

THE CARDINAL NEWMAN SOCIETY'S CATHOLIC EDUCATION REPORT



LITERATURE, LIBRARY, AND MEDIA GUIDE FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATORS

by Denise Donohue, Ed.D., and Dan Guernsey, Ed.D.
February 2019

Summary

This guide provides the reader with considerations and recommended best practices for the selection of literature, media, and movies for academic coursework in Catholic elementary and secondary education, as well as guidelines for library policies and best practices for the acquisition of library holdings. The guide can be applied to the selection of book fair organizations. Sample school policies and a model scoring rubric are included.



THE CARDINAL
NEWMAN SOCIETY

Promoting and Defending Faithful Catholic Education

All of The Cardinal Newman Society's research and analysis, including this paper, is available online on the Society's website at NewmanSociety.org.

Copyright © 2019 The Cardinal Newman Society. Permission to reprint is hereby granted provided no modifications are made to the text and it is identified as a publication of The Cardinal Newman Society. Note: The views expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily those of The Cardinal Newman Society.

The Cardinal Newman Society
10432 Balls Ford Road, Ste. 300
Manassas, Virginia 20109
703/367-0333
Research@CardinalNewmanSociety.org

Literature, Library, and Media Guide for Catholic Educators

by Denise Donohue, Ed.D., and Dan Guernsey, Ed.D.

“Literature and the arts are also, in their own way, of great importance to the life of the Church. They strive to make known the proper nature of man, his problems and his experiences in trying to know and perfect both himself and the world. They have much to do with revealing man’s place in history and in the world; with illustrating the miseries and joys, the needs and strengths of man and with foreshadowing a better life for him. Thus they are able to elevate human life, expressed in multifold forms according to various times and regions.”

- Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium Et Spes*, 1965, #62

Rationale

The mission of Catholic education fulfills its purpose of “critical, systematic transmission of culture in the light of faith”¹ and the integral formation of the human person by developing each student’s intellectual, moral, emotional, physical, and spiritual gifts in harmony, teaching responsibility and right use of freedom, and gradually introducing all students to the knowledge of salvation by helping them become prayerful, moral, and Christ-like individuals bearing witness to the hope that is within them to build the Church on earth, evangelize the world, and contribute to the common good.² How a school accomplishes this mission includes many things, one of which is its selection of curricular materials—in particular, its selection of literature and the arts.

Literature and the arts can be powerful forces in human formation. They can build up or tear down the moral imagination of a person. They can enable one to transcend oneself and enter into the shoes of others from different cultures, times, and dimensions. C.S. Lewis notes the specific power and role of literature as having the capability to enlarge our being, to broaden and enhance our perspectives, and to “see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own.”³ Such powerful forces must be respected and carefully selected in a Catholic school, because literature both assists in the formation of the moral imagination and acts as a vehicle for the transmission of Catholic culture.

For our children, stories are not just about texts and techniques, but also about people and relationships, providing opportunities to engage in deep and meaningful discussions about man, the common culture, and the cultures and peoples from all times and ages. Stories are not just about literary styles and interpretive complexities, but also about exploration into the imaginative and powerful terms surrounding the nature of reality, morality, faith and virtue. Great literature

¹ Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, [The Catholic School](#) (Vatican City: Rome, 1977) 54.

² Code of Canon Law (1983) c.795; Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, [Gravissimum Educationis](#) (Vatican City: Rome, 1965); Congregation for Catholic Education, [Circular Letter to the Presidents of Bishops’ Conferences on Religious Education in Schools](#) (Vatican City: Rome, 2009) 1.

³ C.S. Lewis, [An Experiment in Criticism](#) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 137.

presents images of nobility and excellence and their opposites for our judgment and self-judgment about what it means to be a fully actualized, good, human being—or the opposite.

Catholic educators must keep in mind that the goal is to assist the maturing student not only to enjoy reading well-written texts, but also to better understand and interpret the world and the human condition correctly.⁴ Literature has the capability of eliciting strong passion and emotion as well as imagination and reasoning. Well-crafted stories help students become wiser and more virtuous people, providing insight into man's nature and his relationship to God and creation.

During students' tender years, literature and the arts should provide clear and compelling examples of beauty and goodness. Selected works should foster a joy for reading and learning and unambiguously reinforce virtue and promote a Catholic worldview, avoiding the moral ambivalence of relativism. Heroes and villains must be identifiable and evaluated through the lens of Christian morals and values.

All students, but especially younger students, need to be carefully guided as they begin to encounter non-Christian worldviews, such as those represented in the myths of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Such encounters are important in the quest to help them understand the cultural and historical forces that have influenced the development of human thought, especially Western thought, across time. Truth and beauty, wherever found, are called out and celebrated, until they reach their summit and perfection in Christ, in Whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) and in Whom "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17).

As students mature, especially in high school, more complex elements of the human experience come into play, including darker elements of the human condition. This includes painful and confusing tragedy and despair that result from sin: the rejection of virtue, truth, and even God Himself.

Such deep human exploration and experience can be emotional and impactful; it can also be dangerous. Because of man's fallen nature, the minds, hearts, and imaginations of some authors and artists are sullied and dulled, and their works must not be taken on uncritically, or perhaps even at all. Some authors and artists are simply bad guides, whose works add little value to the formation of the human soul and can actually lead one away from God—away from truth, countering the mission of Catholic education to lead souls to Heaven and secure the common good here below.⁵ Still, masterpieces of literature can expose students to the darkness of broken humanity that they might not have previously considered or encountered and thus expand their own humanity through vicarious experience. When this happens, it is important that a trained and faithful Catholic teacher be present to guide them through the experience. It is also important that the work provide for the correction of evil and reinforcement of the good. This, for example, is what happens to classical tragic heroes. Such men are not perfect, and they are often prideful, but, in accepting their downfall and the role their error has played, they come to a degree of knowledge and wisdom which is of benefit to them and ultimately to us, the audience, as balance is restored.

⁴ Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, [The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School](#) (Vatican City: Rome, 1988) 57.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, [Meeting with Catholic Educators](#) (Washington, D.C., 2008).

It is also possible, especially in more modern works of literature, for the author to create a world where there is little or no truth, or where evil is presented unchallenged or unrepented, or even as an alternate good. Because our goal is integration of truth and life for our students—not alienation, relativism, and brokenness—Catholic educators cannot leave students adrift in such situations. Such books are to be used only with extreme caution and with specific planned instruction in place to ameliorate any confusion which may result. The solid Catholic response to such a work must be geared to leaving the student wiser and stronger in faith than before the work was first approached.

This approach encourages the inclusion of moral, ethical, epistemological, and anthropological questions such as, “Is what the text says and infers actually true?”, “How do its assertions comport with logic, reason, natural law, revelation, and a Catholic worldview of man and life?”, and “How is happiness achieved? What threatens it?” Literature can serve as an effective medium to address critical questions such as, “How ought men to live in community with each other?”, “What are an individual’s rights, duties, freedoms, and restraints?”, “What are a society’s?”, “What is the relationship between man and God; between man and the physical world?”, “What is the nature of human dignity and the human spirit?”, “What is love?”, and “What is the good life?” One of the goals of Catholic education is to help students develop dispositions for pursuing objective truth and striving for a habitual vision of greatness as they identify how literature interprets the human condition, human behaviors, and human actions in its redeemed and unredeemed state.⁶

Literacy in a Catholic school is a vehicle for the discovery of truth, beauty, goodness, and freedom; a delight in creating and in creation; a means to attain salvation; a warning of the destructive and self-destructive consequences of sin; and a pathway to serve the common good.

Recommended Policies

Because a student is generally not able to opt out of major literature assignments and because there are a myriad of possible materials that can meet a Catholic school’s [K-6](#) or [7-12](#) literature goals, there are likely multiple selections that satisfy educational objectives and the recommended policies below. If exceptions are made, they should be limited to extraordinary circumstances, with primary concern for the students’ purity and formation, and with approval from top administrators. But we believe that these guidelines provide ample opportunity to identify beneficial materials.

The Cardinal Newman Society has compiled a [recommended reading list as well as other resources](#) to assist toward this end.

The following policies from The Cardinal Newman Society and exemplar policies from five [Catholic Education Honor Roll](#) schools may be used without attribution and altered to fit the school’s mission and culture.

⁶ Denise Donohue & Dan Guernsey, [Catholic Curriculum Standards](#) (Manassas, Va.: The Cardinal Newman Society, 2016) 2, 8, 12.

Recommended Literature, Media, and Movie Policies

Literature, Media, and Movies must:

1. Have enduring value and educational significance.
2. Be selected for intellectual, moral, inspirational, and artistic weight more than for entertainment, popularity, faddishness, or an attempt to entice students to read.
3. Be of high-quality writing and artistic value, promoting creativity and a Catholic imagination.
4. Assist the student to a right ordering of the intellect, will, and emotions.
5. Assist the pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness.
6. Have characters that either undergo positive growth in virtue or have their vices shown as detrimental and contributing to their downfall.
7. Include teacher-led evaluation of themes and events in terms of Catholic norms, values, and worldview so as to provide insight into a Catholic understanding of the human person in his redeemed and unredeemed state and in his relationship to God, family, and others.
8. Be age-appropriate in content and ability.
9. Be free of significant and shocking profanity.
10. Be free of explicit discussion, presentation, or description of sexual activity or sexual fantasy.
11. Not be a proximate cause of sinful thoughts or actions, a pathway to the occult, contrary to truth, a temptation to despair, or a diminishing of faith.
12. Be listed in a course of studies or class syllabus available to parents.
13. Not have ambiguous moral themes and characters in summer reading or viewing assignments, since teacher input is not available, and ambiguity might lead students morally astray.
14. Not be rated “R” or “TV-MA”.

Recommended Best Practices for Literature

- Introduce students to the great conversations of humanity – especially as they are advanced in literary classics. Should they desire, students can read contemporary novels in their leisure time.
- Avoid an overemphasis on informational texts. Good and Great Books engage higher-order thinking skills and enhance personal development, creativity, and engagement.
- Beware of stories of darkness, despair, the occult, or confused archetypes - especially with younger students.
- Avoid stories that pursue a cultural agenda at odds with a Catholic understanding of human dignity, marriage, or sexuality.
- Use multiple literary approaches: moral analysis, reader response, authorial intention etc., and not simply “close reading.”
- Tailor questions and assignments to both the immediate world and transcendent meaning.
- Use an interdisciplinary approach and integral approach so that theology, history, and philosophy develop the “story” and inform the discussion of events.

- Use the beauty and skill evident in exceptionally well-written works by the best authors to model and teach effective writing skills.

Recommended Best Practices for Movies

- Movies shown during class time are to have an instructional purpose and not be used for entertainment.
- Teachers should watch the entire movie prior to incorporating it into a lesson plan.
- Watching carefully selected scenes, rather than entire works, can be an efficient way of maintaining focus and ensuring effective discussion.
- The movie or video should be stopped frequently to provide for thorough reflection and discussion.
- The teacher should be actively engaged in watching the students and facilitating discussion during movie clips, not attempting other work.
- Students should be seated to ensure their ability to focus on the film and engage in discussion. Theater type seating, as opposed to sitting behind a desk, can assist in ensuring the student is not sleeping, accessing social media, or doing other work during the movie.
- Any brief scenes with foul language, temporary partial nudity, or other offensive content must be skipped or blocked from view or hearing.
- If the movie is to be shown on YouTube or over the internet, teachers should take care to block inappropriate advertisements.
- Showing an entire movie should be a rare event in class. If searching for rewards for students or things to do during a celebration, games and other social or physical activities are to be preferred over movies.
- If the movie is available online (Netflix, YouTube, internet, etc.), consider having the students watch the movie as homework (possibly with their parents or fellow students) and complete a study-guide or reflection questions which can then be discussed in class.
- Look at several rating sites to help evaluate literature, media, and movies according to the rationale and policies articulated within this guide.

Recommended Process to Challenge a Selection

1. Cite title and date material was/is to be covered in which class.
2. Articulate the general nature of the concern.
3. Cite specific pages or sections of concern.
4. Discuss how this contradicts the school's book/movie selection policy.
5. Submit the concern to both the teacher and the principal. Final determination of suitability shall rest with the principal who interprets and applies board policy.

Rationale for Acquisition of Library Holdings

As a Catholic education's mission is different, a Catholic school library also looks different. Library books serve the Catholic mission of the school to promote truth, goodness, beauty, and excellence. Catholic education teaches students to read, because reading is an important part of being human. Reading is primarily a tool and a means, not an end in itself. We don't just want

students to read anything; we want them to read selections that will help them learn and grow in human capacity and joyful wonder. Reading can help ensure freedom and provide authentic joy when it leads students to encountering enduring ideals. Catholic education teaches students to read so that they can learn, seek, explore, think, and come to know the truth about the world around them.

A Catholic school library does not seek to provide access to “all kinds of books,” but rather the best and most meaningful books aligned with the school’s mission. What is acceptable to secular associations such as the American Library Association (ALA) and those who generate annual book awards may not be appropriate for the furtherance of a Catholic culture and worldview in a Catholic educational institution. Secular associations may be consulted for technical advice, but they are not to be used as the final arbiter of appropriate content, excellence, or vision for a Catholic school library.

Efforts should be made to steer youth to lasting and meaningful works and not selections chosen to “just get students to read.” There are plenty of options outside of the library and the school for that. Also, even if there is “nothing harmful” in a book, it may make sense not to include it in the library collection if it is unduly attracting students away from the best readings. For example, the cartoon-enhanced book, *Ellie McDougal*, may be more attractive and less work than *Little Women*, and the book *Captain Underpants* may be more enticing than *Captains Courageous*. But there is no doubt which books are better for our children. When the “harmless” gets in the way of the excellent, perhaps it’s not as harmless as first thought.

For the youngest readers, it’s important to be aware of impure archetypes. Selections which include foreboding figures such as trolls, witches, monsters and dragons are very helpful to communicate deeper realities to children about the world and about real hostile forces, both human and demonic, but stories about friendly dragons and misunderstood monsters can lead children to assume that evil is just a function of misunderstood or alienated “others” who mean no harm. This mixed message can present real harm to children when faced with life situations they are too young to handle.

For young adult readers, the collection should exclude works centered on hyped-up school drama or young adult books that present cynical images of school and teachers and parental authority; these work against the building-up of trust and community desired in a Catholic educational setting. Similarly, young adult novels which center on suicide, death, extreme alienation, sexuality, or modern broken families or which present parents as enemies and obstacles to “freedom” should be replaced by books promoting exploration, courage, loyalty, and nobility when students are working through sometimes difficult developmental changes. Historical fiction provides enough cognitive dissonance to allow modern youth an opportunity to re-evaluate their anxieties and limited worldview in light of a much broader and healthier context. In-depth, complex, dysfunctional, and alternative family relationships and lifestyles can better be explored after the young adult stage with selections from great works such as those from Jane Austen and Dostoyevsky, among others.

Individuals working in the library accept their responsibility as curators of materials given the importance reading has on the spiritual, social, and intellectual formation of youth who are growing in their understanding of reality. They support Catholic parents as the primary educators

of their children and take seriously the task of acting *in loco parentis*. The Catholic school does not intend to censor books out of the public domain, but, within its own private domain and targeted audience, the school must be faithful to its mission and the constraints of the school's budget.

Recommended Library Policies

1. Library holdings support the mission of Catholic education.
2. Library holdings are approved and acquired through a selected committee with strong faculty representation.
3. Library holdings are chosen for their high-quality writing and artistry and for their creative, intellectual, spiritual, and inspirational weight over their entertainment value.
4. Books of enduring value take priority, even if they are not available in library-quality copies.
5. Library holdings are not acquired simply because students request them, because they are best-sellers, or because they have won book awards.
6. Library holdings for K-8 maintain archetypes, promote virtue, and are morally unambiguous from a Catholic worldview.
7. Library holdings should not include fictional works that focus exclusively on suicide, drug abuse, modern dysfunctional relationships or works that foster cynicism about school, teachers, parents, or religion. Young adult fiction should instead encourage adventure and virtue.
8. Library holdings should not contain significant or shocking profanity or explicit discussion, presentation, or description of sexual activity or sexual fantasy.
9. Library holdings should not be a proximate cause of sinful thoughts or actions; they should not be a pathway to the occult, contrary to truth, lead to despair, or facilitate a diminishing of faith.

Book Fairs and Clubs

1. Select book fair organizations and clubs whose mission supports the mission of Catholic education.
2. Select books for sale according to library policy and rationale (eliminate others).

Exemplar School Policies

Frassati Catholic High School – Spring, Tex.

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT PHILOSOPHY AND MISSION

"...A selfless desire for a commitment to calling, a sense that honor is far more valuable than life—these are aspects of the soul that must be awakened by a vision of the high and the noble. And herein lies one of the great values of studying the classics: our poetic heritage gives imperishable form to the heroic aspiration."

-Dr. Louise Cowan

By placing before us examples of the high and noble, the classic works of literature ignite in us the desire to reach such heights of greatness as well. While distinct from philosophy and science,

literature as an academic discipline is comparable to both in its breadth and depth of imparting knowledge. Moreover, as the ancient Greek writer Cicero pointed out, “nothing is sweeter and more useful than the study of literature” because of its power to illuminate the beauty of the truth about the human person. For these reasons, the English program approaches literature as a vehicle of truth that imparts wisdom.

Thus, the English curriculum seeks to cultivate the students’ ability to understand, appreciate, and respond to the great works of our literary tradition. Students search out the wisdom of the poets and refine their judgment by taking part in seminar discussions focused on the chief works of major authors. Students are encouraged to learn what the best of the writers understand about human nature and the human experience throughout the ages. In doing so, they also follow in the footsteps of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, who so loved Dante’s great epic *The Divine Comedy* that he committed large passages to memory and would spontaneously recite them for his friends.

Throughout the English course of study, students develop their ability to read and think critically, and then to express themselves orally and in written form. Special emphasis is placed on mastery of the written word through an intensive writing program that is carefully woven into each course.

The course sequence parallels the Ethics and Culture department courses. The freshmen English course is organized thematically around the question of the human person’s search for identity, thus dovetailing with the Ethics and Culture course, *The Human Person*. In the sophomore English course, the literature explores the question of man’s search for happiness, complementing the Ethics and Culture course, *Principles of Ethics: The Search for Happiness*. The study of logic, rhetoric, and analytical writing in the junior and senior courses also helps students as they address the more complex issues in Bioethics and in their senior writing project.

The mission of Frassati Catholic High School’s English Department is twofold: 1) for students to achieve excellence in writing, interpretive, and critical language skills and 2) for students to achieve a certain excellence of soul, by learning to integrate the knowledge to be gained from great literature not only into their other courses but into their own lives.

Holy Family Academy - Manchester, N.H.

Literature texts in the Holy Family Academy curriculum must meet the following criteria:

1. Is imbued with the Catholic imagination.
2. Prompts wonder about and provides insight into the human condition as understood by the Catholic Church.
3. Is written in beautiful and coherent language.
4. Reflects or is at least compatible with a Catholic world view.
5. Is age appropriate in subject matter, complexity, and length.
6. Contains no vulgar or obscene content.
7. While expressive of a particular time and culture, the work has universal significance.

The Lyceum - Cleveland, Ohio

Because teaching literature effectively would seem to follow from a coherent and true philosophy of literature, we take this opportunity to set forth some general principles that we hope the teacher will agree with and find useful.

1. Students should read many wholesome works of imaginative literature. Literature addresses itself primarily to the imagination and the emotions of the reader, and therefore is an important tool by which those faculties are formed rightly.
2. Because of its unique influence on the emotions and imagination a school cannot be too careful in its own selection of literature that it “requires” students to read.

With regard to the first point, we must remember that a work of imaginative literature is not a work of philosophy, nor is it a work of theology. Though imaginative literature would appear to be all-embracing in its ability to include anything and everything (“Homer wrote a cosmos in verse”), nonetheless there is a distinction between a work that addresses itself primarily to the faculty of reason and a work that addresses itself primarily to the “heart” or emotions. As Aristotle points out about the purpose of tragedy in his *Poetics*, we maintain that imaginative literature is a great tool for disposing the passions rightly; literature has a great power for inclining the passions with moderation towards goodness, truth, and beauty.

On the other hand, a tool which has such a great power for good also has a great power to the opposite, and therefore we note that just as good literature (like good music) has an immediate good effect on the reader, bad literature has an immediate bad effect on the reader. But a school, like a good physician, must above all abide by the words of the Hippocratic Oath when it says, “never do harm.” In other words, a school must keep an especially strict standard about what literature it requires students to read.

Unfortunately, because of differences in human judgment and the difficulty of measuring works of literature, it very well might follow from this “principle of strictness” that students will not encounter certain great works of literature because they have been erroneously cut from the canon because of some “doubt” about their appropriateness.

This leads us to the next three principles by which we select books at The Lyceum:

3. Texts chosen should be undeniably good or excellent.
4. Every text must be chosen keeping in mind its suitability for the particular age level for which it is chosen.
5. Some little regard to “literacy” should play a part in the selection of texts.

Of course it may be impossible to find a single text that is “undeniably excellent” insofar as the poet maintains: “More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise” And so we might most assuredly find someone to deny that any single text is “excellent.” We will, consequently, stipulate that every text in The Lyceum canon of literature be “excellent” in the eyes of most who are liberally educated. Even so it would seem unimaginable that there might be someone who would deny the excellence of *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*.

That every text ought to be suitable for a particular age level is self-evident with regard to the “readability level” of a text. It is more difficult to know which texts are suitable for various

maturity levels with regard to the ideas and content of particular works. For example, experienced educators know that Jane Austen's marvelous *Pride and Prejudice* can stir the heart and passion of the junior and senior in high school, but very often proves to be a dismal failure for the ninth and tenth grade student. At the same time depending on a particular literature teacher, a work which is arguably more suitable for the 12th grade student with respect to content (e.g. the *Iliad*) might, in fact, work very well with a younger student.

In general, we believe that works of literature should be just enough advanced for a particular age level to provide a challenge and an opportunity for vocabulary building as well as an opportunity for increasing a student's individual ability to read with understanding – but not so advanced that the text will prove frustrating and ultimately produce the intellectual fatigue which we call “Great Books Burnout.” This fatigue is especially prone to happen at the small classical school precisely because of the high standards and lofty aspirations that are the hallmark of such a school. On the one hand The Lyceum honors its students by offering the greatest works of the western world, (the school does not insult the minds of its students by giving them unworthy works written by mediocre minds); on the other hand it takes pains to avoid the opposite danger of presenting great works that are simply inaccessible to developing minds.

Needless to say, choosing appropriate works of literature that meet all of these requirements is therefore not an easy task!

[St. Augustine Academy](#) – Ventura, Calif.

From its founding Saint Augustine Academy has endeavored to pass down to our students the most important works of literature in the Western tradition. Given the constraints of time in the school year and the maturity of the students, we very carefully select our class offerings from a variety of genres from across the centuries. We identify important themes and topics by examining the theological, moral and intellectual virtues in various works. We make note of important themes expressed in key passages by organizing them into three columns THEOLOGICAL, MORAL and INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES and by placing these citations along with their location in the text. In this way we can more easily trace the development of these three values and determine whether there is sufficient intellectual, moral and theological content to merit inclusion in our curriculum. By INTELLECTUAL we mean that the work deals with philosophical, historical and political issues. MORAL VIRTUES involve the ethical questions most often centered on Christian and Greco-Roman virtues. THEOLOGICAL VALUES refer to Judeo-Christian questions of our relationship to God both as individuals and as a community, and, most specifically, to Jesus Christ as our risen Savior.

In this way we can examine whether our favorites works go beyond the level of a heart-warming tale or a hard-hitting history and moves into the realm of the morally gripping story that is also instructive of the commandments of our faith, of our Lord's love for us and of our struggle to love and be faithful to Him. If the work contains clear passages of moral and theological content that our students may discover for themselves, then we know that the work will afford the students a chance to reflect and consider these great questions over time in their own lives.

Seton High School - Manassas, Va.

When choosing literature for classroom use, we generally consider a number of criteria. Using *The Odyssey* as an example will help to clarify those criteria. First of all, is it worthwhile as literature? Here we are often guided by the experience of the ages: if a work is a “classic” of western literature and has been part of its culture for many years, it is likely to have enduring value. The quality of the writing is likely to be high, the story to be appealing, and the themes to be those of universal importance. This is all certainly true of *The Odyssey*, one of the staples of western education for hundreds of years and an essential point of reference for educated persons for at least as long.

A second consideration is the work’s appropriateness in a Catholic school at the level being considered. While students just beginning high school may have been previously sheltered from certain more adult topics in the past, most do know at least in general about serious problems of morality such as violence and unchastity. While they may be surprised at first to find them in assigned literature because of this sheltering, they realize that immorality is a part of life and that the struggle between good and evil is a universal theme. So, beginning in high school, unchastity may be seen in a number of the classics students’ study (i.e., *The Scarlet Letter*, *Hamlet*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Tale of Two Cities*).

Any books with explicit descriptions of unchastity, or which could possibly lead a young person to sin, are eliminated. Most books clearly portray sin as sin: where there could be any doubt in the mind of the student, classroom discussion led by the teacher clarifies the matter. For example, at the very beginning of our study of *The Odyssey* we explain that ancient Greece was a pagan society, and that the people did not have Revelation to guide them or sanctifying grace to strengthen them. Part of our ongoing discussion is a consideration of the differences between this pagan society and one guided by Christian principles. They discover that the Greeks had a remarkable natural understanding of virtue in some ways but lacked virtue in other ways because their religion was unable to provide them with the Way, the Truth and the Life. In spite of the depiction of the sins of the Greeks (somewhat graphic in violence, not at all graphic in unchastity), we believe that none of our Seton students could possibly be led into sin by the contents of *The Odyssey*, especially when they are explained by Catholic teachers in the context of a good Catholic education.

Holistic Rubric for Selecting Literature in a Catholic School

Compare the literature selection to the description provided in each box and circle the score that most closely applies to your selection.

| Score | Description |
|---|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">4 Excellent Choice</p> | <p>There are multiple or significant timeless themes presented which: transcend culture and politics, allow for a richer and deeper understanding of humanity, and lend themselves to profound discussion about authentic truth and reality from a Catholic worldview. The work powerfully provokes a deeper understanding of virtue (or the destructive consequences of the lack thereof) and its effects on human flourishing. The work is uniquely suited to assist the student to a right ordering of the imagination, passions, and emotions. The work has significant artistic weight and strong intellectual merit. The writing is very well crafted and can serve as a model for student emulation. The work has been read for generations. There is no profanity. There is no blasphemy. There is no description of sexual activity or sexual fantasy. The content does not diminish the student's faith or innocence or lead the student to sin or despair. The instructor is expertly equipped to provide a Catholic perspective on content and themes.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">3 Good Choice</p> | <p>There are themes presented which: transcend culture and politics, allow for a deeper understanding of humanity, and lend themselves to discussion about authentic truth and reality from a Catholic worldview. The work allows for discussion of virtue (or the destructive consequences of the lack thereof) and its effects on human flourishing. The work assists the student to a right ordering of the imagination, passions, and emotions. The work has artistic weight and intellectual merit. The writing is well crafted. The work is likely to be read by future generations. There is no shocking or significant profanity. There is no blasphemy. There is no description of sexual activity or sexual fantasy. The content does not diminish the student's faith or innocence or lead the student to sin or despair. The instructor is effectively equipped to provide a Catholic perspective on all essential content and themes.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">2 Fair Choice (See below)</p> | <p>Themes are primarily cultural and political, somewhat limiting discussion about transcendent concerns. Discussion about authentic truth and reality from a Catholic worldview is possible but not forefront. The work allows for discussion of virtue (or the destructive consequences of the lack thereof) but its impact on human flourishing is ambiguous and/or ambivalent. Disorder in the work may somewhat confuse the students' passions or emotions. The work is currently popular in some English or liberal arts courses but has not yet proved its staying power over time. There is no shocking or significant profanity. There is ambivalence or neutrality toward the Catholic faith. There is no excessive or explicit description of sexual activity or sexual fantasy. The content does not diminish the student's faith or innocence or lead the student to sin or despair. The instructor is adequately equipped to provide a Catholic perspective on most content and themes.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">1 Poor Choice</p> | <p>Themes are primarily cultural and political, limiting discussion about transcendent concerns. Discussion about authentic truth and reality from a Catholic worldview is significantly impeded by a worldview that is provocatively and enticingly anti-Christian. Virtue and vice are confused, ridiculed, or presented as inconsequential. Disorder in the work is not resolved or leads the students' passions or emotions astray. The work is culturally popular, but rarely found in school curricula, and has not yet proved its staying power over time. There is shocking and explicit violence. There is shocking or significant profanity. The work is blasphemous. There is excessive or explicit description of sexual activity or sexual fantasy. The content may diminish the student's faith or innocence or lead the student to sin or despair. The instructor is insufficiently equipped to provide a Catholic perspective on all content and themes.</p> |

Scale Score 2 = Compelling reason must be given for this selection, along with supports to mitigate areas of concern.

About the Authors

Dr. Denise Donohue is the Deputy Director of K-12 Programs at The Cardinal Newman Society. She earned her doctorate in school administration, with a concentration in curriculum development and a dissertation on the establishment of private, independent Catholic schools. She has served as interim chair and visiting assistant professor of a college education department, founder and principal of a Catholic high school, founder and religion coordinator for a Catholic grade school, and assistant head of a Catholic K-12 school.

Dr. Dan Guernsey is the Director of K-12 Programs at The Cardinal Newman Society. He is principal of a diocesan K-12 Catholic school. He earned his doctorate in educational administration and has master's degrees in English and educational administration. He has worked for over 25 years in Catholic education as a teacher and a principal at the K-12 level and as an associate professor, department chair, dean of education, and president at the college level.