



Shall We Write

How Then Shall

We Write?

The Christian Playwright and Worldview

by *Gillette Elvgren*

"Who am I?", "Where did I come from?", "Why am I here?", "What's wrong with here?", "How can I fix what's wrong with here?", "Where am I going?" and "How do I get there?" are questions which all of us ask at different times in our lives, or even at different times of any particular day. The answers to these questions compose the basic foundations of a worldview which will find expression in what we do and say. As a writer, one is constantly bumping up against the exigencies of characters and plot as they are determined by the search for answers to these questions. Hopefully any play or film is going to deal with only a fraction of the immensity of the questions poised above, and at best will bring fresh and original expression to the answers.

The only worldview that is capable of answering all of the above questions is the Judeo-Christian worldview. For example, the existentialist has no answers to who he is, where he came from, why he is here, what went wrong with here, and has no idea where he is going. These negatives could be construed as an answer of sorts, but they offer no solutions, the final result being that existentialism provides little more than a meaningless quagmire in which one slowly sinks, much as Winnie does in Beckett's ironically titled play, *Happy Days*. The materialist on the other hand professes to have at least a few of the answers: we come from primordial ooze, we create relative value systems in order to survive in community, and finally we return to the nitrogen cycle. These are answers based on scientific speculations which provide no essential valuation as to the 'why' questions of our existence. To formulate a Judeo-Christian worldview the creative artist must begin to think in Christian categories: this means being able to define and hold to a world-and-life view oriented in Scripture; it means seeing from a Christian vantage point; it means thinking with the mind of Christ.¹

The term 'world view' has often been misconstrued to stand for ones culture, with culture being:

A dynamic pattern, an ever-changing matrix of objects, artifacts, prejudices, relationships, attitudes, tastes, rituals, habits, colors, sounds, institutions, philosophies, fashions, enthusiasms, fads, myths, and loves which are embodied in individual people, in groups and collectives, and associations of people.²

Culture is "the secondary environment by which we are formed, it is inescapable,"³ totally necessary, and insofar as the writer is concerned it defines the matrix of the material world in which he exists and from which he draws the context of so much that he writes. It cannot and should not be ignored, uncritically embraced, or blindly vilified.

Our present multicultural and politically correct society tends to place culture on a pedestal, suggesting that culture is somehow more inclusive than religion, "thus religion has become a mere function of the community or the state"⁴ and we can legislate or judicially rule it into or out of existence. Calvin would view this sort of cultural hegemony as an "apostate world view", though he would be the last person to turn away from the positive influence that ones surrounding culture can have on the sensible man:

Whenever we come upon (truth) in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear.⁵

So we appreciate the contributions that Pinter has made to the canny play of subtext, Beckett for finding a meaningful relationship between Form and Content in more abstract works, Mamet's rhythmic and ritualistic use of dialogue; and Sam Shepherd's recognition, treatment, and debunking of American myths.

Where then does this leave the writer who has fully embraced the Judeo-Christian worldview? If he is indeed an inheritor of a belief structure that exists outside of culture, is above culture and within culture, (in but not of the world) and provides answers to all the epistemological questions of existence, "how then should he write?" The remainder of this essay will be directed to investigating approaches to this question, especially in terms of how fiction writing can reflect the three basic phenomena of the Judeo-Christian worldview in terms of Creation, the Fall, and Redemption.

After creating the cosmos, the world and humanity, God found His organic and evolving process to be a *good* one. By this He not only meant structurally good (sound, balanced, harmonious, aesthetically pleasing) but also morally good, meaning that the relationship between man and his Creator was perfect, creative, and meaningful. So, right from the beginning, God's creation established the necessity for a symbiosis insofar as *form* and *content* are concerned. What does this mean for the writer? It means that he has to recognize that we inhabit a moral universe (content) and that the structure (form) of our creation is such that it allows for communication between the Creator and His subjects. There are absolute moral values that are prescribed by scripture which the writer has to be cognizant of in creating and motivating his characters.

As moral relativism becomes the norm in our culture, post-modern thought and subsequent human behavior discounts moral absolutes. Just about every work of art (even abstract expressionism) implies cultural choices that reflect the artist's viewpoint. In the enclosed world of creative art a micro-worldview is often implied. Just look at Munch's *The Scream* or Ginsberg's *Howl*. In the film *The Graduate* all parents are myopically grotesque images of humanity; human relationships are essentially defined within sexual parameters, and the institu-

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tion of marriage between a man and a woman is mocked. The audience, provided with this highly selective and distorted view of humanity, is given little or no choice but to cheer Dustin Hoffman as he runs away with the married bride at the end of the film. The Christian writer has a responsibility to consider the repercussions of the moral choices he provides for his characters.

The concept of judgment at the end of Creation and the implications of man's Fall presupposes a number of other content elements which the Judeo-Christian based writer needs to consider. Some of these are personal guilt, the existence of sin as a reality, man's freedom to choose evil as opposed to good, and the implications of an on going and a final Destiny.

The Implications of the Reality of Sin

Cultural entertainment venues have certainly not turned their backs on the idea of sin as a culpable choice and, of necessity, a destructive one. Christians have no monopoly over this. We see the ill effects that are experienced by Joe Keller for his immoral actions in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*. By the end of *Godfather III*, we have witnessed the compromising moral choices that have reduced Michael Corleone to an isolated figure. Kerry Meads and Robert Smyth's adaptation of *Dracula* is unique in that it so deftly plumbs the depths of the nature of evil and its warring with good within the human soul and psyche rather than emphasizing the horror/spectacle or the recent faddish inclinations of turning Dracula himself into some sort of romantic hero. The 'warring against principalities' in the form of demon possession, the evil effects of the occult, witchcraft, and other diverse manifestations of evil which are anthropomorphized in werewolves, aliens, and other ghoulish creatures are conscious and unconscious realizations of the spiritual warfare in which man is continuously involved. Peretti's novels and the *Left Behind* series have capitalized on these archetypal fears, though we might wish that they had done so with more artistry and less literalization. In other words, the depiction of the fallen state of man has been thoroughly and aptly categorized by so called secular writers and often trivialized by pulp fiction Christian writers. So where does this leave the serious Christian writer? Certainly the pay is good in writing for such amoral sitcoms like *Friends* or *Seinfeld*, but at what cost to the basic tenants of your worldview? The Christian writer's commitment should be to portray the fallen state of man not only in terms of a conflict between good and evil, but in depicting a context in which the results of choosing evil over good and vice versa are aptly expressed, making sure that sin is not glorified, and finally in pointing the way towards the light of possible Redemption in the universe created by an awesome, holy and righteous God. This final caveat is added in order to deal with other cultural solutions offered up by New Ageism (*Grand Canyon*), psychological insights and breakthroughs (*Equus*), the affirmation of the community and the family (*On Golden Pond*), and of friendship, forgiveness, compassion, and so forth. There is nothing essentially wrong in plays or films whose final solution is the expression of these themes (especially the latter ones) and though they can reflect the Judeo-Christian world view, they do not necessarily define the writer as belonging to it.

The challenge is this: you are a member of God's Kingdom who has been blessed with artistic talents, specifically writing. Your desire is to return to God and to the community of man the express fruits of your gifts. You realize that there is a great deal of good writing that lauds noble values and condemns sinful activity which is already being written and performed by the apostate culture

around you. Why then do you choose to replicate these works when you have been provided with a precious insight into the workings of God in creation through His Son and the Holy Spirit? The rub comes when you ask the question: "But how can I do this without seeming to preach, to proselytize, or to revert to bumper sticker theology in the expression of my work? How can I do this without cheapening or trivializing the mysterious and awesome insights into the Ineffable that God has made uniquely mine?" One of the ways is through realizing a sense of...

Destiny

Religious faith is necessary to understand human destiny. And man in his faith is covenantally related to a Being that is transcendent, and, because of this covenantal relationship, which constitutes true religion, man has an eternal destiny, which transcends culture.⁶

To write with a sense of destiny recognizes that there is a purpose/Being outside of oneself that is guiding, interacting and even manufacturing the course of a character's action. John Irving realizes this in his novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and Todd Stein articulates this same sense in his script *2:22*. "What if there is no such thing as a coincidence? What if all these little things in our lives have meaning?" Frederick Buechner deepens our awareness of this realization when he writes:

The question is not whether the things that happen to you are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak—even the walk from the house to the garage that you have walked ten thousand times before, even the moments when you cannot believe there is a God who speaks at all anywhere. God speaks, I believe, and the words are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys.⁷

A character or an audience's burgeoning awareness of this phenomenon is at the heart of the existential religious experience, even though it doesn't have to be couched in religious terms. The paradox is that all of this is expressed within the knowledge that we are creatures imbued with 'free will'—with the capability of resisting and denying the reality of this destiny factor in our journey.

Choices

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days." (Deut. 30: 19-20)

The choices that you offer to your characters become essential in defining their world view, and the various plot points that you create in your story should progressively complicate your protagonists life in terms of the moral/value

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systems that they accept or reject. The nature of these choices will establish a worldview context for your protagonists and antagonists that will be recognizable as well as truthful to your audience.

Structure

One of the measures of a play's artistic authenticity can be determined through examining the relationship between Form and Content in the story that is being unfolded. The ritualistic formalism of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is congruent with the on stage pageantry and off stage regicide in the highest places. The simultaneity of the wagons presenting the Biblical narrative in Medieval Mystery Plays offers a structural equivalency to the idea of the Great Chain of Being which was reflective of the cosmological world view of the time.

The domestic box set realism at the turn of the last century became an effective structural vehicle for the naturalism that was being explored in terms of a heightened interest in social and psychological issues.

The revolutionary Russian filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein, strove to find a structural model (conflict montage) that would be the best vehicle to express the Marxist dialectic. Beckett created desolate wastelands to portray the desiccated characters and the absurdity of life which he portrays in his existential dramas. Brecht created a theatre of fragmented scenery supplemented by various musical and media devices that were devised to alienate his audience from empathizing with his characters so that his socialist message could be more strongly communicated. Each author/director devised what they felt would be the ideal *form* elements with which to carry their philosophical worldview or content preoccupations.

Is there then an ideal structure for playwriting that would best contain the Judeo-Christian worldview? Of course not. Our cosmology is too all-inclusive to be contained in a single structural reality. Scripture itself contains songs, poetry, epic, parable and dramatic narrative, flashbacks, flash-forwards, and a final chapter which is phantasmagoric and charged with symbolism. God has provided a host of paradigms which can free you as a writer from being restricted to a comfortable domestic realism reflective of the sit-com effluvia which surrounds us. Why not take advantage of this freedom? For example, Lucia Fragione's play *Espresso*, (2004) offers up a two hander in which each character plays multiple characters, transitions from place to place with the simple manipulation of a prop or costume piece, moves from reality to abstraction, from exterior to interior voices, in a stripped down theatrical context, all telling the story of a woman's intense psychological struggle within herself, her family and also with her God. ⁹

The use of Time is usually considered to be a structural element, but in the hands of such writers as Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter it also assumes a content mantle. Gogo and Didi are depicted in *Waiting for Godot* as existing in a world where day arbitrarily changes to night and in which there is no concrete sense of past history, played out in the context of a diminishing sense of future possibility. The realm of potential action has been reduced to the here and now, to the scrabbling after appetite.

In the Bible we are presented with a different image of time. The panoply of the Biblical narrative has a definite beginning-middle-end to it insofar as the history of this earth is concerned. We are notably affected by the sins of our fathers going back generations, and we have definitive promises to look

forward to in the future. What does this tell us how we should write? Should all plays congruent with a Judeo-Christian worldview be sequential narratives? Christ was, is, and will be, and if we take this paradoxical axiom and combine it with the multifarious literary paradigms evidenced in Scripture, we find ourselves able to write with unshackled structural autonomy.

Perhaps one of the delights as well as one of the burdens of being a writer and a believer is the realization that God has provided a way out of the fallenness of this world. Christ is at the heart of this redemptive act, and to deny the efficacy of what He accomplished on the cross through the reality of his resurrection is to deny the very essence of our World View. This earth shattering resurrection action is a mystery, it bridges the material and spiritual worlds, and it implies the working presence of the Holy Spirit within and without. The "burden" mentioned above becomes, how do we present images, reflections, echoes of this reality in our dramatic work without compromising the awe, wonder, fear and majesty that it demands? One way is through how we deal with the concept of character change.

Change

A common phrase that emerges from play and film writing texts is that "characters don't change. We are what we are, and all of our psychological tendencies are formed by the age of five. We don't change; we merely realize potentialities, fears, and traits that have always been buried within us." There is some truth here, but the Judeo-Christian world-view offers a very different concept of change in which "we become new creatures" who "are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Cor. 3: 18) This sort of transformational impetus comes from without and is directly tied to our faith stance and to the sanctified walk that we experience after salvation. How to depict this reality is one of the great challenges of the Christian writer. Scripture tells us that Matthew dropped his tax collecting duties and followed Jesus, but we are not invited into the psychological and spiritual pressures that brought about this radical change in his life. But his actions tell us that something startling happened. A more complete rendition of change is provided through the depiction of Zacchaeus, another tax collector, who in his overwhelming desire to see Jesus runs down the street and climbs a tree compromising his social and occupational station in life; he agrees to invite Jesus into his house, inviting all of his so called sinner friends to come along, and the next morning he restores what he has stolen from people fourfold. The important element of writing that we can learn here is that scripture doesn't provide us with a long monologue in which Zacchaeus tells us how he was saved by Jesus, but demonstrates through a series of key actions the state of his mind and his ultimate turn around. Scrooge doesn't stop to give us a treatise about how the visiting spirits changed his life, he throws open the window to his cold apartment and buys a goose and Christmas presents for Cratchit and for his family. In *Paper Wings* we watch Jamie's groundedness grow and replace actions that speak to her new life in Christ.⁹ We know and ultimately believe a person not by their words but by their actions.

Christ-likeness

The impact that Jesus has had on all of history (even religious mythical paradigms expressed in both Jewish and gentile cultures *before* His coming in

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the flesh) reverberates through literary, theatrical and filmic presentations. The image of Christ portrayed through his attributes as a model of the hero is prevalent, and can represent a way of depicting aspects of our worldview in other-than-the emotional peripateticness which she evidenced in Act One through a series of biblical modalities. Christ as the scapegoat is seen in the sacrificial lamb of Jewish atonement rites, but also in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* and in *The Mission* and *In America* to name but a few. The novels of Wendell Berry in their portrayal of the long suffering citizens of Port Williams, Kentucky who strive after goodness and eternal values, reflect many aspects of the Christ person and message as does the main character of *Mr. Ives' Christmas* by Oscar Hijuelos. Christ-like innocence brings ultimate destruction to Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. The Duke's forgiveness at the end of *Measure for Measure*, Francis' transformation into a saint/man united with the natural elements in Zeffirelli's *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, and even Joan's striving to fulfill and make complete God's destiny for herself and those around her in *Joan of Arcadia* are all Christ-like impulses manifest in story and character, the emulation of which deserves further exploration by the sensitive Christian writer.

The Objective Correlative

Gerald Manley Hopkins writes: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," in his poem of the same title. T.S. Eliot corroborates this view in his concept of the Objective Correlative which essentially says that matter itself can be imbued with anthropomorphic attributes, and that it can reflect both the spiritual and the emotional state of characters in literary fiction. Thus when the moral balance of both Thebes (*Oedipus Rex*) and Denmark (*Hamlet*) is upset, this is reflected through plagues and rotteness which assault the physical environments. Lear's madness is mirrored in the tempestuous storm on the heath; the sullocating sexuality and mendaciousness of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is realized through claustrophobic boudoirs, screens, fans, and cumbrous make up. In other words, the physical world reflects the moral state of the characters. That nations and individuals are or will be punished for their moral turpitude through plagues, droughts, invasions, earthquakes and financial ruin is consistent with Biblical revelation. The writer is obligated to inculcate this principal in his work in order to take advantage of the dynamic power of living symbols which can reflect moral values as well as states of mind in the lives and actions of his characters. The richness that ensues is often the difference between talking about or literalizing values as opposed to subjectively establishing them through symbolic objects and actions. "Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made." (Rom. 1: 20)

We hear Christians justifying their writing by using such terms as *redemptive* or *transformational*. If the play has a redemptive message it is automatically Christian. But more often than not, what is implied is that it has a happy ending, that good wins out over evil, that marriage and community are restored, and that it represents safe family values fare. Certainly there is nothing wrong with creating stories that reflect aspects of the Judeo-Christian ethos, but again it should be emphasized that the above values are being regularly produced on television and film projects within the dominant culture. To write redemptively stands for far more than lizzy and warm happy endings, or feel good senti-

ments that allow us to leave the theatre whistling those feel good moral tunes that played over our sensibilities for two hours. True redemption is the result of a transformational process which has as its origin the radical intrusion into our fallen world the saving grace of God through his Son, Jesus Christ. From this standpoint, the purpose of redemption is much like the purpose of Art itself: to jolt us out of our material complacency; to make us see the world through new lenses; to give new purpose and insight and meaning into our mundane lives.

As Christians the Holy Spirit dwells within each one of us. We are all walking miracles. The ineffable resides within. That is not only remarkable; it is shattering in its scope. And along with it comes a great responsibility which is to share with the world the repercussions of this phenomenon of God-within. On a daily basis we are aware that we exist on the cusp of a spiritual reality that is a vast mystery, we commune with a living and personal God, we are aware of warring with principalities, and we live literally on our toes in anticipation of this God interacting and intervening in our lives. This is the most precarious, the most challenging and the most demanding walk that any human being can experience. That in some form or other, it should be the motivation for our creative impetus is not at all untoward. How to articulate this mystery without sentiment or schmaltz, without purposeful sensationalism or a deadening proselytizing voice is the challenge.

Transcendence and Incarnation

Christ provides us with the model. He was God made incarnate in the material world as Man, as flesh and blood. He preached the Kingdom through parable and paradox; his actions healed, salvaged, outraged, and amazed the world. He became the perfect blending of form and content. At the same time He transcended this life. Angels announced His coming. He expunged demons, was transfigured, raised the dead with the command of His voice, and ultimately defeated death itself, returning in a new bodily form that brought together the noumenal and the phenomenal. The dynamic infusion of God in the world is the energy that the Christian writer has to catch, harness, and reproduce in multifarious ways that make possible in his work the impossible, and that reflect, echo, shadow, and even manifest the walking miracles that we are—God in flesh, God in material reality, God wanting to break out of this material world and flash out like “shining from shoo foil” to a world still muddled in darkness. Oftentimes it is just a moment: at the end of Lucia Fragione’s *Espresso*, an ‘angel’/actor lifts his broken but transformed partner and carries her about the stage to the sound of eagles’ wings; the Pope kneels down and kisses the dirty feet of Friar Lawrence in *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*; in *Five Cups of Coffee* a man obsessed with the turnings of time stands at the rusted gates of the Garden of Eden and decides to return to real time to become a parent and a partner in a way that he had never before; a man dies and a baby lives in *In America*; a man finishes building a barn when his father dies and stands upon it and curses, challenges and weeps before his Maker during a horrific storm in *Building the Barn* by Buddy White; a woman kneels and receives the Holy Spirit, but this is shown only through light and the empty vicarious spying of an apostate Priest in Bresson’s *Diary of a Country Priest*. The list goes on. When the transcendent springs from the actions and symbols of our natural environment it has a particular evocative power, and for the audience it becomes immediately identifiable and possible. Flannery O’Connor throws down the gauntlet: “As grace and nature have been separated, so

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imagination and reason have been separated, and this always means an end to art".¹⁰

Are we capable of imbuing our fictional environments and the characters and stories that we create with a sense of destiny, with universal moral dictums, with Christ-like imagery and actions, with gestures and words which signify the wonder and awesome presence of our Lord in both mundane and life changing moments? Are we up to the challenge of bringing a new trans-Genesis to our fallen culture through what we write?

End Notes

- ¹ Bruce Lockerbie, *Thinking and Acting Like a Christian* (Multnomah Press, Portland, Oregon 1989), p. 98.
- ² Kenneth Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, Ill. 1989), p. 34.
- ³ Henry R. Van Till, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia, PA. 1972), p. 32.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ⁵ Leland Riken, *The Liberated Imagination* (Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois, 1989), pp. 148-149.
- ⁶ Van Till, p. 27.
- ⁷ Marjorie Casebier McCoy, *Frederick Buechner* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1988), p. 108.
- ⁸ Lucia Fragione, *Espresso* (Talon Press, Vancouver, Canada, 2004.)
- ⁹ Gillette Elygren, *Paper Wings* (Unpublished play script, Chesapeake, VA. 1997).
- ¹⁰ O'Connor, Flannery, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction", *Mystery and Manners*. (NY: Noonday Press, 1969), p.82

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