout the play, Romeo often speaks of angels, winged messengers, or other heavenly beings. The most prominent religious imagery comes in Act I, scene v, at Romeo and Juliet’s first meeting. Romeo and his friends have snuck in to the Capulet party, and Romeo is looking for the object of his affection, Rosaline. As he moves about the room, he sees not Rosaline but Juliet, and he is immediately smitten.
with her. This complete rapture manifests itself in Romeo’s language. He decides that merely touching Juliet’s hand will “make blessed [his own] rude hand.”

Juliet has become a divine being, capable of providing blessing to such a lowly creature. The first words he speaks to her also echo this sentiment:

If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

Romeo has already declared himself a devotee of Juliet, and he announces his love in these overtly religious terms. He is the religious traveler on a holy journey to the sacred shrine that is Juliet. This same devotion appears in chapter four of the Gospel of Matthew. Here, Jesus calls to James and John to join him, and they “immediately [leave] their boat and follow him.”

They give no thought to any possible consequences; they just go. In a similar fashion, Romeo gives no thought to the ongoing feud between his family and the Capulets, not concerned that this stranger he sees at a Capulet party may, in fact, be a Capulet. He is so committed to this being that he can think of no option except to follow her. Romeo is ready to cast off all that he is to be with Juliet. He further claims that Juliet is capable of purging the sin from

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33 Ibid., I.v.104-107.

34 Matthew 4:22
his body. Just as the Christ will purge the sin from all humanity, Juliet will cleanse Romeo.

After this initial meeting, Romeo cannot wait to see Juliet again, so he climbs over the Capulets’ orchard wall in search of Juliet. She is standing on the balcony outside her room, and Romeo surreptitiously comes upon her here. As he gazes up at her, he again offers his adoration in terms of the religious: Juliet is his “bright angel.” When he finally announces his presence, he hails her as a “dear saint.” In addition to this religious idolatry, Shakespeare appears to borrow phrasing directly from the Bible itself. When Romeo begins to swear his love to Juliet—swearing here by the moon—Juliet finds this unacceptable, for the moon continually changes, and Juliet does not want Romeo’s love to wax and wane as well. She instructs him “not [to] swear at all.” This language appears an almost exact echo of the words of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew. As he delivers his Sermon on the Mount, one of the directives Jesus gives to his followers is to avoid falsely swearing vows to which they cannot fully commit. Better, Jesus says, to “swear not at all.” Both Juliet and Jesus

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36 Ibid., II.ii.29.

37 Ibid., II.ii.60.

38 Ibid., II.ii.118.

39 Matthew 5:24
would rather have little said than empty promises made.

Shakespeare again recycles language from the Bible at the end of Act II as Romeo and Juliet prepare to marry. As Friar Laurence brings the nuptials, he reminds the young couple that they “shall not say alone / Till holy church incorporate two into one.”  These words appear in similar form in both Genesis and the Gospel of Matthew, first by God when Adam and Eve have been created. God says, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and then become one flesh.”  In the Gospel of Matthew, when the Pharisees inquire of Jesus whether there are any circumstances under which divorces is permissible, Jesus harkens back to Genesis, saying that a married couple is “no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”  By invoking this specific language, Shakespeare wants his audience to understand how sacred and permanent the union between Romeo and Juliet now is. There is no force on Earth, even the fierce anger between the two families that can break this bond.

In Act III, the dramatic climax of the play, Shakespeare’s characters make careless and impetuous decisions that doom them to the tragic fate that must befall them. Even within this context, Shakespeare continues to borrow rhetoric from the Bible to heighten the dramatic tension between the characters. When Juliet discovers

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41 Genesis 2:24

42 Matthew 19:6
her new husband has killed her cousin Tybalt, she calls Romeo a “wolvish ravening lamb.”[43] Jesus uses a similar phrase, again in the Gospel of Matthew. During the Sermon on the Mount, one of his commands is to “beware the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”[44] The false prophets seek to turn the faithful away from the true and righteous path. Likewise, Juliet fears that Romeo may be a similarly deceptive fellow, and she momentarily fears she may not be able to trust Romeo.

Though Romeo and Juliet spend one night together, they must hastily separate before morning, as Romeo has been sentenced to exile for the death of Tybalt. After Romeo leaves, Juliet sinks into a terrible depression, and her father seeks to cure her of it by marrying her to Paris. A desperate Juliet seeks help from the Friar, who offers her an equally desperate solution: she will drink a potion to feign death, thus rendering it impossible for her to marry Paris. This act seems to be a dilution of the death of Jesus. As Christ will rise after just a few days, so, too, will Juliet wake “from the borrowed likeness of shrunk death . . .[in] two and forty hours.”[45] As Christ’s was a necessary act to save humanity, Juliet must die—to her family, to the life she knew—in order to preserve her union with Romeo.


[44] Matthew 7:15

Act V concludes the tragic events of this play. Romeo has not received any
details from the Friar regarding his plan to reunite the couple. Erroneously believing
Juliet to be dead, he returns to Verona, intent on killing himself so he may lie forever
beside his love. He stops only to buy poison from an apothecary. This scene reflects
the actions of Judas as depicted in the Bible. One English teacher stated the
following:

When Romeo buys the point he spends 40 pieces of gold for the poison.
And modern audiences don’t get that because they’re not as keyed into
the biblical references. Whereas Shakespeare’s audience would have
said, ‘Forty, not 30—40! Not silver—gold!’ Romeo is committing
heresy now. He’s out-Judas-ing Judas, who sold Jesus for
30 pieces of silver and then went and hanged himself. Romeo’s
spending 40 pieces of gold, and then he’s drinking the poison and
killing himself.46

The horrible betrayal of Jesus by Judas is magnified in what will be Romeo’s betrayal
of Juliet. He abandons life, yet she is not dead. When Juliet wakes shortly after
Romeo has died, she immediately decides that she will not live without Romeo. She
takes his dagger and plunges it into her chest, killing herself.

To miss all of the biblical allusions in this play is to miss the intensity that
Shakespeare imparts to his characters. Students must have familiarity with the Bible if
full understanding of this play is to take place.

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46 Biblical Literacy Project, Inc., Society of Biblical Literature, and First Amendment Center,
The Bible & Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide. (New York: Biblical Literacy Project, Inc;
Nashville: First Amendment Center, 2003), 11.
CHAPTER IV

In addition, it might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religions or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historical qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, where presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistent with the first Amendment.

--Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark

Religion is a ubiquitous player in a global society. Religion undergirds values, politics, and social sciences . . . and deepens an understanding of art, literature, history, music, and even science—as an alternate and rational method of inquiry not necessarily in conflict with religion.

--Reverend John T. Thomas, Episcopal priest

The discussion about teaching religion in schools is one of the most longstanding debates in the educational community. For decades school boards, administrations, teachers, parents, and even students have been questioning several facets of the inclusion of religion in schools as well as religious instruction in schools: the presence of prayer in school, the constitutionality of such endeavors in the public schools, which topics can be taught, why such classes should be taught, and who should teach such classes, to mention a few. Proponents of the academic study of religion profess that no study of humanity can be complete without it. Opponents state that religion is personal and subjective, and that time spent teaching religion is time spent away from core academic subjects. Even the courts have had to intervene and attempt to navigate the differences between teaching about religion and the teaching of religion.
In every case brought before it, the Court has advocated and valued impartial instruction about religion in public schools. As long as teachers can maintain objectivity in instructional presentation, religion is a valuable and necessary part of one’s education.

Both religion as an academic course of study and an inclusion of religious text into curriculum are often avoided, however, because of the separation of Church and State clause established by the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution. This clause, however, is often misinterpreted as one that absolutely forbids any sort of religious instruction. The Constitution affords religion a place in the public schools system. It acknowledges the effect religion has on the development of civilizations. Religion drives nearly every aspect of a culture—from personal values to cultural norms. Courses in the humanities focus on these cultural advances, and English and history teachers aptly incorporate elements of religious study in their instruction. If the goal of the public school is to educate its students and encourage them to understand works as fully as possible, then a basic instruction in the religion that has dominated the development of this country as well as the texts written in the Western world becomes an essential element of every student’s education. Not a dogmatic instruction; rather, an informative, objective study that seeks to enlighten the students as to how the Christian perspective has shaped both individual and societal consciousness expressed in the literature studied.

Teachers have a great responsibility in allowing appropriate examination of
and discussion about Christian allusions and influences in texts. They must not allow any proselytizing to occur, from students or from themselves. Any discussion of Christian elements must be clearly touted as academic, not devotional: both students and parents must be clear about this. Teachers themselves must have a thorough knowledge of and comfort level with biblical texts. Most school systems neither provide nor mandate training for teachers in this area, so it is incumbent upon teachers to educate themselves.

Although the high school English cannon involves works from a myriad of cultures and peoples, the majority of the popular texts in the cannon are by Western, Christian writers. Biblical allusions are disseminated in these texts, so the reader must have thorough knowledge of the stories and characters in the Bible. Analysis of works like Dante’s Inferno, Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, John Steinbeck’s East of Eden, William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, and Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon demand prior biblical knowledge. It becomes incumbent upon the teacher, then, to present and discuss excerpts of the Bible as literature.

English teachers also incorporate the academic study of religion into projects, personal writing, and research papers. Former English teacher Karen Mackall¹ had students research various cultural views of the afterlife in conjunction with a study of Dante’s Inferno. Students focus thesis statements to reflect how various beliefs in the

¹ Karen Mackall was the 9th Grade English Coordinator and teacher at McLean High School, McLean, Virginia, from 2004-2006. She taught English for six years.
afterlife affect a civilization’s practices in daily life. Current English teacher Ken Kraner incorporates excerpts from the Book of Ruth into his *Odyssey* unit plan. In this particular lesson, students are asked to generate a list of traits they believe a hero has. Discussion ensues, and a final class list is established. Kraner then requires students to read the excerpt from Ruth, and discuss whether or not she fits their definition of a hero. Kraner says that without fail, every year the students are amazed by the fact that Ruth displays nearly all of the traits mentioned, while Odysseus, Homer’s epic hero, manifests virtually none of them.

In my own classroom, I see the need for a more explicit study of the Bible, particularly Genesis, Exodus, and the Gospel of Matthew. Such texts, however, will be integrated into curricular units rather than taught individually. Having a framework for study reduces the likeliness that such teaching can be misinterpreted as any attempt to espouse personal belief. When students read George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, for example, I will provide them with text from Exodus in which Moses receives the Ten Commandments. To recognize the pigs’ audacity in changing the Seven Commandments of Animalism, students should be aware of the conditions under which Moses receives the Ten Commandments and the gravity of such an act by God. When I introduce *Romeo and Juliet*, I will have students read the Gospel of Matthew, with particular emphasis on verses that appear in Shakespeare’s texts. As we proceed

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2 Ken Kraner currently teaches English at McLean High School in McLean, VA. He serves as the 10th Grade Pre-AP English Coordinator and has taught English 16 years.
through the play, students can discuss how and why Shakespeare chose to use the language of the Gospel in his play.

With careful preparation and planning, biblical texts can and should be seamlessly integrated into the high school English curriculum. English teachers hope to inspire students to become life-long readers, engaging with texts that have not been assigned by an instructor but rather chosen out of interest or curiosity. A solid foundation in biblical literacy will serve them in this endeavor as well. If students read J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, for example, they will not need an instructor to help them draw parallels between Harry and the Christ. If they pick up a copy of Orson Scott Card’s science fiction masterpiece *Ender’s Game*, they will likewise experience the richness of seeing Ender as a Christ-figure. Politicians invoke Christian allusion in their speeches. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech” is rife with biblical references, as he quotes from Amos, Isaiah, and Psalms. President Barack Obama quoted 1 Corinthians when he announced, “the time has come to set aside childish things.” Biblical allusions still permeate nearly every facet of American culture: a thorough grounding in basic texts equip students with the tools to recognize these influences both inside the classroom and out.

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North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, *Appendix: Works Commonly Taught In NC High School English Language Arts.*

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, *Appendix English I.*

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, *Appendix English III.*


