

Lesson 6

Finding the Literary Features

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In doing an analysis of a literary composition, as with a Gospel, one is looking at small stories which, when taken together, make up a larger story. As in viewing a stage play, a film, or watching a TV show, one takes in the whole by viewing the various "**scenes**" (or small stories) that make up the larger story. These scenes fade in and out going from one location or moment in time to another or one event to another. The players may change from one scene to the next or remain from scene to scene.

The first feature to look for in undertaking an analysis is the *players*, then the *stage setting* (i.e., the time, place, scenery), then the activity or *action* of the players, which will likely include their conversation called *script*. Out of the script, whether in the form of monologue or dialogue, various *themes* or motifs are introduced that gives content and meaning to the scene as a whole.

Taking the Story Apart

One begins the analysis of a story by identifying the smallest units of thought or activity within the composition; these are called "**Scenes**." This is done by looking for the smaller stories making up a group of stories having something in common in terms of players, stage setting, action, script, or themes. Through this process the composition can be taken apart scene by scene. A collection of scenes having certain literary features in common will make up an "**Act**," which can be identified by the literary features they have in common. If the composition is lengthy, these acts can be collected into larger units called "**Parts**," which united by what the acts have in common in the scenes. Developing the composition from Act to Act by means of the unity of thought or action within them will reveal the *plot* or *story line*. The story line may be discovered by

looking for a pattern of events or actions, which gradually unfolds before the reader as he goes from scene to scene.

The process of analysis begins with the **literary features** of the **scenes** making up the **acts**, which make up story or composition as a whole. The process begins, however, by searching out the **literary features** of each scene; i.e., players, stage setting, action, script, and themes.

Identifying the Scenes

In identifying the individual scene the reader asks, "Where does this scene begin and where does it end?" One may visualize fading into a scene and moving through it until it very naturally fades out. Marking off the beginning and ending of the scene gives one a definite pericope of text with which to work. The most important move in the development of a scene is that of **getting the players on stage**, which involves identifying the stage or **stage setting**; i.e. the place and time (location and occasion) of the action, with attending features of significant scenery. Once this is done, the **action** and **dialogue** of the actors must be identified. The initial questions to ask are: who are the players, where are they, and what are they doing or saying? In this one is getting the players, then asks concerning these players:

1. Who are the **players** in this scene?
2. Where are they in terms of time and place (**stage setting**) and is this significant to the development of the scene?
3. What are they doing on stage (**action**) or why are they on stage or why are they doing what they are doing or saying [**script**]?
4. Are the players major or minor; i.e., are they significant to the action or dialogue?
5. Are the **players** in this scene protagonists, antagonists, or supporting players and what makes them protagonists or

antagonists?

6. What **themes** are introduced in the action or dialogue that may be of significance to the meaning or interpretation of this scene?

7. What is the significance of this scene to the development of the story as a whole and what is the significance of all this to me? How does what is going on in this scene apply to me the reader?

SHOW AND TELL

Using the Gospel of Mark, which easily lends itself to story analysis, we may demonstrate the process. The opening lines of the Gospel of Mark begin with a narrative comment introducing the reader to what is to follow.

Mark 1:1-3 is to be identified, not as a scene, but as **an editorial comment**. A literary device used by many writers is the editorial comment, which is always in narrative form. An editorial comment functions to introduce a scene or give meaning to something the players have said or done which may not be evident. In Mark 1:1-3, we see a quote from Isaiah the prophet, who had prophesied that a forerunner (a voice in the wilderness) would come before the Messiah appeared. In Mark 1:2, the author, by means of an editorial comment, identifies John the Baptist as this forerunner.

Marking Out the Scenes *(Looking for the Literary Features)*

In **Mark 1: 4-8**, one sees players, action, stage setting, script (or monologue), and themes. The **players** are John the Baptist, the whole of the Judean countryside and people from Jerusalem. The **stage setting** is the desert region of the Judean countryside through which runs the Jordan River in the year 27-28 AD. The **action** of this scene consists of John baptizing and preaching, the people of the Judean countryside coming out to hear him, with many confessing their sins and being baptized.

There is in this scene something of a character development of John, the main **player**, in the description of his appearance and behavior. The **script** consists of a monologue piece spoken by John, functioning here to identify his message (1:7-8). The action communicated in John's words is not an action that can be seen occurring on stage in this scene, so it is not to be identified as an action by the players on stage; thus, the action found within the monologue is not to be confused with the action of the scene. This scene sets the stage for the following scene in which another player enters the stage.

With the entrance of a new **player** at verse 9, the emphasis shifts from John the Baptist to Jesus, even though the action of John preaching and baptizing is still going on. Here the question may be raised, "Is something new going on that justifies the creation of a new scene? Has the **action** of verses 4-8 ceased? Has the story with which we were concerned in these verses now given way to another story? Has the entrance of Jesus presented a shift in literary features (player, action, script, and themes) significant enough to call it a separate scene? Although this action is similar to what was going on in verses 4-8, the focus of the action has shifted to the entrance of Jesus upon the stage. These kinds of decisions are, however, at the discretion of the one doing the analysis. If one chooses to take verses 5-11 as a continuation of verses 4-8, this is the reader's option.

It is also useful to take advantage of the editorial decisions that have been made in the composition from which one is reading (i.e., the English text of Mark). The text of most English translations makes verses 9-11 a separate paragraph. The reader may ask why these verses are set out here as a separate paragraph from verses 4-8. The translators must have considered verses 4-8 a unit of thought in and of itself, with verses 9-11 considered a separate unit of thought. This is the same kind of consideration the reader must undertake in deciding where to break the scene here in this text. To detect a scene change, look for a change in players (especially a new player on stage), stage setting (time or place), a change of action, a shift in the script from one topic to another, or a shift in the themes of the scene.

In the Director's Chair

When trying to identify the **action** of a scene, it is useful to visualize the action, then ask, "If I were presenting this as a director of a stage play or a film, how would I go about it?" How would you reproduce this action on stage? In verses 4-8, the players are John the Baptist and those coming out to see him from the Judean countryside. Visualize that action, then describe what you have just visualized. By doing this, you have identified the action of the scene.

The only **script** to be identified here is that of John, which appears to be a condensed version of his preaching. The words are part of the narration of Mark, but he puts these words on the lips of John, which makes them a part of what is happening on stage. If the text consists of what is being said by a player on stage, then it is to be identified as the literary feature called "**script**," whether in the form of monologue (one person speaking) or dialogue (more than one person engaging in conversation on the stage).

Often Jesus engages in monologue in the form of sayings, stories or parables, sermons, discourses, or prayers. When he is speaking and those to whom he is speaking are in the role of listeners, the script is to be considered **monologue**. If Jesus, or anyone else, is asking questions of someone, or is engaged in an exchange of words with someone, that is **dialogue**. If someone not stage is making a comment, it is to be considered an **editorial comment**. This is an important distinction when considering the role of the players on stage. Who is saying what? This is also important in identifying the significance of the **themes** developing out of the **script**. From these various forms of script (monologue, dialogue, and editorial comment) come the themes of the scenes and the composition as a whole.

Monologue Scenes

Within a composition as a Gospel, one often finds a teaching block of considerable length. Such is the case in Mark 4:1-34, where a number of stories or parables are told by Jesus. Also, in 9:33-10:52, a

large block of teaching material is found in Jesus' training of the Twelve. These individual stories all stand by themselves and can best be studied by listing them as scenes, with the literary feature of "**theme**" justifying the break between the stories. The purpose of identifying material as "scenes" is to allow the one doing the story analysis to take the composition apart in order to look at its particulars.

When dealing with lengthy monologue material, this is best done by breaking the various subjects of the monologue into "monologue scenes," each scene being justified by a change of theme or motif. In the Mark 4:1-34 text the various stories are easily identified, as is the case in 9:33-10:53. However, the Apocalyptic Discourse, found in Mark 13:1-37, is not as easily broken into scenes. The **players** remain the same, the **setting** is the same, the **action** is the same, and the **script** is monologue. The only things that change are the **themes** as Jesus goes from one theme or motif to another within in the discourse. For consistency sake, and for ease of study, it is best to treat each part of the monologue as a separate scene when the discourse changes themes.

If the player delivering the monologue is on stage, the length of the scene would be determined by the nature of the discourse. In a singular teaching block as the Sermon on the Mount, there is actually one scene but, in order to set out the changes in theme within the monologue, each theme change may be treated as a separate scene.

Identifying the Themes

Returning to the first scene in the Gospel of Mark, the question of who John is and what he is doing in this scene has been revealed by the writer's editorial comment of verses 1-3. John is the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. Here we have a very identifiable **theme**, *viz.*, that of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and the identification of John as a special messenger of God. In verses 4-8 we find several important themes: John is identified as the forerunner, his appearance is reminiscent of the appearance of Elijah the prophet, his work of preaching repentance

and baptizing the people, his announcement of the one coming after him, and the theme of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Themes may be identified by words or phrases, such as "repentance," "faith" or "the kingdom of God," and these lend themselves easily to word studies that make for one of the most enjoyable and informative experiences of Bible study.

A theme is not limited to single words or phrases. Many themes require a complete sentence to express them. Here in Mark 1:4-8, we identified the theme of "the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (i.e., Isaiah 40:3)." See also the following lessons for more development of finding the primary themes of a scenes and of the composition as a whole: "The Stories of Jesus in Mark," "The Stories of Jesus in Matthew," "The Stories of Jesus in Luke," and "The Stories of Jesus in John."

Outlining the Composition

A story analysis begins with finding the smallest unit of thought in a **scene**. Each scene consists of **literary features**: players, stage setting, action, script, and themes. Once the scenes are marked off, they are grouped into **Acts** based on what the scenes have in common in terms of the literary features. The Acts then are grouped in terms of their contribution to the story line of the composition as a whole; that which in unity or movement of action holds them together. The composition as a whole may be divided into major **Parts** of a composition.

The grouping of scenes into Acts may be seen in a stage play, movie, TV show, or a novel. The players move from scene to scene in the development of the storyline (i.e., the story being developed by the players, action, and script). This group of scenes has developed the story to a point, then a shift in players, stage setting, action, or script occurs that is designed to develop another part of the story. This is usually done in three-act stage plays, where the scenery, costumes, or time frames are changed, or with a narrated inserts concerning a change in time or place. In a novel, this is very simply indicated by breaking the story into chapters, sections or parts.

Whatever the literary device used, something changes within the movement of the story and the audience or reader, by this device, is able to pick up on this change.

In the story analysis of the Gospel of Mark there are two major divisions called "Parts," with seven Acts in Part One, and eight Acts in Part Two. Part One runs from 1:1-8:30, which may be divided into the seven Acts. Part Two runs from 8:31-16:20, which are divided into eight Acts. See the outline of the Gospel of Mark divided as a composition into parts, acts, and scenes determined by the method of story analysis presented in this lesson.

Conclusion

The discipline of story analysis may be used in the analysis of any literary composition. The various steps of story analysis have been presented here as an introduction to the storycraft discipline. Following this procedure the reader should be able to do his or her own story analysis of any narrative, especially the NT Gospels. The first step is to identify the specific scenes of the composition by looking for the literary features within a given pericope of text.

A unit of text in a NT Gospel should be easy enough to identify by the way the biblical text is paragraphed in the composition under consideration. Using a worksheet will help in identifying the literary features. One needs only work through the text, identifying the literary features.

The necessity of grouping the scenes into "Acts" may become obvious to the reader as the scenes are developed in the analysis. The grouping of the scenes into Acts follows from an awareness of the movement of events or themes through the scenes considered. In a similar way the various Acts will become recognizable as a unit in terms action or themes and may be identified as a section of material unto itself. The composition may be divided into Parts of the composition as a whole. The grouping of scenes into Acts, and Acts into Parts is something that requires the reader to spend a good bit of time with the composition looking for observable movements of

action and/or themes that give unity to the whole collection of Acts.

By spending time with the individual scenes, the reader will begin to see connections or relationships among the literary features that give them unity. When these relationships begin to appear, the reader will sense that he is being drawn into the story and the particulars of the story will become more easily seen. Story analysis is like any other type of research work. The most useful and important tool in such an endeavor is one's "powers of observation," as presented in the story of, "The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz."

The more time one spends with the stories, the more one begins to see things in the stories he didn't see before, as well as seeing relationships among the stories that were not readily seen before. Each literary feature can become its own subject of study. Whether the character analysis of a player, the particulars of a certain stage setting, an action, a speech or discourse, a parable or story, a conversation, or even a word or expression found within a speech or discourse, each has its own contribution to make to the story.

One should also remember that this approach is only one way of getting into the story in an effort to understand it. There are other approaches used, which are just as useful. The tools given the reader in story analysis are simply "tools with which to dig," and there are many other tools that may be discovered and employed in the mining of the ore of these stories. The great storyteller, Robert Louis Stevenson, in discussing the study of Scripture, made a very insightful comment concerning the value of in depth study of Scripture. "The more deeply he works the mine," Stevenson wrote, "the richer and more abundant becomes the ore." Nowhere is this more evident than in story analysis, especially when the stories are those give to us by God.

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