

English 2 Honors: Principles of Literary Study – Prose

Canning

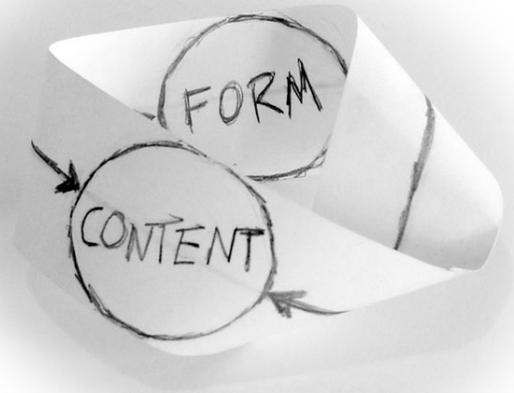
Content versus Form

Content Questions:

1. What happens in the story?
2. Who are the characters and what are they doing?
3. Where are we?
4. What time is it?
5. How does the story end?

Formal Questions:

1. How does the story unfold? (plot)
2. How is the story told? (narration, point of view)
3. How is the story presented? (tone)
4. How are the characters constructed? (characterization)
5. How does the time and place inform the story? (setting, atmosphere)
6. How does the *way* the story is told affect the story? (tone, irony, genre)
7. How does the text shape the story? (language, diction, discourse)



Content questions are concerned with what the story is about - the material that makes up the story. Formal questions are concerned with how the story is told – the devices that explain and inform the story as a literary text.

The differences are often subtle:

“The King died and then the Queen died.” This is a story – “this happened than that happens.” Stories have beginnings, middles, and ends.

“The King died and then the Queen died of sadness.” This is a plot – while you can say “this happened than that happens,” you also have cause and effect. There is now tension in the story because you have possible motive, a character’s psychology is introduced, and we can appreciate the tone of the situation, etc.

In the first example, you know what happens – two monarchs die. In the second, you understand aspects of how it happens and why – one monarch dies which affects the other whose strong feelings for the first cause her death.

The challenge is to consider **how** the content shapes the form and, conversely, how the form shapes the content. This is at the very center of literary analysis and a question we will continually coming back to.