

How Should We Approach *The King and I* (Or Any Other Story For That Matter)?

by Dan Daugherty, Upper School Humanities Teacher

When Alcuin, the 8th century monk and leading scholar in the court of Charlemagne found that the monks under his charge were reading *Beowulf*, he asked the question, “What has Ingeld to do with Christ?” It is a good question. What can a Christian gain by reading stories by non-Christians? Why should anybody, for that matter, want to expose himself to any work of art, music, or literature that challenges his presuppositions?

This spring, Schaeffer Academy is presenting Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The King and I*. The musical was written in 1951. It is based on the novel, *Anna and the King of Siam* written in 1944 by Margaret Landon, which was based on memoirs written by Anna Leonowens in the 1870s about her experiences working as a schoolteacher in King Mongkut’s palace in the 1860s. It is important to keep this history in mind as we consider the presuppositions and worldviews presented on the stage. This isn’t simply a story of 19th century Siam. It explores the dark themes of prejudice, colonialism, and clashing cultures. It also reveals a bit about mid-20th century America’s understanding of such themes. You likely won’t agree with all of it. It may make you uncomfortable at times. So, what is the value of presenting such a story on our stage?

Permit me to give you a brief literature lesson, much like what your children get in my classes. The questions presented by this particular story are, after all, not all that different from those inherent in works such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, or *Animal Farm*.

The Three Functions of Literature: Experience, Interpretation (or Worldview), & Form

Literature functions *as literature* if it effectively employs these three elements. That is, to the degree that a written work effectively employs these elements, its functions, and the more that we soak in good literature, we will grow in compassion for others (*experience*), learn to evaluate our lives and beliefs (*interpretation or worldview*), and cultivate beauty in the world around us (*form*). Our initial pass through the functions is to gain an understanding of the story. Subsequent passes through them enable us to better understand ourselves.

Function 1: Experience—A Mirror and a Window

American author and theologian Frederick Buechner says that “the story of any one of us is in some measure the story of us all.” That is, for a story to function, it must speak to universal experience. It must resonate with its audience. It must, in some way, present a *true* picture of the world.

This three-function method is based on the work of Leland Ryken, Wheaton English professor emeritus. On the function of *Experience*, Ryken says:

[T]he subject of literature is human experience. The thing that sets literature off from philosophy and the ‘thought’ disciplines is that it embodies human experience in concrete form rather than presenting abstract propositions. Literature gives the example rather than the precept. It embodies experience in event and character, in image and metaphor...

The incarnational nature of literature has important implications for settling the perennial question of whether literature tells the truth. One of the levels of truth in literature is truthfulness to human experience and external reality. Literature overwhelmingly tells the truth at this level. Writers are sensitive observers of reality.

In another place, Ryken asserts, “History tells what happened, literature tells what *happens*.”

Additionally, C.S. Lewis makes the point that literature acts not only as a mirror, reflecting our own experiences, but as a window opening onto vistas that we never have experienced, and possibly never will. But the more time we spend with characters that at first seem utterly different from us, the more we’ll see ourselves in them, for better or for worse.

For instance, have you ever gazed through a window at the scene outside long enough to allow your vision to adjust and refocus until you’re looking your reflection in the eye? You begin with a distant gaze and end in introspection. This is the power of good literature. It is both a window and mirror.

Think of the joy of finding yourself in the pages of a book – whether a *bildungsroman* that reminds you of your own childhood and coming of age, or a love story that reminds you of your own courtships or heartache. But this is only the beginning of the mirror. Once we work around the functions a few times, we’ll find that the mirror reveals more than we first thought. The best literature tricks us into seeing ourselves, much like Nathan tricked David through the use of a story: “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12).

This window-mirror effect also serves to teach the reader or the audience empathy. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn says, “The one and only substitute for experience which we have not ourselves had is art, literature.” I’ve never flown into space, but I have a sense of what it might

be like from watching science fiction movies and reading science fiction novels. The more artful the *Form*, the more easily I can suspend my disbelief and become immersed in a world that is not my own.

Inevitably, this literary window invites me to empathize with the experiences of the other—a very worthy pursuit for the Christian reader—and in doing so, I'll find that I am once again looking in a mirror. If I were Huckleberry, how would *I* treat Jim? If I were Jim, how would I feel in this or that particular moment in the story?

This window-mirror effect reveals the underlying themes of the work. Themes are the universal truths of the human condition that undergird a piece of literature and cause it to have mass appeal – they allow the literature to function.

In his essay *An Experiment in Criticism*, C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

What then is the good of—what is even the defense for—occupying our hearts with stories of what never happened and entering vicariously into feelings which we should try to avoid having in our own person? Or of fixing our inner eye earnestly on things that can never exist...? The nearest I have yet got to an answer is that we seek enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself... We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own.... We demand windows. Literature as Logos [that is, the Incarnate Word] is a series of windows, even of doors...

In love we escape from our self into one other. In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person's place and thus transcending our own competitive particularity....

This, so far as I can see, is the specific value of good of literature considered as Logos; it admits us to experiences other than our own... Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realize the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors.

Function 2: Interpretation—Worldview and Perspective

So as *Experience* asks *To what degree are the experiences of the characters true to real human experience? If so, how might I humbly learn from the experiences of others?* The function of *Interpretation* asks *How do these characters understand their experiences? How do they interpret them? What are their underlying presuppositions or worldviews? How do their interpretations challenge or sharpen my own worldview?*

Every character interprets his or her experience. These interpretations are sometimes explicitly stated in dialogue or through narrative or in the case of a musical, through song. The

presuppositions of a character are often revealed through indirect characterization, or the ways that other characters interact with or talk about him. Of course, because there are multiple characters, multiple interpretations are offered for every experience or event in the story. As we will see shortly, the function of *Form* provides some clues as to what the author or director may truly believe, but we must be slow to make judgments on that point. An author or director may be playing devil's advocate, provoking the reader or the audience to reconsider his or her presuppositions. If the reader is too rash in assuming that an author's worldview is that of a single character, then many readers, upon reading *The Screwtape Letters*, may very well have guessed Lewis to be a Satanist, or upon reading *Huckleberry Finn* guessed Twain to be a racist. We will see below that the function of *form* has something to tell us in these cases, namely that the genre—*satire* in these cases—changes the rules for the reader.

T.S. Eliot says, "Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint." Reading literature or watching a stage play cannot, therefore, be done in a vacuum. We must listen to and compare the various interpretations presented. We must also consider historical and social contexts. Story is persuasive, perhaps all the more depending on the beauty of its *form*. It can even be seductive. But before we jump to conclusions, we must discern what the literature or play or piece of art or music is truly saying *as a whole*. Then we must analyze it, allowing it to challenge our presuppositions and sharpen our thinking (and feeling). We must examine not only the story, but also ourselves in light of the story: *Why did I have such a visceral reaction to this character's response? If I'm honest with myself, don't I sometimes see the world the same way that he or she does? Should I? How does the Bible speak to the experiences of these characters? Do their interpretations or perspectives on the world give me new insight or point out any blind spots that I might have? Is evil depicted as evil? Good as good?* (Here I will recommend a book by Jerram Barrs: *Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts*. Barrs introduces a specific framework for this particular function of *Interpretation* and then provides several case studies. It's a quick and practical read.)

If a piece of literature is nothing but a message, it is no longer literature, but propaganda, and even the intended message mostly misses the mark. If Nathan had come out and told David, "You should not have slept with Bathsheba and sent her husband to certain death," David would

have likely been enraged. Instead, Nathan told a subversive story that worked as a story first, thereby causing David to think.

Though a piece of literature may express a Christian moral, might it still fail to truly depict life experiences, and if it isn't true to life, is it truly Christian? Though a piece of art may have Christian symbols, might it still fail to be beautiful, and if so, is it truly Christian? Are these things binary or analogue? Zero-sum or on a continuum?

Function 3: Form—Structure and Beauty

Finally, the function of *Form* provides structure and beauty, without which literature (and other forms of art) cannot function as such. To think in terms of *Form* is to examine the craft of the literature or the art or the stage play. To the degree that it functions on this level, it convinces the reader or audience member to suspend his or her disbelief and enter into the *Experiences* of the characters, and wrestle with their *Interpretations*.

Genre is an important aspect of *Form*. Every genre has its own set of rules. Fairy tales, for instance, provide a framework for talking animals so that any reader who objects to the realism of the story or insists that a wolf could never dress up as granny, has misunderstood the way the story is meant to function. Likewise, musical theater allows for spontaneous eruption into song that, though not realistic, can be a rather effective and enjoyable story-telling device.

Other questions to consider when examining *Form* include *From whose perspective is the story told and how does that affect the way I, as the audience or reader, interpret the events? What tone does the author employ when describing certain characters? Is the music in a major or minor key, and what does that convey?* Imagine, for instance, if the “Imperial March” was played when Luke Skywalker appeared and the “Main Theme” was played when Darth Vader entered. Or if Skywalker wore black and Vader, white. These are the types of clues that lead us to one of the most important question we can ask ourselves upon reading a book or watching a play or movie: *With whom does the author intend me to identify or sympathize? Which characters capture my imagination? How did the author, director, or performer use his or her craft to get me there? Have I been made uncomfortable, and if so to what end? Have I been seduced by the beauty or comedy in a way that tempts me compromise my convictions? Or is my discomfort caused by the simple fact that I don't like confrontation or having my settled views challenged?*

The degree to which the *Form* excels, these questions are thrust upon us with increasing power.

The Three Functions of Literature: Putting it all Together

Ryken, again, on why literature (or any story-telling form) matters: “The intellectual usefulness of literature is not that it necessarily tells us the truth about an issue but rather that it serves as a catalyst to thinking about the great issues of life.”

That’s the goal, isn’t it? To think about life? So here’s a quick review of our tour through the three functions of literature:

Experience: The characters invite us into their experiences. We watch and listen as they interpret those experiences. We sympathize—perhaps even empathize—with *this* character’s action or *that* character’s dilemma.

Interpretation: We see a repetition of experience and interpretation and themes begin to emerge. *What are the universal truths to which the author is appealing? What is he saying about those truths? What do those truths say about me?*

Form: We are pulled by the beauty of the work. We ask ourselves, *should I be pulled? Which character am I most like? Which character would I want to be like? In what ways does this piece of literature hold a mirror up to me? How does it challenge my worldview and my lifestyle?*

There is obviously much more that could be said regarding these functions of literature—entire semesters’ worth, in fact! My desire here is to give you, our Schaeffer community, a shared terminology so that we can have productive conversations not only about *The King and I*, which we are performing in March, but also about *King Lear* and *Wicked*, both of which portions of our student body will be attending in the Cities this spring, and any other piece of literature or art or music that we encounter.

Here’s to lifelong learning!