Playing Twenty Questions with Literature: Heuristics for the Exploration of Literary Texts

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Criticism is a lens. It allows us to focus on certain aspects of the text. At the same time, all critical approaches, while promoting insight, impose partial blindness. This is because each system focuses our attention on certain aspects of and relationships relating to the text, while drawing attention away from others, effectively (if temporarily) silencing them. Another way of looking at critical systems is that each approach is a heuristic, allowing us to brainstorm about the text by providing us with a set of guidelines for exploring a text, often a set of questions and a guiding philosophy (or agenda, if you want to be political about it). I do not believe it is possible to create a complete system of literary analysis, to cover every possible way of looking at every possible text. Every system--and, of course, every critique--will be incomplete, but without these approaches our ability to explore, understand, enjoy, and value literary texts (whatever "literary" really means) would be greatly reduced. Here, then, are "twenty questions" one can ask about novels, films, plays, and perhaps even poems. I offer them as a starting point for exploration. Enjoy.

1. Questions of plot and structure

I have sometimes argued that the six basic plots are as follows:

- Boy Meets Girl (or Boy Meets Boy or....)
- Boy Saves World (or at least his little corner of it)
- Boy Learns Better (or Boy Grows Up)
- Boy Goes on Quest (or is on a quest and Comes Home)
- Boy Gets Revenge
- Boy Takes a Beating (or Gets Killed…it's how he deals with his fate that makes the story)

There is also the dramatic framework set up by Northrop Frye, Hayden White and others:

- **Spring/Comedy/Conservative**/Hero succeeds in reforming a corrupt society of some kind and in romance and/or other personal endeavors--the story line is

considered conservative because it suggests that our society is basically all right, at the core, although individual injustices must be met and defeated (and that this can be done through wit and the uncovering of hypocrisy and vanity rather than through action, particularly radical and violent action).

- **Summer/Romance/Anarchistic**/Hero abandons or fails to reform a corrupt society but succeeds in romance; the genre is considered anarchistic because it presumes that victory can only take place on the level of personal success or failure; often, the best way to deal with a corrupt society is to simply go away, to escape and create one's own society.
- **Autumn/Tragedy/Radical/**Hero restores order but is destroyed or endures personal loss because of it; the genre is considered radical because it suggests that changes in society can be made, should be made, must be made with action, and must be made even at great personal cost.
- **Winter/Satire/Liberal**/Hero neither restores order nor succeeds in personal goals; often, the hero is as corrupt as the society he would, in other genres, be attempting to reform, or he becomes corrupt in his attempt to create reform; the genre is consider "liberal" because it suggests that political change is a myth, that no change in the system will produce fundamental changes in society--although perhaps we can achieve small victories by living well--but we must accept an "I'm okay, you're okay" attitude about things and accept that heroic plans to make big changes are doomed to failure.

It is important, by the way, to keep the political aspect of literature in mind. *Nothing is more political than literature*, even when it overtly makes an argument about a particular political issue, because so much of literature is concerned with power and morality, about what is true, good, and possible, about what is just and beautiful, about who has power and who should have power in society and in the family, and how that power should be employed, and for what ends. It is hard to find a work of literature that does not ask us to join with or join against certain characters (or the narrator); in doing this, a work of literature becomes an argument for (or against) a particular political, ethical, social, and/or moral agenda.

Stephen King (yes, that Stephen King) talks about novels as being about the conflict between order and disorder; he describes his horror novels as Apollonian (orderly, sober, normal, sane) societies being attacked or destroyed by some Dionysian (disorderly, drunken, abnormal, insane) element.

Another idea is that of the text as verbal object, as self-contained universe of verbal logic, whose artistic impact comes not so much from the ideas themselves but from how those ideas and characters operate as a self-contained system, in the way that a symphony is not so much about tone but about structures of tones, and the way a sculpture is not so much about image as about the cooperation of many images to create a single effect ("objective criticism").

Finally, it is worth considering a work within the framework of Kinneavian theory. James L. Kinneavy, in *A Theory of Discourse*, argues that there are really four basic kinds of human communication. Expressive discourse (writing, speaking, etc.) emphasizes the views and feelings of the writer. Referential discourse emphasizes the topic being discussed. Persuasive discourse emphasizes the audience, as it is composed with the intention of discussing the topic to influence the audience in some manner. Finally, literary discourse emphasizes the language itself, with the goal of creating an artistic construct that will entertain the audience. (It is interesting that Cicero defines rhetoric as having three goals, to instruct, to move, and to please, which sound suspiciously like referential, persuasive, and literary discourse). Every text, Kinneavy says, may contain elements of any of these four goals, so any work of literature can be examined in terms of expression, reference, persuasion, and literary creation.

2. Questions of motifs and symbols

Motifs are another important aspect of fictional form. Images or themes may be repeated or, as often occurs in music, employed as a series of variations on a central image or theme. As in cluster criticism, the use may not have to refer to any meaning outside the text, although in some cases this is of central importance to the meaning and impact of the text, but it is always true that they create a sense of connection between different aspects or moments in the text itself. For example, if we know that roses are important to the hero, any use of roses or rose imagery may be a sign of this kind of connection.

Symbols are, of course, a central aspect of literature. Anything that is not literally what it is, that may have some hidden meaning or meanings, can be a symbol. Symbols, of course, can be used to create a resonance or connection of meaning(s) throughout the text through repetition and variation.

3. Questions of character

A system outlined by Northrop Frye--see *Anatomy of Criticism*, pages 172-173--has four basic character types...

The first is the **eiron** (the self-deprecator). There are several kinds of eirons, including the neutral hero and/or heroine and the witty side-kick (originally in Roman drama, this was a tricky slave--if you've seen Marty Feldman in *Young Frankenstein* you get the idea)

Other types of characters in Frye's discussion of drama (which can probably cross over to fiction some- what) are:

- the **alazon** (the blocking force, often a hypocritical boaster, and sometimes a father figure in competition with the hero for the girl (Frye points out that comedies often combine both sexual and political triumphs: boy saves world and gets girl)
- the **buffoon** (who increases the festivity of the mood rather than contributing to the story)

- the **churl** (sometimes a straight man, often a naive rustic, sometimes simply someone who refuses to enter into the cheerful spirit of events)

We should always consider how a character fits into a story, how they further the plot, what the author might be trying to teach us by including certain characters. We may also want to examine whether characters are fully developed and "three dimensional," stock character types ("the brash soldier," "the stoic gunslinger," "the sage," "the virginal princess," etc.), or entirely symbolic or allegorical. Sometimes authors use deliberately complicated characters--the character who suddenly does the reverse of what we expect to draw attention to the whole notion of stereotypes and stock characters (e.g., the virginal princess who is also a better shot than the hero). In addition, one should consider how "public" or "private" a view we have of the characters--do we only see what they do and say, or do we get a chance to see what they think and feel, too?

4. Questions of style

Style is one of those fuzzy terms that can mean a lot of things. It is, however, worth considering the actual diction, syntax, and presentation of the text. This can cover an enormous range of textual features, including the length and complexity of sentences, the variation of sentence forms, the relative degree of abstract or concrete language employed by the text, the use of images, the length of paragraphs, pacing, the division of the text in chapters or sections, even the physical layout and production values of the text (the size and font of the typeface, the quality of paper used, etc.), although this last may be outside the control of the author. All of these factors can influence how we experience the text, how realistic we find the story, how we view the characters and their actions, and so on.

5. Questions of genre ("definition")

Genre literally means "kind" or "class." Almost every text can be described as belonging to one or more genres; the few texts--if any exist--that are unclassifiable can still be approached based on the genres to which they may be responses (including rejections). Genres are useful to readers and critics because every genre establishes a set of guidelines, expectations, etc., about the text's form, content, goal, people who are allowed to create such texts in the first place, people who are supposed to read the text once it is completed, how important the text is, what themes might be explored in the text, and so on. Some basic questions include the following: What makes this a "novel," as opposed to some other form, like a novelette, an epic, a drama, a ballad poem (in prose form), and so on? What makes this a certain kind of novel, e.g., historical, western, science fiction, fantasy, romance, mystery, etc.? Is the essential dramatic quality of the story comedic, tragic, romantic, or satiric?

6. Questions of universals

One approach to literature is that it addresses universal questions of human experience. Some critics argue that what makes a text literature, the reason it stands the test of time, is that it addresses issues that are of common concern to all (or, at least, most) human beings.

Some of these questions might be classified as considering “What is the human experience?” What does it really mean to be alive and to be human? What does it mean to grow from childhood into adulthood, and to grow old and face death? What does it mean to be in love? What are the universal experiences that are generally true for all people in all times?

A related set of questions often explored in literature might come under the heading of "What is the meaning of life?" Why are we here? What does it all mean? What is a good life and how shall we live it? What does God (or the gods, nature, the universe, etc.) ask of us?

7. Questions of morality (or ethics) ("Is it good art?")

Many critics believe that literature must have a moral or ethical component. Samuel Johnson complained about the new genre of the novel in the 18th century because he was concerned about it being a bad moral influence. He and other writers believed that true art "instructs while pleasing." John Gardner believed that literature, real art, must be "life-affirming." To what extent does the text teach, and what does it teach, and do you believe it is a good thing that the text is teaching these ideas? Why or why not? (Often, questions about what is erotic or pornographic are based on this notion.)

Literature can usually be examined in terms of good and evil. Each work of literature is usually an argument, explicit or implicit, in favor of certain kinds of thinking and certain kinds of behavior, and as an argument against other kinds of thinking and behavior.

This is another question that has become more important for me as a teacher of literature over time. Edmund Burke is reputed to have said that "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." Rabbi Hillel is reputed to have said, when asked about the meaning of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary." Literature often addresses the nature of evil. What is evil (or "sinful" or perhaps "less good than it should be")? What kinds of evil exist in the world? How do we know something is evil? And, perhaps most important, how should we respond to evil?

8. Questions of heroism, villainy, and monstrosity

Literature often asks questions like these: Who are the heroic figures and why? What is the author trying to say about the nature of humanity and heroism that these people are the heroic figures? How heroic is the protagonist? The antagonist? What is the author trying to say by using heroic and unheroic figures in these positions within the story? Who are the villainous figures and what makes them villainous? Who are the anti-heroic

figures? What makes them anti-heroic? Is it simply a quality of being somehow ordinary, normal, etc.? Finally, literature examines questions of the normal and the abnormal, and asks: Who are the monstrous figures? What makes them monstrous or grotesque (as opposed to "evil")?

The "monster" is often used to address such questions as "What does it mean to be human? and "What makes something or someone a monster?" Replace the term "monster" with "foreigner" or "outsider" and you have an entirely new set of questions. Often, of course, stories that involve monsters suggest that the "monsters" may be more human than they appear; some of them also suggest that someone who looks like a perfectly ordinary person (or a hero) might be far more monstrous than a creature or person who is simply strange or ugly.

Fantasy, science fiction, and horror are often concerned with this last issue. Examining the "other" (monster, alien, immortal, ghost, etc.) is often a way to address certain aspects of being human. In addition, horror as a genre is frequently concerned with examining the relationship between the normal and the abnormal, the wholesome and the taboo, etc. In fact, horror often frightens or disturbs us not only by putting certain characters in danger, but by blurring or violating the boundaries between the normal and the abnormal, etc.

9. Questions of power

In recent years, I have come to rely more and more on the issues related to this question. Cicero's "On Duties" and "On Friendship" are important works for many reasons, but I think one of them is that they identify two of the critical issues explored in literature. The first is the issue of power. Human relationships are often hierarchical; some people have power of some kind over other people. It may be because they are kings, or parents, or employers, or landowners, or teachers, or officers, or some other kind of political or community leader. What does it mean to be a leader? What makes a leader a good leader? What are the rights and the obligations of a leader?

The other side of the question is what are the rights and obligations of someone who is ruled or commanded or guided or protected? What makes a good child, a good subject, a good soldier, a good community member, and so on?

10. Questions of relationship

Another issue addressed by Cicero and other writers is one of friendship. Human societies are full of relationships where people are not connected by power, but by some kind of kinship or friendship. What is a good friend? A good brother? A good wife? A good husband? How should we treat those to whom we are related not by power, but by affection, by kinship, by friendship, or by marriage?

11. Questions of reality and depiction ("mimetic criticism" and other issues)

One approach to literature is the relationship between art and the real world, between "art" and "truth." A great deal has been written about whether or not art should be "truthful" or not, whether realism is the real measure of art, or if art is more "real" than reality because it allows us to see the essence of things that we can only experience in terms of material or social aspects. Some critics have recommended that writers use "nature" as their guide, that the stories and characters they invented must be plausible or "true to life." Many writers believe that literature should try to be as realistic as possible, to try to record and express (or perhaps to "capture") real life in verbal form. Of course, some writers turn this question on its head and deliberately write stories or poems or plays that are not "realistic." Sometimes they are doing this to explore some kind of symbolism or to explore what they think an experience like passionate love or drug addiction or dreaming might be like. Sometimes they do this to draw attention to the relationship between art and real life, to show that while they are related, they may not be exactly the same thing.

Some questions that might be considered are as follows: What view of the world is being presented in the text? How "realistic" is the text and why do we believe it to be realistic? How does the style and arrangement of the text serve to create or destroy a sense of "realism," "surrealism," etc.?

Another issue is to consider if and how the text calls attention to its existence as a text, rather than text that pretends to be a literal translation of reality into a linguistic structure.

12. Questions of narration and silence ("viewpoint")

Every story is narrated. Someone, whether it is one of the characters in the story, or an unseen narrator, or the point of view provided by a film's director, is relating the events of the tale to us, letting us experience those events in one particular way, while blocking out other viewpoints. This blocking out of alternatives is usually not malicious, although authors are frequently aware of the significance of having the story told from one point of view and not another. Ultimately, the choice of one narrator over another is unavoidable; there is no way for a single narrator or author to present the totality of everything that takes place in a story, but we need to be aware that every story can be told in an infinite number of ways. Some of the questions one can consider are as follows: Who is telling the story and how does that influence how the story gets told? What kind of narrative techniques are being used and how does that influence the way the story is told? Who is not getting to speak and how does that influence how we view the story and the ideas it contains? Whose point of view is being valorized? Whose point of view is being silenced?

13. Questions of change ("process, history, and relationship with text")

Novels and dramas are dynamic forms of literature; almost always, the action described by a novel or a play takes place over a period of time and describes some kind of change. So we can look at the following: How does the plot develop? We are used to the traditional description of plot as one of introduction, crisis, climax, and anticlimax or

conclusion (although in some non-Western societies we do not see this kind of development, suggesting a more spatial/static relationship with the world rather than the dynamic/process/progress/change-oriented relationship common in Western societies). How do things change in the novel. In particular, how do people change? Orson Scott Card has said his main character is always "the person in the most pain" and implied that the story is not over until that pain is somehow resolved. (Gardner talks about writing as a response to woundedness.) Who or what is responsible for the changes that take place?

Another issue is that we are involved in a relationship with the text. Consider the very process of your reading of the text. How have you changed (in knowledge, attitude, etc.), if you have changed, during the course of reading the text, and now, afterwards, having finished it?

14. Questions of rhetoric ("rhetorical criticism")

Every text can be treated as an argument, explicit or implicit, for certain things. The author wants us to believe certain things or do certain things. The author wants us to feel certain things about certain characters. The author wants us to experience the ideas and themes of the story in a certain way. How does all this happen? How does the text operate as an explicit or implicit argument for a certain agenda? What is the author trying to prove and how does he or she go about proving it? How successful is the text as an explicit or implicit argument? Why does it succeed (or fail)?

A related issue is **text as semiotic**--how does it go about communicating its meaning to the audience? How does it operate as or within a system of symbols?

One can also adapt the classical treatment of rhetoric to literature, examining the text as a kind of persuasive speech and exploring the three types of Aristotelian arguments:

Ethos: Who is the "narrator" and why do we trust both the narrator and mode of presentation? What relationship is established between text/narrator and audience?

Logos: What ideas are established and how are they established, implied, or proved?

Pathos: How does the author (through the narrator and/or the events of the text) appeal to the audience's values or emotions? Why is this done? What does the author hope to accomplish by doing this? How does it help in her attempt to persuade the audience?

Kenneth's Burke pentad and notion of identification are also valuable for considering how a text might attempt to persuade or argue with an audience. What kind of dramatic structures are being set up in the text, what is being identified with what, and for what purpose?

Finally, one can consider how a text might influence an audience in ways the author may not have originally intended (for example, do slasher films encourage violence towards women? if so, how?)

15. Questions of race, gender, and class ("multicultural, feminist, and Marxist criticism")

This is a cluster of questions related to the views of the author and the possible influence of the text on topics concerning power and relationships between different groups of people in society. What does the text say about masculine and feminine roles in society? What does the text say about the relationship between races and the concept of race? What does the text say about working class people, "white collar" workers, bosses and laborers, masters and slaves, the relationship between classes, and the very concept of class?

16. Questions of tradition, culture, and canon

Every text can be considered in relationship with a canon, a hierarchy of works that are considered the core of a genre, either because of their quality, or originality, or influence, or representativeness. Those most central to the canon are those which represent the best in what that culture or discourse community considers best and most beautiful among a certain set of texts; they reflect ideological assumptions about a genre or a set of genres. What place does any specific text have within that hierarchy? Is it primary, secondary, minor, marginal, or outside the canon?

A related question is how a text fits within a tradition or genealogy. One way of looking at this is to consider that texts are responses not only to the real world, but also to other texts which they imitate, draw upon, react to, refer to, and so on. In other words, texts have meaning to us because we have read other texts, so the relationship, implied or explicit between a text and other texts, in or out of its own genre, is worth exploring. For example, how does our concept of the monster Grendel influence (and be influenced by) our notion of the Frankenstein monster, both as he appears in the novel and in later film versions?

Another way of looking at this issue is to ask what literary or aesthetic or rhetorical traditions the text belongs to and how it fits into those traditions. What does it mean, for example, to say that a novelist has written an "absurdist play" or a "picaresque novel"? One can argue whether or not tradition is another name for "genre," but it is sometimes useful to treat the two issues as separate

17. Questions of culture ("cultural criticism")

What does the text tell us, either directly or by implication, about the society in which it was composed or the audiences for whom it was intended?

Ideology here refers to the underlying assumptions about what is true, good, and possible (and the opposite: what is false, bad, and impossible) used by individuals or groups. All people and all groups have some kind of ideology, although certain ideologies are more flexible than others. In addition, ideologies are often "invisible," the assumptions are so

basic to our understanding of reality that we are not aware of them or, if we are aware of them, never think of questioning them.

Regardless of what the text seems to say on the surface, what appear to be the ideological assumptions that the text is based upon? What can we say about the community in which the text was originally written? What can we say about the community for which the text was written? (Authors who write for "the universal audience" still have some assumptions about what that audience is and what they expect, and will write in reaction to these assumptions.) The image we might use here is the text as a window onto the lives and minds of a particular culture.

Finally, it is worth asking how a text relates to the culture in which and for which it was produced. How is a text typical (or atypical) not only of a genre, but of a historical period and locale. For example, to say that James Joyce is a "modern Irish writer" tells us something about him, just as to say that Joyce was an "experimental novelist" also tells us something. What exactly does it mean to say that a writer is typical of a certain period, geographical location, etc.?

(The term "community" or "culture" can refer to any group of people who share a set of assumptions about the true, the good, and the possible. Many critics and philosophers use the term "discourse community" to discuss some of these issues. This is based on two notions. First, they believe that all communities are discourse communities since people can only operate as groups through the use of language and texts in the first place--as I recall, Cicero made this argument about two thousand years ago. Second, the word "community" sometimes implies a specific time and place. However, as the Internet has shown, a community can be virtual; it can consist entirely of words and ideas and feelings and arguments shared by and between people who might never physically meet.)

18. Questions of Critical Approach

There are a variety of specific critical approaches that provide ways of approaching literature. Some of these are described in the following paragraphs.

One of these is what is sometimes called Burkean approaches to literature, drawing upon the theories of Kenneth Burke. This includes the notion of form as the arousal and fulfillment of expectations (from Kenneth Burke). What expectations does the text create and how does it ultimately fulfill them, if it does indeed do so?

We can also employ a tool referred to as the **Pentad**. Developed by **Kenneth Burke**, the Pentad addresses any dramatic (or fictional) work in terms of looking at any action within the text as a combination of agent, agency, act, purpose, and scene (Who did it? By what means? What did he or she do? Why? Where and when?) See *A Grammar of Motives* (and, also, *A Rhetoric of Motives*) for more information. One important aspect of the pentad is that by breaking the fiction down into its dramatistic elements, we can see which ones are most important to an author (for example, if circumstances drive a character to certain actions, if "scene" and not "agent" or "purpose" determines the "act,"

then this tells us something about the way the author views and is portraying reality.) In addition, Burke talks about "identification," by which he means how one thing is associated (or identified) with other things. This is useful in determining how the author creates certain effects or feelings in the audience--repeated images of life are used to describe books in *Fahrenheit 451*, for example, *identifying* books (and their ideas) with life and living things, a symbol that works on several levels (books and ideas are the "life" of a society, ideas are "alive," books are not simply dead pieces of paper and cardboard but are living things because of the ideas contained within them).

Related to all this is another form of criticism designed by Burke called **cluster criticism**. Here, one looks for clusters of terms, themes, and images and attempts to outline the network of connections between them. They need not really refer to the meanings of these ideas outside of the text, what matters is that within the text they are creating their own interlocked system of meanings.

Another approach is use the text as a way of understanding the author (usually because the author is seen as a kind of "wisdom figure" or because he or she is seen as having a coherent philosophy about one or more issues or concepts). What can we learn about the author's views by examining the text? What is the author trying to say about the nature of heroism, beauty, truth, reality, justice, etc. in this text? How is the text typical or atypical of a particular author's works, viewpoints, etc. How does it show his or her growth or progress as an author?

Finally, many critics are interested in the metatextual aspects of a piece of art. Modern linguistic theory argues that linguistic meaning takes place within the "free play between signifiers," that words are meaningful not only because they refer to something in the world, but because of their place in the enormous network of meaning that is a language. In fact, words have meaning because of their difference from other meanings. But if this is true, if there is no "center of language," no final anchor of meaning, texts can be approached by asking how the meaning of the text deconstructs itself through the internal contradictions created by assuming any final structure of language or meaning.

19. Questions of comparison and contrast

This is one of the easiest and broadest of all the questions. Quite simply, one should consider how any one particular work is similar to or different from any other work. Often, it is by comparing one work with another that the unique features of both works will come into sharp focus. Because this is such a broad question, however, it is often useful to compare the work in question with another work that you are familiar with, and to combine it with other questions from this list, but only one question at a time. For example, one can explore how the Hero in Shakespeare's Henry V differs from Dorimant, the protagonist in the Restoration comedy, *The Man of Mode*. Or, one can consider the treatment of evil in *Frankenstein*, as compared to the treatment of evil in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

20. Questions of reaction ("reader response")

One of the new theories of criticism is based on the very real factor that we do not simply passively absorb experiences; instead, what we experience as reality is mediated, the raw sensory experience goes through several filters (sensory, linguistic, cultural, etc.) and our own personal desires, quirks, interests, memories, etc., operate upon the information to construct what we think reality is. Reading is, under this view, not a simple communication of data; we are as responsible for what we see in the text as the writer who originally transmitted the information. We are all translators. In other words, we not only receive the information, but participate in constructing our understanding of what we have read. For this reason, all individual reactions to the text are potentially valuable. What do you personally think about the text? What do you find in it? Why do you feel this way? Your view is as important as any other critic; the only difference between you and the so-called professional critics is often nothing more than that they took a lot more English courses than you have and, as a result, have somewhat more experience (i.e., they have developed their own system for looking at texts).

Want to read more about it? Here are some (but not all) of the authors you should look into...

- Aristotle
- Wayne C. Booth
- Kenneth Burke
- Cicero
- Terry Eagleton
- Michel Foucault
- Northrop Frye
- Paul Fussell
- John Gardner
- Samuel Johnson
- James L. Kinneavy
- Richard Lanham
- Hayden White

For a list of their books, all you have to do is find an on-line library catalog or on-line bookstore (there are several you can reach through my Rhetoric Page) and enter their names as a search term.

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