

Dr. Louise Cowan—a True Teacher

by Ben House, Veritas Academy

Only twelve percent of adult Americans read poetry, according to a recent statistic.¹ Several of my students, my eleven-year-old son, and I fit into an even smaller minority: the number of Americans who travel three hours one way on a rainy night to hear a poetry lecture. The occasion was a lecture series called “Poetry and the City” sponsored by the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. The lecturer was Dr. Louise Cowan.

It was the desire to see and hear Dr. Cowan that drew my students and me from Texarkana to Dallas. Dr. Cowan holds the Louise Cowan Chair of Literature at the University of Dallas and she is a key figure in the founding of the Dallas Institute’s Teachers Academy. She received a doctorate from Vanderbilt University and is the author of many articles on literary criticism and two volumes on Southern literature, and she edited or co-edited several other volumes on literature for both scholars and general readers. Her credentials and scholarly accomplishments are impressive, but that alone would not have drawn a homebody like me out so far and late into the night. Louise Cowan is one of the most important literary scholars of our time. Now in her late eighties, Dr. Cowan is still lecturing, teaching, and inspiring students in the field of literature. Dr. Cowan is important because of her role in the Southern Literary Renaissance as both scholar and participant, her understanding of literature and scholarly accomplishments in that field, and

her achievements as a teacher.

First, Louise Cowan has played a vital part in the Southern Literary Renaissance, which has had a major impact on American literature since the

together on Saturday nights to read and critique their poems and discuss literature, philosophy, and other topics. Soon they began to publish a literary magazine called *The Fugitive* and they came to be

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1920s. The geographical center of this literary renaissance was Vanderbilt University. In the 1920s and 30s, a number of young scholars developed a literary community in the Nashville area that spawned dozens of books of poetry, fiction, literary criticism, politics, and history. From this same circle of writers came at least three major movements that impacted literature and culture. These American Southern writers in several ways resembled the Inklings of England, which was the literary group including C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and other friends. These Southerners shared a common heritage and intellectual excitement about applying that heritage to the modern world. Lots of writers participated in the movements emanating out of Vanderbilt University, but four poets were the key members of the original group. They were John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. As young men, they gathered

known as the Fugitive poets. All four men went on to successful careers in writing and teaching literature. By the late 1920s, feeling that Southern culture, the agrarian values of rural America, and the importance of family and faith were all under attack, they responded by contributing articles to *I’ll Take My Stand*. This book, made up of essays by twelve Southerners, is a classic work on localized politics, heritage and culture, and the importance of the traditional agrarian community. The essays were attacked in their day by critics now forgotten, but *I’ll Take My Stand* has remained in print.

Louise Cowan wrote her doctoral dissertation on the Fugitive poets, titled *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History*. This study contains a history of the movement, biographical sketches of the poets, and literary analyses of their poetry. Dr. Cowan also wrote a book called *The Southern Critics*, which introduces and examines the literary criticism of the Vanderbilt literary circle. Other key writers in the Southern Renaissance include Flannery O’Connor, Caroline Gordon, and William Faulkner, who have all been

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subjects of Dr. Cowan's studies.

While Southern writers do not fit into a nice neat mold, they do seem to share more than just upbringing in the South. A sense of geography and history, an attachment to the agrarian community, and a respect for older codes and truths—what William Faulkner called the “old verities”—tie the

writings of these Southerners together. In her book *The Southern Critics*, Dr. Cowan wrote, “...the Fugitives learned that they were gentlemen, Christians, and—if the egalitarian world forced them to admit it—clearly aristocratic, at least in their attitude toward literature, education, and culture.”² She goes on to say, “Their discipline was poetry; their mode of study was the apprehension of the poetic form; their outlook was classical and Christian; their concern was the welfare of human culture, to the extent that it could be furthered through literature.”³

Dr. Cowan is an authority on Southern literature. She learned Southern literature directly from the Fugitive-Agrarians. She was a colleague of such renowned Southern thinkers as novelist Caroline Gordon, who Dr. Cowan brought to the University of Dallas as a teacher when Ms. Gordon was 78, and scholar Mel Bradford, whose writings on Southern literature and history are quite brilliant. In Dr. Cowan's lecture, she quoted Davidson, Ransom, and Tate freely and often. Even though the Fugitive-Agrarians lived until the latter half of the twentieth century, many of their ideas and books are neglected. Donald Davidson, for

example, was an excellent poet, yet his poems rarely appear in anthologies. Perhaps it may not be politically correct to reference these Southern authors in some circles, but their achievements

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are still being heralded by Dr. Cowan and her students.

I had a second reason for wanting to hear Dr. Cowan. Not only has she studied Southern literature extensively, but also she has developed literary approaches to all genres of literature. Much of her work in the area of literary genres can be found in a series of books she has edited and contributed to called *Studies in Genre*. The three volumes available in this series are *The Epic Cosmos*, *The Terrain of Comedy*, and *The Tragic Abyss*, with a fourth volume on lyric poetry remaining to be finished. These genre studies by Dr. Cowan and others are quite scholarly and extensive. Her essay in *The Epic Cosmos*, titled “The Epic as Cosmopoesis,” is one of the most brilliant, yet difficult, writings I have ever read. I read it each time when I am teaching Homer and Virgil, with the hope and expectation that each new reading will deepen my understanding of both epic literature and this essay.

In another key work on literature, titled *An Invitation to the Classics: A Guide to the Books You Always Wanted to Read*, Dr. Cowan and Os Guinness compiled short introductory essays written by themselves and others on

literary classics. These essays, which are more than summaries of the works, are much more accessible and understandable for students and reference purposes. In fact, *An Invitation to the Classics*

is one of my most often used books. The contributors to the volume occupy literature positions in key universities across the country, and

many of them are Dr. Cowan's former students. Each selection takes a major classic piece of literature and analyzes the main themes and contents and provides biographical or historical information about the author and the time period of the writing. My literature lectures and discussions in class are filled with my borrowings from this book. Dr. Cowan's introductory essay gives a useful description of what makes a book a classic.

My favorite personal experience in teaching in a classical Christian school has been discovering literary classics I either had never read or had never read deeply. Since I began teaching in a classical Christian school, I have read more and better books and read and taught them in a deeper sense than I ever did in college, in graduate school, or in teaching in public school. Homer and Milton, Shakespeare and Melville, and other great writers are unsettling and unsatisfying. When you finish their works, you want to start over and read them again. And you want to read what others have noticed and observed about these classics. Since Dr. Cowan is so well-versed in literary classics, listening to her is quite a thrill.

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This leads to the third reason I wanted to see Dr. Cowan. She is a great teacher. Her students have transplanted her approach to teaching literature to schools and colleges across the land. Many of them are quite capable scholars and authors themselves. As Dr. Glenn Arbery has said, "Directly or indirectly, her ideas have influenced thousands of undergraduates, graduate students, and secondary school teachers, as well as tens of thousands of their students."⁴ Most of my gleaning from Dr. Cowan's insights has been from reading her books, listening to a few "taped tapes," and attending a couple of lectures, yet, thankfully, I am one of those secondary school teachers who has been able to echo her insights and hopefully imitate her enthusiasm in my classroom.

In her essay, "The Importance of the Classics,"⁵ Dr. Cowan describes how her study of Hamlet reawakened her understanding of Christianity in Shakespeare's writings and then her study of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamozov* led to her "rediscovery of Christ in His fullness." Literature is a great means of expounding a Christian worldview. Not only are there a host of great Christian writers—ranging from St. Augustine to Flannery O'Connor—but also the themes of great literature invariably reflect Christian issues. Not all literature professors see or apply this and not all approaches to literature are open to Christian interpretations. But God is gracious, both to individuals and

to whole cultures. Isn't it amazing that in a world so often described as post-Christian, post-modern, skeptical, and unbelieving that God not only raised up a C.S. Lewis and a J.R.R. Tolkien in Britain, but He has raised up whole ranks of literary scholars in our age, including Dr. Louise Cowan.

NOTES

1. Statistic found in the Spring 2005 catalog of courses and events at the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture.

2. Louise Cowan, *The Southern Critics* (Dallas: University of Dallas Publications).

3. *Ibid.*, 75.

4. Glenn Arbery, *The Tragic Abyss*, editor's preface (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2003), i.

5. Louise Cowan and Os Guinness, *An Invitation to the Classics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).



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