

On November 16, about 60 students, faculty, and community members gathered in Nicholson Hall to listen to Dr. Roger Lundin of Wheaton College explore “Modern Literature and the Question of Belief.” Dr. Lundin, Blanchard Professor of English, focuses most of his research on the relationship of Christianity to literature, 19th century American literature, and modern intellectual history. His passion for literature certainly came alive that evening as he walked the audience through three key points in the quest for belief as manifested in modern literature.

Beginning with three authors whose works document the struggle with belief in the mid-19th century, Dr. Lundin titled his first point “Nimble Believing.” All writing within just a decade of one another, Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Emily Dickinson, grappled with the growing intellectual and social changes of the time or what Lundin referred to as “unnatural disaster.” Sharing a story of an exchange between Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Dr. Lundin revealed Melville’s coming to terms with eventual self-annihilation. Hawthorne notes, however, that Melville could not “rest until he gets hold of a belief.”

For Melville, he could neither believe nor be comfortable with unbelief. Moreover, Lundin quoted Anna Dostoevsky’s recollection of her husband’s, Fyodor, response to the painting “The Body of the Death of Christ” by Hans Holbein. The painting evoked so much emotion in Fyodor that he jumped up on a chair in the museum to get a closer look. This painting later appears in his work *The Idiot* when characters Myshkin and Rogozhin discuss whether or not a painting as grotesque as that can cause a man to lose his faith. Rogozhin concludes that it can, in fact, result in unbelief. Lastly, referring to works by Emily Dickinson, Dr. Lundin discussed her vexation about the loss of providential assurance in the wake of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. He remarked, “Dickinson felt Darwin had thrown the redeemer away.”

Each author produced their greatest works between the years of 1850-1880, decades in which a revolution in thought and practice occurred. Dr. Lundin remarked that unbelief emerged with “astonishing suddenness” making it, for the first time, socially acceptable and legitimate. This understanding led to Lundin’s second point entitled “Beyond Belief”. Using the definitive works of James Turner and Charles Taylor, he delved into the history that brought about such a monumental change in public thinking. He specifically noted that within the two decades following the Civil War agnosticism became a self-sustaining enterprise. Furthermore, unbelief quickly took root in the modern cultural center of the university. Though a new culture, agnosticism did not represent a clean break from, but rather an outgrowth of the preexisting Victorian culture.

Dr. Lundin then explored the “disenchantment of the world” during the 16th century Reformation, and the desacralizing of nature and time that corresponded to the Protestant emphasis on individual conscience. Using *King Lear* as an example, he discussed the neutral realm of nature and the growing ability of orthodox Christians to keep distance from God and the transcendent realm. Furthermore, the arguments for design, at this time, set up a clock-work God whose relationship to humanity and nature could easily be severed. While compelling at the time, Lundin noted that this theology quickly collapsed when Darwin came on the scene revealing its susceptibility to unbelief.

Finally, Dr. Lundin, in his third point, "Believing Again," discussed the effects of the tension of belief and unbelief in the world of art, particularly literature. Referencing poet, Milosz, he claimed that in the decades following the Civil War, for artists, the issue at hand was "a matter of believing again, not believing still." Lundin argued that the three authors, Milosz, Dostoevsky, and Dickinson all believed that room for belief might still exist in their current world, but the materialistic explanations would have to be challenged. He followed by explaining that the most powerful models of theology are "metaphors of drama and patterns of narrativity that capture God's majesty." These narratives are vastly different from the evolutionary view, which reduces human experience to a basic chemical and biological process. For authors writing in the wake of Darwin's theories, there was much to absorb. The horizons of the universe had expanded exponentially along with the age of the earth, and writers were left reconciling the tension between new and old thought in their written works.

Dr. Lundin concluded by casting the art of literature into an eschatological context. He called artists "children of God who play in a world of corruptibility that cannot be ignored." Lundin reasoned that art in the modern world accepts the rootlessness of this life and lives by the truth of the promise of God. "Art refuses to let current understanding of the reality of unbelief be the last word," stated Lundin. He wrapped up his lecture by calling us to be nimble believers who are longing and learning to believe again in this modern world.