

**THE THEOLOGY OF MODERN  
FICTION, BEING THE  
TWENTY-SIXTH FERNLEY  
LECTURE DELIVERED IN  
LIVERPOOL, JULY, 1896**

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The theology of modern fiction, being the twenty-sixth Fernley lecture delivered in Liverpool, July, 1896 by Thomas G. Selby

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**THOMAS G. SELBY**

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THE THEOLOGY  
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BEING THE TWENTY-SIXTH FERNLEY LECTURE

*DELIVERED IN LIVERPOOL, JULY, 1896*

BY  
THOMAS G. SELBY

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## THE THEOLOGY OF MODERN FICTION



### INTRODUCTORY

IN the early centuries religious teaching was formulated in Church councils, and dispensed amongst the half-taught races of Christendom, without scowl of protest from the docile patient. It is a far cry thence to the present hour, when a large section of the public picks up its religious ideas outside the Church. The daily press coins the commercial and political creeds of our fellow countrymen, and the successful novel-writer coins the religious creeds of equally large numbers. It may be a question how long the currency will wear; but for the time being a dozen story-writers, whom it would be easy to name, have influenced multitudes of people to an extent that may well be the despair of an equal number of trained divines or famous preachers.

Can any theology come out of fiction, and of fiction which is in no sense ecclesiastical in its bias? Is it not enough to make our dead novelists turn in their graves, to propose enrolling them into an assembly of divines who shall define for us articles of faith, and settle in any way



the great questions of God, character, and human destiny? We are sure, at least, of the scorn of some living writers who idealise the gin, blasphemy, and heathenism of the slums, and dress up for our admiration the puppets of an obscene and rollicking Bohemia. To such scorn we may reply that no sane student of the science of religion would think of going to the marionette show to discover the materials of an intuitional theology, any more than a student of medicine would think of going to the pits of eviscerated mummies in the sands of Egypt to qualify for his profession by grounding himself in physiology. The kaleidoscopic trick of the impressionist does not concern us. The mere society novel, which chronicles hunts, balls, dinners, drawing-rooms, is likewise irrelevant, for it deals with the fitful surface of things. One might as well try to hammer filigree out of quicksilver as find suggestions even of an elementary theology in such cursive, capricious, intangible material. And as to the tainted novel, the book which is the mere peep-show into gutters and iridescent cesspools, that will go the way of other peep-shows in a few brief years. The books, however, which with due care and comprehensiveness portray human character and its issues will live, and in proportion to their truth to fact must surely illustrate some of those great principles of religious faith which are bound up with the constitution of man and the history to which he contributes.

The novel is sometimes a mere fashion plate devoted to the description of costumes soon out of date, a stage for the display of those skin-deep manners and customs peculiar to separate castes of society, a feat in sea or

landscape painting to which human interests are subordinate, a readable glossary which stores up for after generations the quaintness and piquancy of expiring dialects. Now and again it is written to boom the latest cult of a cluster of drawing-room butterflies playing at Eastern mysticism, or to further a new criticism destined to be speedily ranked with other exaggerated judgments and overweening expectations. The historical romance comes round in its appointed period to revive the spirit of a bygone century, and cast the glamour of fascination over a half-forgotten ritual. In much-thumbed volumes of the circulating library we may sometimes feel the pulse of a faint, easy-going, middle-class theology; and in volumes which persist after the ups and downs of a decade we may see marks of pathetic reverence for a lost experience, or trace the tracks of a stormy battling to keep, amidst many distractions, priceless fragments of the threatened faith. A book may utter what is partisan rather than catholic in the temper of its writer, and betray a direct ecclesiastical aim, to which plot and dialogue are subsidiary. In such case the production becomes disguised testimony, and its worth will be proportioned to the candour, intelligence, impartiality we can verify in its author. As a rule, stories which are ostensibly religious in their aim, whilst providing harmless and helpful entertainment for the mind in certain stages of its development, do not sensibly direct or determine the deeper channels of religious thought. A writer may chance to be without fixed religious belief, and the theology which pervades his chapters will be identical with an inevitable theology in his own subconsciousness, which he cannot cast out or

ignore. In some respects, especially when days of questioning and controversy are upon us, literature of this type may be of a higher religious value than that which is conceived with the direct object of pointing a pious moral or advocating some formulated scheme of belief and Church government. This theology in solution, which is diffused through all the higher literature of fiction, has evidential force about it of no mean order, inasmuch as it shows that man is religious in spite of himself, and that even in the writer who has repudiated dogma there is an irreducible minimum of theology, out of which some of the cardinal articles of the Christian faith may be built up in new forms. And the books which mirror human life veraciously, the private negations of the writers notwithstanding, must always be more or less religious and furnish some of the rudiments of the faith; because they bring before us the normal principles which work in human society from generation to generation, whatever the mystery veiling the origin of those principles. Such a witness to the innate and indestructible faiths of the human heart is without price, since the witness is more or less hostile and grudging, and concedes no more than can be helped to the inchoate Christianity which cleaves everywhere to the conscience and history of man.

Not a little of our recent fiction teems with painful and repulsive illustrations of the doctrine of human depravity. The basest instincts of the blood are assumed to contain the clew to all the complexities of character. Writers who crowd their canvases with the tragedies of greed, drink, sex, revenge can more than make good the flagging emphasis the Christian teacher puts upon the