

**The Power of Story:
the study of literature as a springboard
to the faith journey we take with our students**

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Of the many daunting responsibilities one generation must fulfill for the next, perhaps none is more compelling than deciding what stories to tell. For it is by our stories that we remind one another who we are and what life is all about. By our stories, we address questions of identity and purpose. Each generation of parents, of adults, of nurturers of our youth, in every society, in every cultural setting, faces this critical task. For if the young do not know who they are and of what they are a part, how will they know what is to be valued and of what to be cautious as their earthly journey unfolds? The power of story, the importance of story.

Thus, we are all storytellers, in a most significant sense. It is this sense of how intimately the concept of story is interwoven with the daily living of our lives that is an entry point for the teacher of literature in our Lutheran schools -- she or he who seeks to undertake the academic journey within the context of our faith journey with our students.

In the thirty years since graduating from Concordia, Seward, I have had the privilege of introducing students at the high school and college levels with the delights of literary study. Along with that privilege has come the challenge or "tension" that perhaps every teacher of literature in our Lutheran school faces: how to represent fully and faithfully the literary work of art for the fullest aesthetic enjoyment by the student -- and, at the same time, assist the students as they encounter world views, philosophies of life, and religious attitudes that seem to be in stark contrast to the Christian values we desire our students to embrace and live.

From my experiences, I offer some thoughts regarding how a serious study of literature can lead students to thoughtful consideration of the realities of our human condition in a fallen world and our need for a Savior. Literature can illuminate the needs, behavior, and consequences of decisions and actions. It can highlight our frailties, our aspirations, the limitations of human potential, and our need for deliverance.

In the end, the list of questions that writers explore is perhaps not a lengthy one, and the questions are those of identity and purpose: "Who are you?" "Who am I?" "What is the nature of my relationship and obligation to you?" "Is there a God?" "If there is, then . . . ?" "If there is not, then . . . ?" "Yes, but what if there is?" Of course, these questions can appear in different forms. Sometimes they are explicitly raised in the lives of the characters; at other times, they are implicitly addressed.

An idea expressed in a literature course from my undergraduate days long ago put it this way: "Every writer who would be significant must eventually get around to the concept of original sin." I've thought often of this statement over the years, and have shared it frequently with my students.

Perhaps the idea behind the statement is that a writer who would give us recognizable portraits of the human condition likely will have to confront the question of what humans can do about their predicaments. When we as readers observe the behaviors and choices of the characters in a novel, encounter the attitudes and reflections of the narrative voice, and sense the approval or disapproval of these choices and attitudes by the human author who has created this imaginative depiction of life, we may sense the "informing philosophy" of the writer.

Sometimes, we may sense this informing philosophy to be that people can adjust their circumstances, can create a better world, can improve from generation to generation -- if only they can construct the appropriate economic, political and social structures for themselves. In other words, they have the potential to rescue themselves. In other works of literature, we may sense the informing philosophy to be that people will inflict the same hurts on self and others generation after generation, give in to the same temptations, go down the same dead-end streets -- no matter how "advanced" or "civilized" their generation is proclaimed to be. They will not be able to rescue themselves; they will need a deliverer, a Savior.

Without overgeneralizing, it can indeed become apparent how a writer interprets and regards human life. If one reads several works by a given author, it is often possible to sense whether or not that writer accepts or rejects the concept of original sin. Either the depiction of the human condition suggests that we can rescue ourselves and that we live in a world capable of moral improvement, or the depiction of the human condition suggests that we live in a fallen world, are born into sin, and cannot save themselves.

Thus, the study of literature in the classroom can draw our attention in poignant ways to the critical importance of the Gospel. It can call our attention to wrenching portraits of people in despair, looking for purpose and meaning to their lives. It can confront us with individuals arrogant and self-absorbed, rejecting what faith invites them to accept. It can contrast for us lives lived for self and lives lived in faithfulness to God's plan for fulfillment.

Our students' relationship with language as they encounter it in literary texts is a fascinating one. As I begin a new semester with my students in a literature course, I remind them of their powerful role as readers. Sometimes, students will begin the course assuming their role as readers to be a relatively passive one, similar to that of a sponge: simply absorbing or soaking up what the writer has created in words. The temptation is to see the writer as solely the creative one in this transaction -- and the reader perhaps as solely a laid-back recipient.

To counteract this impression, I urge my students to see their role as a distinctly creative one, as well. I remind them that the words lie there dormant on the page until we as readers encounter them in the act of reading. The reader is the one who gives life to the words, which lie there "dead" on the page until the reader reads them. To give life is a remarkably creative act. I remind the students further that "the words can only say; they cannot say what they mean. It is the reader who says what the words mean."

I encourage my students to notice how they do that, to notice "how [they make meaning]" -- because

to notice how we make meaning of the pages we read in literature can provide us valuable insight into how we make meaning of the larger text of everyday life, of which we turn a new page each day.

To reinforce the concept of the powerful role of the reader, I invite my students to notice another dynamic at work when we read. When we read, the story of our lives intersects the story we are reading. We bring all that has been our story to this point in time to the doorstep of the story we are about to read, and this will influence, in conscious and unconscious ways, the meaning we will attach to what we read. Thus, in real and overarching ways, "story" becomes the bridge between the reality of our lives and the literary world into which we step.

As this bridging experience occurs, I want my students to be very attentive to what they are thinking and feeling as they read. I urge to have always a pen or pencil in mind, making frequent notes to themselves in the margins of the text. In monitoring their cognitive and emotional responses to the text, they are, in part, focusing on the intersection of their life story with the story of the literary work of art. I suggest to them that the most precious time of literary study is when their minds encounter the mind of the writer, one on one -- a truly intimate experience. I tell them that nothing we will do in class the next day is more important than what happened to them as they read the story the night before.

I will try to be helpful and ask them: "I wonder if you've noticed this?" or "What do you think about that?" or "Have you considered this?" But, in the end, the "making of meaning" is a personal and precious sustained moment for our students -- and it occurs in the act of reading.

From this concept, we can then introduce the matter of perspective; that is, "how we see determines what we may see." Our perspective can serve to illuminate, or to dim, what is to be seen. In our faith journey through this life, for example' it's not "seeing is believing"; rather, it's "believing is seeing."

The dynamic of perspective operates in several ways as we read a story: (a) we notice how the characters view their circumstances, and thus we sense their perspectives; (b) we notice how the narrator appears to regard character choices and values, and thus we sense her/his perspective; (c) we notice our own perspectives as readers, absorbing character actions and narrator attitudes within our own accumulated experience and outlook. How we "see" a text, i.e. how we "read" a text, is intimately related to the activity of the "making of meaning", which is our primary privilege and role as readers.

Rewarding and meaningful discussions can occur in the classroom of a Lutheran school when in the illumination of the Gospel the merits and shortcomings of the variety of perspectives encountered in the literary text can be critiqued. In fact, it may be especially in such classrooms, led by teachers of Christian values, that philosophies and beliefs antithetical to Christianity can be seen for what they are. The Christian teacher has distinct opportunity to help students see the message of the Gospel in its full and compelling urgency for a sin-weary and self-absorbed world.

One of the most powerful and engaging novels ever written is Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and

Punishment. Written in the 1860s, it is representative of great literature in that it speaks poignantly to each succeeding generation of readers. In terms of the issues it addresses, it seems almost as if it could have been written last night. I have taught this novel often to juniors and seniors in high school, as well as first year students in college. It provides an excellent example of significant literature serving as a springboard to thoughtful discussions of faith and life.

It is the story of an impoverished university student in St. Petersburg, Russia, at a time of considerable social change and tension. We first meet Raskolnikov in his "tiny cupboard" size apartment on a sweltering day in July. In the opening pages of the novel, we note that everything about him connects to the weight of oppressiveness: the oppressive heat, the confined conditions of his living quarters, and most of all, the weight of anguish he feels regarding his poverty. He slips out surreptitiously from his apartment house, in order to avoid seeing his landlady -- for he never seems to have the money to pay his rent. He has been making frequent trips to an old pawnbroker in the area, receiving paltry sums of money from her for the items he has brought.

In his growing resentment of her, he begins to rationalize and plan what he considers a quite justifiable action: he will kill the old woman, take her money and use it to fund his studies and provide for his needs. He rationalizes that society does not need this "louse", this woman who profits from the misery of others -- but that society does need the leadership and intellectual talents that he possesses, if only he can finish his university degree. Thus begins the story of an individual who tests his theory that laws in a society are meant for the mass of "ordinary" people, while every now and then an "extraordinary" individual comes along who has the "right" to transgress if only he exhibits the courage to do so.

The killing of the pawnbroker, however, for all of his careful planning, does not go at all as he had anticipated. Shortly after this first killing, the pawnbroker's half-sister Lizaveta appears quite unexpectedly as he is trying to obtain the old woman's key to the money box. In a fit of emotion, he commits a second killing, as well. These plot level events occur very early in the story, at about page 70 (Bantam Classic edition) of an over five hundred page novel. Thus, the "crime" of Raskolnikov may be said to have taken place in a relatively short portion of the literary work of art, leaving over 4/5 of the novel to focus on the "punishment" of Raskolnikov.

I pose the question for my students: because the totally unexpected second killing does occur, what kind of novel can Dostoevsky now write, as distinct from what he may have written if only the first, carefully rationalized, killing had taken place? Further, I ask my students to ponder when and how exactly do they believe the "crime" of Raskolnikov to have occurred. Was it the moments when he swung the ax and killed -- or did it occur much earlier than that? What themes, issues, and observations about the human condition does he seem interested in calling to our attention?

I tell my students that if the novel was solely about someone committing two killings and the attendant shock for us as readers, I would not ask them to invest the reading time and the making of meaning for over five hundred pages of novel. Rather, I encourage them to notice the insistent questions Dostoevsky appears to be raising, as regards definitions, causes, and consequences of such matters as "crime", "punishment", "suffering", and "poverty."

As well, he is keenly interested in the "children" in society. The image of "child" appears frequently in the novel, most prominently at key plot level events. We are asked to define "children" in society, and ponder that perhaps it is not simply a chronological delineation. We are asked to reflect on who are the "children" among us, how society treats them and why, and with what consequences.

Two other very key characters in the novel are Porfiry, the detective, and Sonia, the teenage girl drawn into prostitution to provide money for a mother dying of tuberculosis, impoverished sisters and brothers, and a drunken father, who regularly steals money from her purse to foster his drinking habit. Porfiry becomes quite curious about Raskolnikov, and in his experienced detective manner, circles ever nearer and nearer to him. Sonia has a strong faith in God, and this is her constant source of strength as she faces the events of her young life.

Space does not permit me to go into very much of the fascinating, gripping series of plot level events that draw us as readers into this story and propel us with steadily escalating momentum as the novel proceeds. However, of the many ironies at work in the narrative is the fact that Lizaveta was the closest friend of Sonia, and it is Lizaveta's necklace cross which Sonia wears. When Sonia realizes that it is Raskolnikov who has killed Lizaveta, her reaction demonstrates the centrality of her Christian faith. Her first comments to him are "What have you done -- what have you done to yourself?" and "There is no one -- no one in the whole world now so unhappy as you." (354, Bantam) Sonia effectively has separated the sin from the sinner. Even more compelling to her than the loss of her closest friend is her concern for the lost sinner that Raskolnikov has shown himself to be.

For much of the story, Raskolnikov resists and mocks Sonia's faith -- yet he is intrigued as to how it provides such meaning and strength for her. He is fascinated with the story of the raising of Lazarus. Following her reading of it, what may be the symbolic high point of the novel occurs.

"That is all about the raising of Lazarus," she whispered The candle-end was flickering out in the battered candle-stick, dimly lighting up in the poverty-stricken room the murderer and the harlot who had so strangely been reading together the eternal book. Five minutes or more passed. (285, Bantam)

For many readers, this is indeed the symbolic high point of the novel, for it leads into the poignant way into which the reader's "story" and the novel's "story" touch. For, in the end, who among us is not in that room? -- when we remind ourselves that in the human community there are more ways to kill one another besides physically, and there are more ways to prostitute oneself besides sexually. Metaphors of "poverty-stricken room" as our world and dimmed possibilities of sight and perspective, apart from that which Scripture provides, contribute to the portrait scene of Raskolnikov and Sonia as a microcosm of the world in which we all live.

As we sense the highly important questions and issues with which Dostoevsky has confronted us, discussion of this novel leads in compelling ways to matters of purpose and identity. Such matters are inevitably part of one's faith journey, highlighted for the student and now made parallel with the academic journey occurring in the discussion of Crime and Punishment.

Readers of this novel sense the relevance of its themes for our society in the late twentieth century. Dostoevsky has created characters with traits and outlooks that we recognize in our own time as well; he has focused on issues of life and death, the value and meaning of human life, and the treatment of old and young. He has called our attention to questions of morality and justice that we recognize in the social issues of our day. Perhaps above all, Dostoevsky has reminded us of the devastation of lives lived apart from Christ, the need for forgiveness, and the strength of God's Love as it manifests itself in the lives of believers.

To read a novel is to read words: words chosen and arranged by human authors to engage us cognitively and emotionally, words to focus our attention on certain truths of the human condition as that writer sees them. In the Christian classroom, we remind ourselves that there are words -- but there is also The Word! The Word of Truth, the Word of Life, the Word of Love, the Word of Reclamation, The Word of Forgiveness, the Word that is the Way, the Word that is Forever. We encounter the text of human words within the context of The Word, which is our Way and which is our Life, through faith in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Within our curriculum of study, we must help our students to remember, to always remember, that The Word, God's Word, continues to be the only truly revolutionary text for a sin-weary and self-centered world. Our various areas of study must be unified by the energizing influence of The Word. Otherwise, our academic disciplines -- and our very lives -- remain only shallow discoveries of our identities.

The power of story. The importance of story. For it is by our stories that we remind one another who we are and what life is all about. In the end, only one Word will remain. For the children of God, we encounter story within the Story that is Truth. For it is by this Story that we remind one another Whose we are and what Life is all about.