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What does Jesus have to do with Victorian Literature?

by Jessica Ann Hughes

When people ask what I work on, the answer is simple. One word, in fact: Jesus. If I want to be more specific, I add, “in the Victorian novel.” Responses generally fall into two categories. Most people are really interested; after all, they know who Jesus is and they are familiar with Victorian novels. The two together sound intriguing. Some, however, look at me awkwardly, as if I have a scarlet “C” emblazoned on my blouse. On rare occasions, being a Christian in academia—particularly in literary studies—baffles people.

I hadn’t planned to work on Jesus. In fact, religion and literature was one thing I did not want to work on when I started a PhD program at the University of Notre Dame in the fall of 2009. After studying English at Westmont College and completing an MA in theological studies (with a thesis on the poetry of Wendell Berry) at Regent, I wanted to do something else, something that would show my theological training from two fine Evangelical institutions could help me think in creative and generative ways when the subject matter was not explicitly theological. I talked to my advisor about a project on childbirth and maternity in the Victorian period, floated ideas about marriage and gender roles, and tried to avoid theological topics.

That lasted about a semester.

When it came time to write papers, I found that it was easy to write theologically-focused literary papers. My time at Regent had taught me to think in such a way that the story of God and his creation had become my primary language. What was more, I had learned to appreciate the theological upheavals of the nineteenth century as more than attempts to grasp ecclesiastical power or antiquarian intellectual debates. They had become living discussions of fellow Christians as they attempted to work out what it meant to follow God as a community in Victorian England. I had learned a theological charity that helped me explore and embrace a broad range of Christian thinkers with nuance and grace. It turned out, this sort of intellectual engagement led to successful seminar papers. After I fell pregnant during my first year at Notre Dame, struggling to keep up my reading and to keep my lunch down, I found myself writing primarily on religion and literature.

One day in the summer of 2012 (on the same day I found out I was pregnant with my second child), a member of my exam (and now dissertation) committee, Dr. Mark Noll, asked me, “So what do the Victorians think about Jesus?” As I sat silently in his office, madly trying to think up an answer, I was

struck by the fact that I had read nothing about Jesus. In all those volumes of church history and theology, in all those scholarly works on the novel, no one talked about Jesus. He did show up in unlikely novels, though. I went home and outlined an answer, one that came in handy when the question appeared on my qualifying exams. Leaving the exam, I felt good, like I'd nailed that answer at least. But I was going to write my dissertation on something else, something on agency and selfhood within religious novels.

During my oral exams a couple weeks later, heavily pregnant and looking for the clear dissertation path, I asked my committee what they thought about my "Jesus-answer," hinting that, perhaps, it might make a good dissertation. They all smiled and nodded and asked me to leave the room to discuss my exams. A few minutes later, they welcomed me back into the room and said, something like, "Good work. You passed. And you are writing your dissertation on Jesus."

So, I am now the person who works on Jesus. It wasn't who I planned to be upon leaving Regent. Rather, it has been a strange and surprising story of God gently guiding my academic work along a path that seems already prepared for me. Although I was afraid that such a project would hold no interest to the wider world of academics, Jesus is far more interesting to scholars than I expected. Recently a chapter from my dissertation was selected for a collection of essays on Victorian belief and doubt. Then, the [AAUW](#) (the American Association of University Women) awarded me a generous fellowship to finish my dissertation during the 2014-15 academic year.

Trying to juggle gardening, house cleaning, cooking, marriage, and parenting with a dissertation is not always easy. Yet, I have seen God's goodness in each stage of the research, even in something as small (but life-changing) as the right question asked on a particularly momentous day. What is more, I'm learning to trust that God will continue to provide the right opportunities as my time at Notre Dame comes to an end (such trust is no small feat, I might add, when facing the inauspicious job market next year). And here is, perhaps, the greatest gift of my Regent education: it has taught me to trust in God's goodness, his goodness in creation, his goodness in calling us to our vocations as Christians and as individuals in his world. The work God has called me to is good: I get to think about—and help others think about—Jesus. I get to examine the role that theologies about Jesus play in encoding cultural narratives. And I get to explore the ways in which Jesus repeatedly defies our expectations and challenges our assumptions, especially when we attempt to capture him on the page. The work is good—it is, in fact, a gift.

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