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# Formalism

## Major Texts

Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique"
Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk-Tale*
Mikhail Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*
Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn*

## Major Ideas

- Formalists pay attention to the "how" in "how things are done." They notice form. When a ballerina executes the familiar moves of the dances in *Swan Lake*, she performs the story of the ballet, but she also performs moves that are technical in nature; she follows certain well-known forms. Those watching might be struck by what good form the ballerina has or by how well she executes moves they know so well, quite apart from the content of the story of the ballet. Form in this example would consist of "the way something is done" as opposed to "what it is about" or "the story being told."
- The story of the ballet would not be possible without the dances that construct the story, the forms the ballerina uses or performs. If you removed the dances and sat in the theater watching the stage, there would be no story and no *Swan Lake*. Form in this broad sense means the practical dimension of art, the way it is executed and constructed so that it

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can tell stories or make meanings. Some would say that form in this sense is all that art is. The narrative reality of *Swan Lake* on the stage consists of practical exercises in balletic form. You may think you are seeing a story, but in fact all you are seeing is performers executing techniques.

- If content is not possible without form, form is also radically separable from content, the things stories are about. Think of a ballerina in the practice room going through the moves that she will be performing that evening in the actual ballet. They are the same as those in the ballet, but they are without significance. They are forms only, mere exercises in technique. In this sense, form is pure technique or technique without any content attached to it. The study of this practical dimension of a work of art constitutes Formalist Criticism.

- The Russian Formalists argued that the language of literature should be studied in and of itself, without reference to meaning. For example, the way stories are told (the "narrative") is an important dimension of fiction. Certain writers are more known for the way they tell stories than for the ideas they advance. James Joyce is famous for his "stream of consciousness" technique, for example, in his epic novel *Ulysses*. Marcel Proust, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, engages in a meditation on the role of time in human life by telling his entire novel retrospectively, beginning in the distant past and ending in the present. Technique and form are crucial to poetry. Some forms were prescribed, such as the sonnet, but more recent poetry is free-form. In poetry, such techniques as rhyme and repetition distinguish poetic form from other literary forms such as prose.

- Another group of Formalist critics, the American New Critics, felt literature embodied universal truth in concrete form. They were more concerned with how literature made meaning than with how techniques could be studied entirely on their own apart from what they meant. Often the meanings these Formalist critics were interested in were religious paradoxes – such as one loses mortal life but gains eternal life. They also felt "great" poems were complex, made up of elements in ironic tension with one another – a universal idea and a concrete image, for example. Irony means that two very different things are said in the same statement, and the New Critics felt that great complex poetry was ironic for this reason. It is universal and particular, ideal and concrete, idea and image all at once. Moreover, if one studies a poem, one usually finds that it is an organic unity: the form of the

poem and the ideas it communicates are inseparable. Form is usually a perfect embodiment of theme in great poetry. The "what" of literature is usually bound up quite tightly with the "how" of literature. For example, William Wordsworth felt life was paradoxical; the simplest natural things tend, according to him, to embody universal truths. And his poems rely quite heavily on paradox.

## Major Terms

**Form/Content** Form is how a work of art is done or made, the techniques and procedures that an artist uses to construct a story or convey a feeling or an idea. Content is what a work of art is about.

**Technique** A technique is a particular way of doing something such as telling a story or establishing a setting or constructing a character. Techniques are also called devices and procedures.

**Narration/Story** The narration or fabula is the series of events that are actually reported or represented in a novel or a film. The story or *szujhet* (or subject matter) is the much longer span of time and of life from which the events reported, represented, or narrated are selected. It is the story world itself, rather than the story about that world. Another term for story is "diegesis."

**Perspective/Point of View** Perspective is the position from which a narration operates. A film like *Iron Man* is told from the point of view or perspective of a wealthy western white man. Predictably, the way people very different from him – angry Middle Easterners, for example – are portrayed is skewed by that perspective; they appear menacing because they are so different; his perspective is laden with fear and he paints the world accordingly. Other terms associated with perspective are "focus" and "focalization."

**Motif** A recurring element of a narration such as a particular event or a particular symbol or metaphor used repeatedly.

**Function** Narratives often follow patterns that they share with other narratives. In folk-tales, a common function is "the hero leaves home." All tales seemed to have this particular narrative turn.

**Discourse** A coherent body of statements about something such as an event, an object, or an issue – for example, the discourse on race or the

discourse of science. A discourse is generated by rules for making statements that produce consistency and uniformity across different statements. Such norms make for unity or consistency across different statements. They also make for easily demarcated boundaries between statements internal to the discourse and statements that fall outside its range.

**Genre** A group of artistic works that share certain traits. Works within the genre are easily recognized as being similar to one another and as being examples of the genre's rules or conventions (agreements to do something a certain way). For example, works in the genre of melodrama usually contain a theme of unjust action wronging someone, who must vindicate his or her virtue.

**Hypotaxis and Parataxis** These terms describe two different ways in which relationships between successive ideas are expressed. In parataxis, the main elements are placed in a sequence of simple phrases, linked together by the conjunction *and* (or variations such as *but*). In hypotaxis, relations are specified as subordinate clauses joined by temporal or relational links such as *when*, *although*, *after*, etc. The Old Testament largely uses parataxis, but many modern translations use hypotaxis extensively, as it is seen by modern readers as providing more interest and variety. However, the narrative pace is changed by doing this, and certain deliberate breaks in the pattern are obscured. An (invented) example of the same idea, rendered in the two different styles is: "When Joseph arrived at the field, he spoke to his brothers, urging them to come home even though they were unwilling," and "Joseph arrived at the field and spoke to his brothers and said 'come home' but they would not."

**Poetic Meter** Traditional metric poetry uses five rhythms of stressed and unstressed syllables. An iambic foot of verse is unstressed/stressed: "That *time* of *year* thou *mayst* in *me* be*hold*." A trochaic foot is stressed/unstressed: "*Tell* me *not* in *mourn*ful *num*bers." A spondaic foot is stressed/stressed: "*Break*, *break*, *break* / On thy *cold gray stones*, O Sea!" Lines vary in number of feet. The iambic pentameter consists of five iambic feet as in the example above. Tetrameter has four feet, trimeter three, and hexameter six.

**New Criticism** The approach to literature advocated by a group of critics in the middle of the 20th century in America. Alan Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and others argued that literary study should focus only on the text – not on history, psychology, or sociology. The goal was to describe the organic unity of the work, the way form and content cohered

perfectly. An author's intention was irrelevant, as was a reader's reaction. Only the text, especially the intricate web of image and argument, was worthy of "close reading." The New Critics were therefore skeptical of the notion that a writer's intention determined what a work meant (the "intentional fallacy"), and they opposed criticism that relied on a reader's emotional reaction to or impression of a work (the "affective fallacy").

## Summary and Discussion

How you do something is sometimes more important than what you do. If you walk into a job interview with an arrogant swagger dressed as if you just got out of bed and sit slouched picking your nose and daydreaming while the interviewer poses questions, you in all likelihood will do less well, despite being eminently well qualified for the position, than if you adopted a more professional demeanor, dressed in a suit, adhered to the rules of proper manners, and listened attentively while sitting up straight. Good posture can be everything. It is a species of what is called "good form," which means "playing by the rules" or "following the reigning conventions of behavior."

Similarly, how you say something can be as important as what you say. You can say "I love you" softly and gently, and it will mean one thing – a sincere expression of affection and commitment – or you can say it with the emphasis falling heavily on "you" followed by a questioning rise in tone – as in "I love YOU? (of all people)." The tone is now sarcastic rather than sincere, and the meaning changes as a result from sincere affection to something like "You've got to be kidding." The feelings your statement generates will be quite different.

Formalists attend to these differences in how things are said or done. All works of culture – film, poem, rap song, novel – consist of technical choices that have meaning. You may have an idea – "adultery is really not a vice; it can be an expression of genuine, even divine love" – but getting it across in a work of fiction requires that you use literary techniques to create character, plot, situation, and event. You have to use words, wrought in a certain way, to make meaning. Or you have to choose where to place your camera, what lighting to use, how to direct actors to deliver lines, and so on.

Formalist critics notice that "how" is often as important as, or more important than, "what." We like to think books and movies and songs are about life. And they are, of course. But they are also technical exercises that entail choices regarding such things as the perspective from which the story will be told, the kind of tone used, the logical evolution of the narrative, the

way characters are constructed, the way lyrics are chosen and arranged, the structure of the melody, the placement of the camera, the kind of lighting used, the images chosen to illustrate points, and the like.

In order to mean, cultural works must have a formal dimension that consists of carefully chosen and arranged techniques.

Formalists in literary study were initially concerned primarily with poetry because poetry is so different from ordinary speech. It is clearly formed, made different by being arranged differently. It possesses rhythm and rhyme; it has melody and depends often on phonic harmony created by alliteration or the repetition of sounds. "Poetics" is the term for the formal study of poetry.

The formal analysis of a poem begins with a simple non-judgmental and non-interpretive description of the work. It describes the themes, the setting, the speaker or narrator, the characters if any, the implied world of the poem (what precedes the poem and what follows), the structure of the poem, such as the breakdown into stanzas, the genre or type of poem, the meter used (such as iambic pentameter), the rhyme scheme, the emotional movement of the poem toward a climax if any, the repetition of words, the images used, the figurative language such as metaphors and symbols, the congruence or dissonance of sounds in alliteration and assonance, the overall thematic argument as that is worked out in the language, etc.

Here are websites that will provide you with most of the important terms to use in such a basic description: http://www.infoplease.com/spot/pmglossary1.html; http://www.factmonster.com/ipka/A0903237.html.

Formalists are also concerned with rhetoric, the shape a writer gives to thoughts or themes in various language constructions. Rhetoric consists of more complex forms of speech or writing that writers use. For example, a favorite rhetorical form American New Critical Formalists studied was paradox (as in the Shakespeare line "Reason in madness"). Another was irony, as when Orson Welles juxtaposes an image of Charlie Kane feeling triumphant with an image of him reflected in glass and looking quite insubstantial and ephemeral. If paradox brings opposed ideas together, irony undermines one proposition with another. It consists of saying one thing and meaning something quite different (as when someone says "You look lovely, darling," when in fact you just got out of bed). Irony is also found in theater and film, when a situation is such that the audience knows more than one of the characters. Irony of situation occurs when a result is quite different from what was intended (e.g., an attempt to save a life ends a life).

For a list of rhetorical terms used in such analysis, here is another site: http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit_terms/.

American New Critical Formalists like Cleanth Brooks (*The Well-Wrought Urn*) were concerned with how poems embody universal truth. Poems contain concrete images that are just the opposite of universal truths, which are abstract rather than concrete. Brooks believed all poetry, therefore, was paradoxical because it was both universal and specific at the same time. He favored a religious view of poetry that saw it as the embodiment of spiritual meaning (universal truth) in concrete figural form (the poem).

## Examples of Formalist Critical Analysis

A good example of a poem that clearly embodies what New Critic Cleanth Brooks contends is Williams Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode" (http://www.bartleby.com/101/536.html).

It is organized around a paradox: all that we cherish passes, yet it passes away only in order to last forever. It is still possible to find something permanent and enduring in nature, and that is spirit. Spirit guarantees a more enduring life than the one of physical experience that is so fleeting and that passes so quickly. In a way, although we lose, we gain. That is the paradox of nature in as much as it embodies an enduring, transcendental spirit.

The kind of spiritualist thinking one finds in Wordsworth and Brooks has been increasingly displaced in recent decades by more scientific ways of thinking. Now it is more common to believe that there is no spirit world. The physical world is all we have. Many writers in this post-religious tradition have written poems about the change from spiritualism to a more physicalist vision of life. Increasingly, they are skeptical of the idea that there are "universal truths," spiritual ideas that apply to everyone everywhere and that are a version of Christian theology. One of the more formally interesting is Elizabeth Bishop. Her poem, "At the Fishhouses" is about the fact that the emblems of Christian religious belief persist, yet the spiritual world they supposedly embody no longer seems credible (http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/at-the-fishhouses/).

The structure of the poem seems to invite a meditation on the possibility of a spiritual world. The first stanza is about physical things; the second, the very short one, seems a deliberate hinge in that it talks of the water's "edge," and the third meditates on religious ideas. It is as if Bishop were trying to be Wordsworth – looking at the physical world and then finding in it emblems of "immortality," a spirit world behind the physical one. But the poem seems more about how difficult and exciting it is to live in a world that can no longer be said to contain a Christian version of spirit. For Bishop, the world is all there is.

Notice how the first stanza contains descriptions of physical objects with resonance in Christian imagery – the wooden captan shaped like a cross, the dried blood that recalls the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the central story of the Christian religion, and the fisherman who recalls the Christian idea of the "fisher of men" who would bring those without faith into the Christian faith. Christ is often figured as a fish ("ichthys") because that was an ancient symbol of the way the spiritual and the physical world joined together. But notice that Bishop is less concerned with suggesting that there is a spiritual meaning in these physical objects than with noting how they are, as objects, simply beautiful in themselves. She seems to suggest that the process of physical life is sufficient. We should concentrate on it, like the old fisherman, and not try to find spirit where there is none.

Notice that the net is "almost invisible," which suggests the way, in a spiritualist vision of existence, the physical world would disappear into its true meaning as an embodiment of spirit. But the physical world persists in Bishop's vision, and it assaults the senses: the codfish make her nose run and her eyes water. Moreover, while the church-like fishhouses with their high peaks evoke the possibility of transcendence (of leaving the physical world for the spiritual by moving up the gangplank at the hinge between water and land), this possibility is countered by the sheer weight of the sea, a dense physical object that seems resistant to being seen as an embodiment of spirit. It is "opaque," rather than being a transparent glass through which one might, as one would in a Wordsworth poem, see Eternity. "Translucence" rather than "transcendence" seems to be what occupies Bishop, and that word is used to describe the simple physical beauty of the actual world. Perhaps this world is enough, she seems to suggest. Perhaps we need to reach or imagine no further by turning it into an embodiment of spirit. While the Christian cross-like wooden capstan is "melancholy," the old man himself, for example, possesses "the principal beauty." He is committed to life itself, lived through the repetition of simple tasks that are "unnumbered." They never turn into spirit; they simply endure and continue, taking hope from Lucky Strikes, an image of the way a brave person who has given up the security of religion might face life in the physical world.

Bishop begins to speak in a Wordsworthian spiritualist way twice and then interrupts herself and returns to the physical world. Twice she begins to intone "Cold dark and deep …" It is as if she were a poet like Wordsworth who sees the physical world as having a "deep" meaning that is the universal truth of the spirit world that is "bearable to no mortal," but she stops herself, allows herself to be interrupted by everyday things like a seal. The physical

world has small pleasures, not big transcendental rewards, she seems to suggest. But it is also a hard place, and enduring life in it without a sense of spiritual meaning can be difficult. Bishop suggests we may be protecting ourselves from facing the hard truth of physical reality – that we all die and pass away. That is why she recalls the hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The fantasy of God protects us from the hard reality of the world. Knowledge of that reality burns your tongue; it is cold and hard; and unlike the fixed meanings of the Christmas trees and the churches, it is in physical time and flows on and away constantly: "our knowledge is historical, flowing and flown." Christmas trees are only natural objects; it is we who turn them into spiritual meaning. But by themselves they are simply innumerable things. They make the physical world special, but that world, for Bishop, is indifferent. It recognizes none of our special occasions, our ways of making meaning of it. The Christmas trees "stand/waiting for Christmas," as the cold water of the world swings "indifferently … above the stones." Fire is often used in the Christian tradition as an image for the transmutation of physical things into spiritual ones. But Bishop's physical reality is one that cannot be burned away into spirit ("transmutation of fire"). Its flame is oddly "gray," and it "feeds on stones," things that cannot be burned. In her metaphor, they resist being transmuted into spirit.

Bishop's technique in the poem consists of creating resonances with Christianity through allusions ("A Mighty Fortress," the bloody capstan). But while Wordsworth turns the ordinary world into a manifestation of spirit, Bishop evokes that poetic gesture and then does not perform it. She remains resolutely on the surface of the ordinary.

The Formalist study of fiction is called narratology because it is often concerned with how stories are told. Consider the formal difference between James Joyce in *Ulysses* and Ernest Hemingway in *In Our Time*, books written just a few years apart. Hemingway's theme is toughness and how to get it. Men who fail are losers. Those who succeed harden themselves against the world and hold emotional attachments at a safe distance. They keep a tight lid on their emotions.

What kind of form would you expect with these themes? Here is an excerpt from a story about a young man fishing in a river near a swamp:

> A big cedar slanted all the way across the stream. Beyond that the river went into the swamp. Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them. … In the swamp fishing was

> a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He did not want to go down the stream any further today. He took out his knife, opened it and stuck it in the log. Then he pulled up the sack, reached into it and brought out one of the trout. Holding him near the tail, hard to hold, alive in his hand, he whacked him against the log. The trout quivered, rigid. Nick laid him on the log in the shade and broke the neck of the other fish the same way. He laid them side by side on the log. They were fine trout.

Notice the simplicity of the sentences, the clean sense of orderliness in the prose. No feminine swirls here, no decorative adjectives. No signs of what other men looking on might take to be emotionality or vulnerability. Notice too the symbolic lay-out of the landscape, with the wet swamp that threatens to swallow up the man on the one side and the neat log on the other where the man can do his brutal work and maintain a sense of order in the face of potential engulfment and tragedy or loss. The simple form of the sentences is a way of keeping what the swamp represents – loss of clear boundaries around oneself – at bay. "Nick did not want it" is a way of ensuring through the very clean, clear, crisp, unadorned form of the sentence that he will not be overwhelmed by the swamp. Form here is almost a weapon like the knife. Its sharp edge keeps the male keen and out of the swamp of emotional disclosure and self-loss.

Now consider Joyce who concludes *Ulysses* by occupying the perspective of a woman who has just had an adulterous relationship during the day and who now lies in bed beside her husband, an affable, not at all duped, keenly aware man who nevertheless puts up with her antics. Here she thinks about a past flirtation, a play about adultery, the onset of menstruation, and her lover of the afternoon:

> "I was fit to be tied though I wouldn't give in with that gentleman of fashion staring down at me with his glasses and him the other side of me talking about Spinoza and his soul that's dead I suppose millions of years ago I smiled the best I could all in a swamp leaning forward as if I was interested having to sit it out then to the last tag I wont forget that wife of Scarli in a hurry supposed to be a fast play about adultery that idiot in the gallery hissing the woman adulteress he shouted I suppose he went and had a woman in the next lane running round all the back ways after to make up for it I wish he had what I had then hed boo I bet the cat itself is better off than us have we too much blood up in us or what O patience above its pouring out of me like the sea anyhow he didn't make pregnant as big as he is."

The first thing that strikes one about the form of this passage is the lack of grammatical markers; everything flows together. Molly is funny, warm, earthy, resentful, and quite physical. She thinks more about getting laid well than about whether or not she is a proper woman or has a proper feminine identity (whatever that might be). The tone is one of good-humored tolerance, especially toward things normally considered "sins" by her Catholic compatriots in Ireland at the beginning of the 20th century. That tolerance suggests an emotional lability and openness that does not need to prove itself through evidence of order, firm boundaries, or toughness. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Form is often appropriate to content. It is the mode of execution of certain ideas or themes. In the case of Hemingway, the form of the sentences is crisp and clear, simple and neat, like the orderly boundary Nick wishes to maintain in the face of the symbolically feminine swamp. In the case of Joyce, the form of the sentences is fluid and boundaryless, associative and connective, like the personality of Molly Bloom.

Narrative is the ordering of events in a story or film such that they plausibly resemble real life. In some respects, narrative emerges from perspective. To see the world from a particular perspective is to tell the story of the world in a particular way. Perspective allows you to see only so much of the world. Narratives are therefore always focalized; they allow one to see, but they limit what one sees.

Narratives are selective constructs. When we tell a story about what happened to us the night before, we do not recount every second and every single thought we had. We instead select and recount only those events and thoughts that are most relevant, most significant, or most interesting for the effect we wish to create. All fictional stories and all films do the same thing. They select from actual events and combine the selected material into a sequence called a narrative.

Narratives are exercises in logic. Each event is a cause from which follow subsequent events. Narratives are also usually spatial as well as temporal. They tell stories in sequence through time, of course, but they also embody spatial schemes of meaning. *The Scarlet Letter* poses an ideal of natural freedom against a social world in which religion and law are fused for the sake of moral government. That spatial structure of meaning is worked out through the temporal narrative.

Narratives are characterized by motifs and functions. A motif is a recurring element within the same story – say, a reference to a blind man's cane in Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example. A function is a recurring element found in

a diverse array of stories. In all heroic narratives, for example, the hero leaves home, is tested, receives help, and vanquishes the villain. The author draws on such forms or patterns in making his or her particular story. As a result, the story contains elements that can be found in other similar stories. Its form is shaped by conventions or formulaic patterns specific to its particular genre (the melodrama, the heroic legend, the comedy, etc.). The conventions of genre lend shape to certain kinds of stories such as the comedy and the tragedy. In comedy, the hero is usually low on the social scale and rises up; in tragedy, a figure who is high up socially falls. Certain such conventions are specific to historical eras. We seldom read or see tragedies these days because the era of kings and nobles is past. We see lots of comedies, on the other hand, because we live in a class-stratified society in which rising up socially or economically is a constant issue, one that provides many examples suited to comedic purposes. *Knocked Up* is a comedy of class ascent; a poor boy gets a well-to-do girl. His virtue transcends the usual barriers to non-success. Comedy is an appropriate form for such content because comedy thrives on breached boundaries and broken rules. And the main male character breaches a class boundary in the story of the movie.

Let's now consider a specific example of narrative at greater length. *The Scarlet Letter* is about a minister who gets a young woman pregnant and then refuses for years to take public responsibility for what he has done. He allows her to suffer the opprobrium of the community and to be branded with the red "A" for adulteress. She is stigmatized and lives a life of shame – at first. She eventually, through her good works, wins over the community, who come to see her first as "Able", then as "Angel." The minister eventually reveals his sin and dies from his private suffering, but not before he publicly adopts his illicit family and acknowledges paternity of the child.

*The Scarlet Letter* is a symbolic narrative in which characters represent certain types – typical emblems of particular kinds of strength or virtue or vice. Hester is a woman associated with nature and with a supposedly (for the era) natural woman's role of care-giver and nurturer. But she is also a free spirit who defies the authority of the world she lives in. Her daughter Pearl represents embodied spirituality in nature, a spontaneous being whose every act is an expression of virtue. Chillingworth represents moral supervision that would torment those guilty of natural lapses such as adultery, while Dimmesdale is the emblem of all the damage such moral government does in the world by making nature seem evil.

The novel's form is also ironic. It begins with one set of moral premises, but during the course of the narrative those premises are inverted. The term

for this is chiasmus, or crossing. In the course of the narrative, terms cross and change value. What began as virtue ends up seeming like vice, and what began as vice appears in the end to be the only true virtue. At issue is the 19th-century religious notion of "sin," the idea that natural human actions can be categorized as evil by those who disapprove of them. Hawthorne demonstrates that what the Puritan church authorities declare to be sin – sexual desire – is in fact a universal human trait. Both Hester and Dimmesdale, the two putative sinners in the Puritan moral scheme, sense others around them who share their passionate sexuality.

The novel is filled with symbols and metaphors largely because, while writing it, Nathaniel Hawthorne read a controversial book that appeared the same year called *God in Christ* by Horace Bushnell, a Protestant theologian and minister who was persecuted for his beliefs, a theme that Hawthorne takes up in his novel. Bushnell devotes his first chapter to "typology," the idea that divinity manifests itself in emblems in the world. For Bushnell, as for Hawthorne in the novel, sunlight is a symbol or emblem of divinity. The scarlet A that Hester is obliged to wear as a sign of adultery is an important symbol largely because, for Hawthorne, it comes to mean something quite different from what the Puritan clerics intended. It is a sign of Hester's natural spirituality because she has made it in such an ornate and creative way that it subverts the harsh simplicity and simple-mindedness of the Puritan moral scheme. Her private spirituality is beyond the reach of conservative moral government. It is its own justification. The Puritans taught children using a simple "primer" that associated letters with words and moral lessons ("In Adam's fall, we sinned all"). Hawthorne in the novel favors instead a more naturalist brand of religiosity that sees divinity in nature. Hester's free-spirited reworking of the A, so that it symbolizes natural talent and natural moral freedom, subverts the meaning the Puritan clerics intended. Moreover, the attempt by the Puritan clerics to establish a fixed moral scheme for everyone is undone by the mobility of meaning of Hester's letter. It comes to mean "Able" then "Angel," a meaning completely at odds with what the clerics intended. Nature subverts moral government, Hawthorne argues in the novel, and the fate of this central symbol confirms that argument.

The narrative draws on the prevailing Puritan moral story, one in which redemption is attained through painful suffering for sins that some would consider simply the expression of natural passions, and it then ironically reworks those premises so that their values are reversed. Because Hawthorne endorses the view that sees nature as inherently moral and sexual passion as

beyond moral schemes, the novel makes the Puritan moral story seem perverse and unnatural. Normally, the Puritan narrative of redemption would portray those who have sinned as evil and in need of moral supervision from holy men. But in this instance, the holy man is himself prone to natural passions. He fathers a child with a young woman. She, rather than being presented as a repository of negative or immoral traits, turns out to be one of the more moral characters in the novel. Her "progress" is not toward reconciliation with the conservative moral authorities; it is, rather, a progress away from the church toward a more natural, spontaneously generated morality that focuses on actually doing good for people instead of branding them as evil for having natural passions.

One important function in the conservative Puritan narrative would be the moment when the sinner accepts the judgment of the holy men and acknowledges his or her wrong. No such moment occurs in *The Scarlet Letter*. Instead, the two moments that might have fulfilled that narrative function – when Hester stands before the crowd on the scaffold in the market and the moment at the end when Dimmesdale mounts the scaffold with her and Pearl – serve a very different narrative goal and have a very different thematic purpose. Both are moments of defiance, when Hester proudly rejects the admonition of the Puritan elders and when Dimmesdale proudly adopts his natural family as his own. Rather than acknowledge guilt or confess to sin, he does what the virtuous Pearl asks of him and freely accepts his natural family as his own. Hawthorne thus creates an ironic version of the standard Puritan narrative of progress toward redemption and away from sin, assisted by the holy men and the holy teachings of the church. In his view, the church itself is evil, and progress consists of movement away from it and toward nature. *The Scarlet Letter* begins with the Puritan premise that sinners (those whose natural passions count as sins in the Puritan moral scheme, that is) should be punished. But Hawthorne immediately questions this premise by portraying his significant characters as rebels whose rebellion is justified. It too is an embodiment of the same natural spirituality that stands opposed to Puritan moral assumptions.

Form is essential to filmmaking because movies are in some respects nothing but exercises in technique. When you shoot a scene in a movie, you have to decide what form is appropriate to the ends you wish to achieve, be they thematic (getting an idea right) or representational (depicting a particular world accurately). You have to decide where to place the camera and what different effects different camera positions will create. You have to decide how to light the scene so as to suggest one emotional tone or another.

Will it be dark or light, and how will each one affect the audience's perceptions of the imagined reality? Similarly, in literature, one has to decide as a writer whether to be "light," to use a humorous tone even with serious material as James Joyce chooses to do in *Ulysses*, or to be "heavy," to describe things in such a way that even small things seem to bear universal significance as in the except from Hemingway. One must also place the writer's version of a camera – narrative voice – in a particular position by choosing which perspective to adopt on the events of the story – right behind the main character's ear or high up in the sky looking down on all the events and characters equally?

*Citizen Kane* is made with a great deal of technical virtuosity. If you pay attention to the way the filmmaker, Orson Welles, uses the camera when filming Charlie Kane, you'll find that he is often implying a criticism of Kane for his faults, which include grandiosity, egotism, and excess ambition. He shoots the film from different perspectives, so that Kane looks different depending on whose eyes we see him through. In one sequence, Kane gives a political campaign speech. The camera assumes the point of view or perspective of his young son who is watching. But then it switches to the perspective of someone watching from high up in the amphitheater.


**Figure 1** *Citizen Kane*. Produced and directed by Orson Welles. 1941.


**Figure 2** *Citizen Kane*. Produced and directed by Orson Welles. 1941.

**Figure 3** *Citizen Kane*. Produced and directed by Orson Welles. 1941.

The perspective of his son makes Kane look huge, bigger than life, a real hero, a great man. But the perspective of the silent watcher makes him seem small. As the sequence unfolds, we learn that the watcher is a corrupt politician about whom Kane is talking in his speech. He says he intends to put the corrupt politician in jail. But the virtuous Kane is vulnerable. He is having an affair with a young woman, and the corrupt politician is about to blackmail him. What we see is ironic form at work: Kane thinks one thing, but we in the audience see another that contradicts what he thinks. He feels, mistakenly, that he has power, and the camera position reinforces that sense of things. But the ironic truth is that he is in someone else's power.

Consider the sequence that shows the celebration of the acquisition of the *Chronicle*. It contains several nice metaphors. It opens with a photograph that then becomes the real thing photographed – a group of men. The metaphor is that images have as much substance as reality for Charlie Kane. He is more concerned with how the newspaper looks than with what it actually is. Next, Kane is dancing with a line of women. The camera observes him from the perspective of his co-workers, Leland and Bernstein, who speak of him skeptically. The perspective suddenly shifts, and we see Leland and Bernstein and a window behind them. Notice that Kane now

**Figure 4** *Citizen Kane*. Produced and directed by Orson Welles. 1941.

appears as a reflection on the glass of the window. Reflections have less substance than actual things, and here the theme of the clash between substance and image established at the beginning of the sequence continues. As the sequence evolves, smoke from a cigar drifts in front of the reflection. It too suggests a lack of substance, and it is associated with Charlie. Formalists notice that content or meaning is often determined by perspective or point of view, where you stand when you look at something or whose perspective you adopt in telling a story. In this sequence, you are put in the position of looking at Kane from the point of view of his good friend, Leland, who clearly is skeptical regarding Charlie. That skepticism is recorded in the images and metaphors that suggest a lack of substance.

## Things to Look for in Literary and Cultural Texts

- What are the major elements of the work's form? Is the meaning of the work embedded as much in how it is done or written as in what it is about?
- How is the narrative organized or constructed? Can it be mapped as a logical structure of causes and consequences?
- What is the perspective from which the story is told and how does that affect what is told or can be told?
- What metaphors or images are used? What thematic purposes do the metaphors serve?
- How do such elements of poetic construction as rhyme and rhythm affect meaning?