

## Examining Life Through the Lens of Art

Many academic disciplines seek to quantify knowledge through the use of numbers. This is a natural outgrowth of the scientific age. Art, by contrast, harbors no scientific pretenses whatsoever: it has little use for numbers, and makes no apologies for this fact. Instead, art attempts to explore that highly abstract element of our humanity that cannot be isolated and empirically observed. The fact that art is often misunderstood can be largely traced to the inherently abstract nature of its method of inquiry.

The story of Moses provides a perfect allegory for understanding the way in which art seeks to say something about life. In the Book of Exodus, Moses is said to have not been able to look directly at the deity, but instead was obliged to look *away* in order to communicate with the divine spirit: “And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God” (KJV Exodus 3:6). It is very much the same way with art. The space in which art moves resists direct, literal description. This is the irony of literature (a discipline which utilizes words in order to convey something that *resists* literal description). Through the use of fictive figures, settings, plots and so on, literature creates a discursive space in which we as human beings may come to terms with the unspeakable, the same way Moses is said to have spoken to the divine spirit through the medium of the burning bush. In order to gain a better understanding of literature, then, it is important for readers to read *actively*, rather than passively; that is to say, the reader must remain aware at all times that the substance of literature is found between the lines. *Huckleberry Finn*, after all, is more than merely a story about a boy who runs away from home. At the risk of redundancy: what if Moses had walked past the burning bush, glanced at it, shrugged his shoulders and continued on his merry way? This is the disservice a passive reader does himself or herself when reading literature. So what does an active reader do? Well, like Moses, (s)he sets out to satisfy his or her curiosity: “And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt” (KJV Exodus 3:3). In every literature course, I repeatedly encourage students to take a moment, “turn aside,” reflect, make marks in the text, underline passages they find to be especially significant, write questions and comments to themselves in the margins, bring these to class – and discuss them!

To be sure, much of what is written every day is meant to be read passively – or at least *more* passively: a comic book, a newspaper, a bulletin, a memo. Literature (with a capital “L”), on the other hand, always aims to *provoke* the reader in some way, and therein lies its charm and appeal. Modern literature, in particular, seeks to suggest something about modern life by examining the contradictions and tensions of everyday life which all individuals must somehow reconcile in order to live. How does the modern individual deal with the increasing chaos and fragmentation of modern life? How does he or she come to terms with feelings of alienation or longing for the past? Is the freedom which individuals the world over have fought to attain not – at the very least – a highly ambiguous phenomenon? How do we balance the desire for individual freedom with the desire to belong to a group? Are the two desires not irreconcilable? These are the kinds of questions which modern literature commonly seeks to address. In this way, through the highly individual, subjective and even *spiritual* medium of fiction, it is hoped that readers will gain an enhanced understanding, in the end, of what it means to be human.