

The Christian Imagination

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth. -Genesis 9:12-16

The increasing organisation of advertisement and propaganda — or the influencing of masses of men by any means except through their intelligence — is all against [arts and culture]. The economic system is against them; the chaos of ideals and confusion of thought in our large scale mass education is against them; and against them also is the disappearance of any class of people who recognize public and private responsibility of patronage of the best that is made and written.... And just as those who should be the intellectuals regard theology as a special study, like numismatics or heraldry, with which they need not concern themselves, and theologians observe the same indifference to literature and art, as special studies which do not concern *them*, so our political classes regard both fields as territories of which they haven reason to be ashamed of remaining in complete ignorance. -T.S. Eliot Christianity and Culture, 32

How do you determine what is "good" art? (in the generic sense of good - not the moral one we discussed last week)

We need to learn to distinguish between taste and quality. We can like things that are not good things, and we can recognize as "good" things that are not to our taste. "You know you're chewing bubble gum. You know what it is but you still want some." -Bono *Discotheque*

C.S. Lewis discusses this distinction at length in An Experiment in Criticism. To develop this skill, though, takes work. The Eliot quote above highlights the importance of doing the work to discern what is excellent for the maintenance of culture. This work is part of what we're commanded to do in Genesis 1 and again in Genesis 9.

Our initial reaction to art will be impacted by our taste, but as we mature, taste can change. Some may be genetic, but taste also develops based on our understanding of the world. The more I know about poetry, the deeper my appreciation of the Beauty of the Spenserian stanza. If I know nothing about meter, I can't understand the significance of the trochees and Dactyls in Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*.

Half a league, half a league
Half a league onward
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
`Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!' he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

A growing understanding of Truth leads me to a greater feel for the combination of loss and hope in Milton's *Lycidas*.

Thus sang the uncouth swain to th'oaks and rills,
While the still morn went out with sandals gray;
He touch'd the tender stops of various quills,
With eager thought warbling his Doric lay;
And now the sun had stretch'd out all the hills,
And now was dropp'd into the western bay;
At last he rose, and twitch'd his mantle blue:
To-morrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.

As I grow in my understanding of Goodness the impact of George Herbert's poem *The Elixir* becomes greater.

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for Thee.

Not rudely, as a beast,
To run into an action;
But still to make Thee prepossest,
And give it his perfection.

A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or it he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heav'n espy.

All may of Thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with his tincture—"for Thy sake"—
Will not grow bright and clean.

Yet Beauty, Truth, and Goodness are rarely pure in any work of art. We are fallen people in a fallen world and dross and gold will remain mixed until the Lord returns and makes all things new. *E.g.* David and Bathsheba vs. David and the Psalms

The song "Satisfied" is a good example of this as the words are arranged in a silly way that hampers the art of their significantly beautiful, even poetic, words.

Thoughtful people can recognize the admixture of right and wrong of any of these elements alongside the differences among the elements of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness.

As we evaluate any work of art, we should train ourselves to talk about each element's quality as well as their interaction. From these things, we can develop a helpful understanding of what a work of art really gives us and a productive way to talk about the work. The implications are beneficial for our own souls and provide gateways for evangelistic conversation as people recognize that we are really engaging the culture in a loving way.

As an example, take Keats' *Ode to Psyche*.

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branchèd thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
Fledge the wild-ridgèd mountains steep by steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same;
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!

Beauty: poetry is good -evocative imagery, but a bit loose. Like much Romantic poetry, not as tight as late Renaissance/18th c. poetry

Truth: worship of human mind, elevation of internal judgment above anything external including God's word. But does highlight that God has given us minds to think and that we should love the souls of all people

Goodness: emphasis on the life of the mind over mere carnal desire is good but not complete. teaching to do the hard mental work of making our minds beautiful temples like the temple Solomon built was to be beautiful is good. teaching that we can build the temple on our own and that the temple is for the mind alone makes the work done vain

Overall: Great example of poetry that conjures up vivid mental imagery. While the ultimate aim of Keats' poem falls far short of Christian Truth and Morality, it is a poem from which we can learn much and that is a delight to read. The context of the myth of Cupid & Psyche loads it with stronger meaning even if he reinterprets the myth by making Psyche a goddess (which makes it even more immoral) and Cupid less insidious than he really was in Classical/Renaissance literature.

Bonus: Best retelling of the myth is Lewis' [Til We Have Faces](#) — one of the best things I've ever read.

Let's discuss the movie *Chariots of Fire*.

- Beauty?
- Truth?
- Goodness?
- Overall Impression?

What about *The Hunger Games*?

- Beauty?
- Truth?
- Goodness?
- Overall Impression?