

## Teaching High School Literature: TOS Examines the Options

By Christine Field

Teaching high school literature can be intimidating. How do I know which type of program to choose? What best fits my child's learning style? What are the options for teaching this subject area? We decided to examine the options and present our findings.

My keep-it-simple philosophy tells me that a really effective high school literature approach is to read, think, and write about books. Get a reading list for college-bound students via an Internet search, read a couple of them each month, write something about each one, and talk about them. It sounds good, but is hard for most of us to implement, track, and verify with our students. There are many options and helps for this subject area.

For those who want a more structured approach, we decided to take a look at three very different approaches. For the whole book approach, we will be looking at the Smarr Publishers program. The textbook approach is represented by Bob Jones University Press, and the worktext approach is provided by Alpha Omega. They each have unique strengths. To make the comparison balanced, I asked the publishers to send me their American and British Literature courses. Typically these are taken at the junior and senior year of high school. Let's have a look.

Alpha Omega offers American and British Literature as one-semester electives for grades 7-12. In the worktext style, the student reads explanatory material and excerpts from literature. To test understanding, fill-in-the-blank, multiple choice, and true-or-false questions are presented after each section. A brief set of new vocabulary words and their definitions is given for many sections. Several times in the worktext, a set of questions is presented for thought and discussion.

The teacher's edition contains answers to the tests and worktext questions, but also contains helpful notes for the parent to use in the thought and discussion section. These questions require the student to synthesize what he has learned. In one instance in American Literature, he is asked to explain the Jonathan Edwards sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In another he is to explain the controversy between the fundamentalists and the modernists. This American Literature elective covers early American literature (1600-1800), the Romantic period (1800-1855), the period of war and reconciliation (1855-1915), the modern age (1915-1946), and on to the post-modern age (1946-present).

In a similar style, British Literature covers the Middle Ages (to 1485), Reformation and Renaissance (1600-1798), Neoclassical and Romantic period (1798-1832), Victorian Age (1832-1901), and the Modern Age (20th century). The same thought-provoking questions are encountered at the end of each section, such as asking the student to look at the two main characters in *The Taming of the Shrew* in light of Ephesians 5:22-23, or to explain the premise of *The Screwtape Letters*.

If your student enjoys the worktext approach, this is a good choice. Some literature selections are quite long and dry. For the student who does not want to toil through the entire work, this course will work well.

Bob Jones University Press represents the textbook approach. Because of the greater space available, more selections are included and the excerpts tend to be longer. The introductory material covers more and goes a bit deeper. Timelines in the text help the student to track what is going on during the time period studied. I particularly appreciate the extra material and aids in the teacher's editions of these volumes. It provides even more background information and gives application activities and questions for thought and discussion. More than 70 authors are represented, including a complete play. For example, in American Literature, after a study of Longfellow's poetry, the student is challenged to write a serious poem or sonnet about some sorrow or disappointment they have experienced. In another instance, after reading *The Gift of the Magi*, the student is asked to explain his understanding of situational irony.

BJU's British Literature follows a similar pattern. Embedded in the text are definitions and clarifications for the student's benefit while navigating these sometimes-challenging passages. Almost 70 authors are represented, and this text includes a major study of *Macbeth*. The discussion questions present some literary meat for our students. For example, in the discussion of *Robinson Crusoe*, the student is asked whether he has spent a considerable time alone in nature and is drawn into an understanding of the danger of allowing the love of nature to become a religious experience or a substitute for the worship of God.

BJU's textbooks are wonderfully presented. The helps presented for both the student and teacher make these difficult works manageable for our children. The selections are generally not as long as the original works and may thus be easier for our student to navigate.

If your preference is to read whole books, consider a program such as Smarr Publishers. Their American and British Literature courses are meaty! Presented in a 36-week format, each program is a nice mix of writing forms: novel, poetry and essay.

Students have a study guide containing a daily lesson. Each lesson has vocabulary words, questions for comprehension, critical thinking questions, information about history, word studies, and literary criticism. Each week the student learns 15-20 new words.

This course is not just focused on reading. Your student will also learn the critical writing process, enabling them to write the most common form of college writing: the argumentative paper. Each course has forty lessons in writing, grammar, and style. Answer keys for all exercises are included with the course.

The American Literature selections are excellent. Your student will study *The Scarlet Letter*, the writings of Jonathan Edwards, the poetry of Poe and Longfellow, the essays of Emerson, the tales of Twain, and more. In British Literature, your student reads *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Beowulf*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Frankenstein*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and more.

Let's look at some examples of what your student will do in these courses. In the study of *Macbeth*, the student reads an introductory page before tackling the actual work. For each act of the play, there are vocabulary words and an exercise and recall questions. After recalling what was read, some critical thinking questions are presented. (For example, after Act I, your student

is asked to speculate on whether the Devil can speak truth.) Finally there are some bonus thoughts. In this instance, the student is introduced to trochaic meter. Your student will really KNOW this work at the end of the study!

As I compose this article, I am planning high school curriculum for my two oldest children. I want to assure our readers that we have nothing to fear about high school! There are so many options and plans and helps that, with a little research and thought, we can find materials to help us get our children through any subject area. Whether the study is literature, life science, or logarithms, we can guide our children through academics with confidence, while guarding their hearts and filling their souls with truth.

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### **Biographical Information**

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