

The Meaning of It All

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Another part of story analysis, though not a literary feature, is the role of "**interpretation.**" Here the task is that of identifying the significance of each literary feature to one's understanding of the scene. With this, one has a better understanding of the meaning and significance of the scene as it contributes to the meaning of the collection of scenes called an Act. Following the movement of the players through each scene, by means of their action, dialogue, and the themes appearing in each scene, will give the reader significant insight as to the meaning the writer wished to give to the story. Our grasp of the meaning of his story is, essentially, our interpretation of what we have seen and heard. The significance of this interpretation for the reader also has to do with application, which will be addressed in the following lesson.

Asking Good Questions

How does one determine the meaning an author wished to communicate with the story he has written? This is most effectively done by becoming involved in conversation with the story or, more specifically, with the text of the story. How does one do this? By asking questions! A wonderful quote I once heard, (the author unknown), states, "*A man is never more alive than when he is asking good questions.*" I have found this statement very useful, especially in the craft of story analysis. It applies to all aspect of life, but is especially applicable in what we are about here. We are looking for a way of getting at the meaning of the story we have before us. This is most effectively done by entering into the story with specific questions. These questions may be addressed to every aspect of the story being investigated. Interrogative pronouns are tools with which to dig out the treasures hidden within the story:

who, what, when, where, which, why, and how. All of these interrogatives may be used in the analysis of a story. We may ask: **What** is the message of this story? **What** is the significance of the setting of this scene? **Who** are these players and why are they on stage? **What** is the significance of the monologue or dialogue in this scene? **What** is this player saying in this scene and **why** is he saying it? **Why** are the players of this scene doing **what** they are doing? **Why** is the player using the language he is using and **what** is the meaning of the words or expressions used? **What** repeated words, phrases, or expressions are used in this scene that may be identified as themes? These are the kinds of question that will open up the text of a story for the reader.

Questions Concerning the Players

The question of "**who**" is usually the first question we ask in trying to identify the literary features of a scene in a story. "**Who** are the players of this scene?" will identify the first literary feature. "**Where** are they?" will get the players on stage and give the reader a sense of place with reference to the stage setting and the player's action and dialogue. "**When** is this happening?" will give the reader a sense of time with reference to the action taking place in this scene. "**What** are they doing in this scene?" will tell the reader something of the action and script the players will use to develop their roles in a given scene. The question of "**which**" will distinguish the players one from another in terms of stage setting, action, and script; i.e., **which** player is doing or saying **what**? The question of "**how**," as relates to the players, is the first question to ask in getting at the meaning of **what** is happening in the scene? **How** is the action of this player to be understood in this scene? **How** are the other players reacting to what he is doing? **How** is the action of a given player to be understood in terms of his role as protagonist or antagonist, or a supporting player? A most important question for interpretation purposes is "**why**." **Why** is this player on stage? **Why** is he doing what he is doing or saying what he is saying? **Why** is what he is doing or saying important? **Why** is what this player is doing or saying getting the reaction it is? **Why** is this player saying or doing something he has said or done before (repeated action)? These

questions will bring the reader into conversation with the text. "*Who is this person?*" or "*Who are these people?*" are the critical questions concerning the players.

Questions Concerning the Stage Setting

Stage setting can play a very significance role in the interpretation of a scene. A story must have time and place. Most stories will set the stage for the reader or listener before going on to other matters. "Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, in a far away land" (time and place), sets the stage for bringing the players into the scene, "there lived a man who filled all those who beheld him with wonder" (the players), and so goes the story. We may use the same method of questioning here as with the other literary features. **When** and **where** is this scene taking place? **What** is the meaning of time or place for this action? **What** particulars of the scenery are important to the development of this scene? **How** does this setting contribute to a given theme presented in this scene? **How** does the timing of this scene contribute to the development of the story? **Why** are the players in this particular place at this particular time? **Why** is this action occurring at this particular time? "*Why is the action of this scene occurring at this time and in this place?*" is the critical question here.

Questions Concerning the Action

The question most often asked in the investigation of a given scene of a story is, "**What is going on here?**" What is happening? This has to do with "action." **Why** is this action taking place? **What** is this action saying about the meaning of this scene? **What** are the players of this scene doing and **why**? **Why** is this action occurring? **What** is being accomplished by this action? **How** do we identify this action? It is good or bad, **which**? **What** does this action tell us about the player(s) involved in the action? **What** themes are intrinsic within this action? **What** words could be used to identify this action other than those within this text (i.e., synonyms)? "*What is going on here?*" is the critical question in determining the action of a given scene of a story.

Questions Concerning the Script

The script is the conversation of the story. The players are in conversation with the reader as well as one another. **What** are they saying? **Who** is saying it? **When** and **where** is this conversation taking place? **Which** form of script is being used here: monologue, dialogue, or editorial comment? **What** does the setting of the monologue or dialogue have to do with the meaning of what is being said? **How** is what is being said being understood or received by the other players? **Why** is the player saying what he is saying? **How** do I understand **what** is being said and **why** it is being said?

Within the script can be found the most valuable ore to be mined out of the story. Here one finds the purpose and significance of the players on stage. The answer to the question, "Who are these people?" is most often revealed in what they say or what others say about them. "Who is this man?" is the underlying question running throughout all four Gospels. The answers given by the people in each scene tells us who these people thought he was. Some believed him to be one thing, some another. What they believed about him, however, is revealed to us in the conversations of the script. Here is found some of most beautiful teaching of these stories. It is within the script of the story that we find Jesus' discourses, teachings, stories, prayers, and his revelations as to who he believed himself to be. Some of the players of these stories became believers while others did not. What they say as to why they believe or do not believe tells us a good deal about them. This is why we need to be so concerned that we clearly hear what the players are saying on stage. "*What is this person saying?*" or "*What is being said by these people?*" are the critical questions here?

Questions Concerning Themes or Motifs

What themes are present in the script of this scene? **What** is the meaning of the various themes used? **How** do these themes relate to one another? If there is more than one theme in this scene, **which** theme is the main theme of the scene? **What** is the meaning of this theme? **Why** has the author placed this theme in this scene? **What**

does he hope to accomplish by bring this theme in at this place in the story? **Where** have I seen this theme before (i.e., is it a repeated theme)? **How** do the other players in this scene understand the meaning of this theme? **What** reaction can be expected from the players in this scene by the introduction of this theme? **How** do you understand this theme; i.e., is it clear to you what the author is doing with this theme and if not, **why** not?

Once a theme is identified, it is very important that the word or expression used to express the theme be properly understood. Not understanding the meaning of the words used by the players of a scene is one of the greatest reasons the reader misses the point of the scene. One of the most rewarding offshoots of doing story analysis is found in the opportunities that arise for doing a word study. The language in which the story is originally told is critical to a proper understanding of what is being said by the players, and, essentially, by the author of the story.

The Gospels are full of some of the most wonderful themes of any literature in existence. Words are powerful things, especially when they are the words chosen by a person inspired of God to communicate his story. If the reader is not sure he understands what a player in a given scene is saying, he should stop and do a study of the word, words, or phrases under consideration. This failing, in this writer's experience, is one of the greatest causes of misunderstanding Scripture. "What is being said here, with what words, with what intent?" is an axiom in the interpretation of Scripture, which should always be of foremost concern to the one doing the story analysis. "*What themes are present here in this text?*" is the critical question concerning this literary feature.

Conclusion

"A man is never more alive than when he is asking good questions." I wish I knew the author of this statement. I heard it quoted as a statement of Victor Hugo, but I have not been able to find it in any of his works. Nonetheless, whoever said it said something worth remembering. Good questions are questions that lead to

understanding. If I do not know a given thing, but I know someone who does, all I need do is ask that person for his help. It is rare to find a truly knowledgeable person who is reluctant to share his knowledge. This is especially the case with a person who in a disciple of Jesus. Jesus' invitation to those who would listen was, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear!" "Ask and your questions will be answered." "Seek and you will find." "Knock and the door will be opened." Here is Jesus' message concerning the value of asking good questions. If someone is looking for an understanding of God's story, his questions will, unquestionably, lead him to the knowledge he desires.

Luke refers to those who will raise questions in search of answers as those who "ennoble their minds" (Acts 17:11). These words were said concerning the Greeks of Berea, who heard Paul's story of Christ and "searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." They went into the text of the Scripture with questions. This is what is being suggested here in this approach to the study of the stories of Scripture. The most effective means of gaining knowledge in any area is to go there with good questions. Questioning the text of these wonderful stories of Scripture, these Gospels, can open the text to the reader in a way he never knew before. Learning the art of asking the right questions is the key to finding the right answers. Remember the saying, "practice makes perfect." Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the craft of story analysis. Go to the story, go into the story, stay there as long as is necessary to see what is there to be seen. Here is how one comes out of the story with insights that will fill his own story with the wonders of the story of God.

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