Why Literary Analysis is Subjective

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*By Michele Dunaway*

*We welcome back Michele Dunaway, who teaches English and journalism at Francis Howell High School in St. Charles, Missouri, when she's not writing best-selling romance novels. Michele has an important lesson for those who teach and study literature: your analysis always depends on your personal perspective.*

A few years ago, after a writers' conference, I was riding to the airport in the back of a Lincoln Town Car with New York Times best-selling historical romance author Victoria Alexander. Somehow we got onto the topic of literary analysis and she told me that someone had once analyzed one of her books and that this reader told her everything she'd discovered. The funny thing was, Victoria said she'd never consciously done much of the stuff the reader reported.

As an English teacher and a novelist myself, I appreciated Victoria's candor. The truth is, a lot of authors don't sit down and create our novels saying, "Gee, I think a metaphor would work here so I better use one." Or, "Gee, the sentence I wrote used alliteration. Darn, I'm clever."

Now, I'm not saying that authors don't consciously make decisions. Of course we do. We plan and plot our novels. Yet things happen. Character names get changed midstream for one reason or another (I once changed a name simply because halfway through the book I didn't like it anymore). Plot lines get thrown out and others added. Settings move. Nothing is set in stone until the end of the book, and even then authors tweak and revise. Sometimes it's by publisher request; for example, in the original Twilight that first sold, Bella and Edward marry at the end. After the publisher wanted more books in the series, Stephenie Meyer changed the ending.

Writing is a work in process. Certainly many decisions are consciously made. Yet others simply flow from the creative part of the brain without the author even realizing what she's done. The command of language is intrinsic. The flow of words simply happens.

Thus, when you, the reader, sit down to analyze a book, the first thing you must remember is that whatever answer you come up with, it's subjective. It's your opinion, deduced from the examples you cite as the reasons for your opinion.

Unless you ask the author or read something the author says about the work, you can't know for sure that you are right. Case in point, in researching my Complete Idiot's Guide to the World of Vampires, which will be out next summer, I asked young adult author Heather Brewer if in her Chronicles of Vladimir Tod series, the school name was after Elizabeth Bathory. I thought it might be, but wasn't sure.

Here's what Heather said, "Bathory High (and the town of Bathory) are absolute props to Elizabeth Bathory. I'm a big fan of paying homage to my favorite vampires throughout history. You'll also notice that Vlad's old house is on Lugosi Trail — which is my way of thanking Bela Lugosi for portraying Dracula in such an incredible way. The books are full of things like that."

So I was right. Even better, Heather provided me with a perfect example of how authors plan to do one thing, and then, without realizing it, do another. She named her hero Vladimir Tod, but there's a twist to the tale. Here's the full story, in Heather's words:

"When I knew that I'd be writing about a vampire, I also knew his name couldn't be anything other than Vlad. It's a total throwback to Vlad Tepes, or Vlad the Impaler, of course. Because while there have been many vampires throughout history, for me, as a child devouring these stories, it all started with Dracula. The funny thing is that I chose Tod as his last name, simply because I'm a bit of a word geek and wanted a simple, one-syllable name to go at the end of his elaborate, three-syllable first name. So I chose Tod out of the air. Three months after Eighth Grade Bites debuted, I was at a signing and a Minion (what I call my readers) came up to me to let me know that she and Vlad share the same last name. Then she said, 'You know what it means in German, right?' Honestly, I had no idea. But, much to my delight, it turns out that Tod in German means 'death'. True story."

Stuff just happens while writing. It comes from the author's conscious or unconscious choice of words. I'll use alliteration just because slow, simple and seductive sounds so slick it slides off my fingertips while typing. (Did you catch the overdone alliteration in that last sentence?)

I've been thinking a lot about literary analysis lately as my daughter works her way through her tenth grade honors English class doing something her teacher calls SIFT — Symbolism, Imagery, Figurative Language, Tone and how it leads to Theme.

The struggle my daughter is having is that the answers the teacher expects seem so rigid, when, in reality, the answers are open to interpretation. What is the tone? Well, it's whatever the reader decides it is, within reason. (I'm not saying a happy tone can be called angry. But happy and joyous can be different, as can angry and livid.) Works can have more than one tone, and I may sense one, and you another. Same for theme.

It's how we derive that tone and theme that's important. Our subjective analysis is derived from our interaction with and interpretation of the work. We come to the written word with our own set of experiences, and we step into the world the author created and apply what we know to that world as we seek meaning and understanding. Our result should be very personal.

Does that mean we're dumb if we miss something or don't see it the same way as someone else? Absolutely not. That's the beauty of interpretation. It's not like science but rather art appreciation. We can both see things our own way.

Once when an English teacher colleague and I were discussing Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," he said, "Well, you know the person in the poem was contemplating suicide." To which I replied, "I don't see it that way."

To interpret the poem that way would ruin my enjoyment of it. If Frost's poetry was often about reminding man of what he knows but has forgotten, then his poem should touch me on a personal level. I should be able to interpret the lines through my own lens as I derive meaning.

Besides, as reported on Cummings Study Guides, in 1958, it was poet John Ciardi who suggested in Saturday Review magazine that the woods in Frost's poem symbolize death; Frost himself scoffed at this interpretation in public appearances and in private conversations. Yet people still interpret the poem that way, and many study guides will give the suicide angle as a correct interpretation.

This example illustrates an important point. The danger in teaching literary analysis is that a teacher must recognize his or her own bias. Just because some expert said the theme of a work was one thing doesn't mean it can't be another. At one time Pluto was a planet and the earth flat.

If a teacher rakes a student over the coals during analysis, or forces the student to be nitpicky in the defense, or if the student is graded down when the student misses what the teacher expects (even when the rest of the answer is correct), then the student learns that reading and literary analysis sucks and is no longer enjoyable. When reading becomes a negative experience, kids stop reading, turning instead to other entertainment venues. They've learned that interacting with a book is torture. It shouldn't be that way.

So remember, literary analysis is subjective. People bring their own preferences and baggage to the reading experience. Some will love a book or a poem; others will hate it. Some will see things one way; others another. But that's how it works, and that's the joy and beauty of reading. The key is to teach the reader how to best defend his opinion, and then respect that opinion. And if you disagree with his interpretation, well, enjoy the ensuing discussion . After all, reading should inspire us to think and dialogue with each other. It's not a competition where we beat each other down and may the best answer win. That's not healthy for anyone, reader or author (who might not ever have meant that in the first place).

To end, I will leave you with one of my favorite poems, by Stephen Crane.

"Think as I think," said a man,

"Or you are abominably wicked;

You are a toad."

And after I had thought of it,

I said, "I will, then, be a toad."

Five lines and so many ways to interpret what I mean by ending with this: here's to all of us being literary analysis toads. Cheers.