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ENG 483

Metaphor Analysis (Part 1)

Title:

Magician, Chef, and Artist: The Many Metaphorical Hats of Authors and Editors

Audience:

Dr. Julie Jung and ENG 483 class

Purpose:

My project is to analyze the metaphors that are used by authors (in this case, Stephen King) to describe themselves as authors. Because the metaphor is a fundamental way people understand themselves as well as a way we project ourselves to the world, the metaphors an author chooses to describe her or himself will describe the relationship they will or could have with the person who comes between them and the audience that will view them. Since I see the editor in the position as intermediary between the author and the audience, it is important for an editor to understand the author's audience as well as possible and be able to make the author understand what impact that audience has on her or his final product. If I, as an editor, can understand how an author sees him or herself in relation to the audience, I will understand how best to relate to the author in order to address the issues of the text.

Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* is part memoir and part thoughts on and advice for the process of writing. The metaphors, as well as the analogies and anecdotes as extension of the metaphors, he uses to refer to himself as an author and his own writing process and product shed light on how he sees himself in relation to his audience and his editor. Although the use of metaphors and, by extension, analogies can be seen to be reductive, linguist Kenneth Burke's points out in "Four Master Tropes" that "[a] terminology of conceptual analysis, if it is not lead to misrepresentation, must be constructed in conformity with a representative anecdote" (510). Following Burke's lead, the purpose of this analysis is to take the metaphors and anecdotes King uses to talk about writing and show how they are representative of the editor and author relationship.

Choosing King for this analysis was, at first, due to his position as a widely popular fiction writer who wrote a book about writing. At further examination, he is a perfect candidate for this analysis because of his position as a writer that is often metonymically reduced to the category of "pop fiction". As a synecdoche for what it is to be a popular fiction author, he is in an important place for my exploration as to the ways authors who know their audience, have made a firm place for themselves in the genre, and, most importantly, have a healthy relationship with their editors frame the role of the editor in their writing. I will explore seven of these main metaphors, their relationship to each other, and what they mean for the audience and the editor.

Magic and Truth

King confesses that he, as well as many other authors he knows, do not know where they get their ideas and makes the claim that "[f]iction writers . . . don't understand very much about what they do . . ." (King xiv, xvii). This may or may not be true of all authors, and some would argue that King understands quite a bit about what he does as a writer (he wrote a book on it); his use of metaphor to describe the process of writing as a magical process shows that he understands more

than he admits. He supports the idea of a “muse”, but he does not understand it in the classical sense: “[t]here is a muse, but he’s not going to come fluttering down into your writing room and scatter creative fairy-dust all over your typewriter or computer station” (138-9). He continues, “[y]ou have to descend to his level, and once you get down there . . . you have to do all the grunt labor . . .” (139). This interpretation of the “muse” seems like an ironic dismissal of the whole concept at first; but he explains that the muse has “the inspiration” and “a bag of magic” once you get down and do all of the hard work to get to that creative place. What the hard work entails, King asserts, is an aggressive course of writing, writing, more writing, and a great deal of reading.

King returns to this metaphor of magic when he states that “writing is magic, as much the water of life as any creative art” (275). Although this sentence is packed with other metaphors as well, his assertion that “writing is magic” is fundamental in understanding how he sees himself as an author. If he sees the writing process as both a place of hard work and magic, does he see himself as a magician who is practicing “tricks” on the audience? The author as magician metaphor implies that the process of writing is a practicing of magic. The strategies the writer employs (structure, dialogue, use of metaphors, etc.) create the illusion of reality. Writers (especially fiction writers) are in the business of creating a story that will engage the audience in the characters, situation, and story. Believability is a paramount narrative convention for authors of fiction: if they want to engage a reader, they must make them believe that these characters could be real and, therefore, have empathy for them as real people. The pious audience and author, as Kenneth Burke explains in *Permanence and Change*, see the illusion created by the narrative as a “truth” about “how it ought to be” (71). There is piety in this metaphor because the audience is willed (by the author as well as by themselves) into a degree of suspension of disbelief in the illusion as “truth”, even when the question of *what is true* cannot be answered. Of course, in the case of fiction, these characters are not real. Certainly, readers understand this (as they do that what the magician presents them on

stage is simply an illusion), but it is important to the momentum of the story that the illusion is convincing and these characters act with piety that the audience will accept as truth.

If the author is a magician, what the author does as a presentation of these characters and story are an illusion of real life. In the case of Stephen King, his often character-based stories necessitate that these characters be believable, or they won't be characters with which the reader will engage. King expresses the importance of fiction to express some kind of "truth": "the job of fiction is to find the truth inside the story's web of lies . . ." (155). Even when the story is fictional, the job of the author is to express some "truth" within the text or in its greater themes. What this "truth" is and where it comes from is different for all authors and people. King's version of truth comes from the old writer's standby "write what you know", but with a twist. A fiction author should go beyond the knowledge of his or her day to day life, but King says that if the author makes sure that within whatever genre they are writing (from science fiction to romance) the characters and their situations mirror something that the author has real experience with, the reader will be more apt to engage with the story and the truth of the writing: "[w]hen the reader hears strong echoes of his or her own life and beliefs, he or she is more apt to become invested in the story" (156). The magician who makes his or her illusion as "real" or as close to "truth" as possible, but makes sure to make the illusion interesting, will be a more popular magician for it.

Where is the editor in this allusion? If the author is a magician and the product she or he is writing is the allusion, the editor would be the person, besides the magician, who knows how the trick works: the lovely assistant. The editor knows how the author makes the audience believe the allusion (develops the characters as believable), how she creates suspense for the audience (unravels the plot/story), and how she performs these tricks for the audience (styles the writing). However, it may be a difficult task to gather this information if the author is unwilling or unable to reveal her or his secrets. An author who views herself as a magician who creates allusions of reality for the

audience to engage with might be reluctant to share how she or he does this with an editor. She might feel like these secrets are tricks of the trade that will lose their spectacle if she shares them. An author who, for example, feels that since she has the talent to write and knows best how to present that writing to the audience would not want to have someone intervene and purpose to tell them how they could best do that.

Although there are certainly authors who feel this way, it is more likely they are more like King, they don't completely know where their ideas come from or why they present them the way they do. The magician who simply performs the magic without understanding completely how they do it is an unlikely character, but the metaphor is still apt. In this case, it is more likely that they are equated with a magician with a communication problem: the magician would find it hard to communicate how the trick works because they do not have the adequate language or social skills to describe it in enough detail to another person. It might be difficult for the author to reveal their secrets because they do not know how best to explain where the "magic" or "inspiration" comes from. The editor in this situation would have a difficult time in assessing the author's style and improving upon it, but the editor is more likely to be embraced in this situation. The editor as assistant to the magician could be the one to help the author understand how best to perform their allusion for the audience; the editor could help the author analyze some of the more mechanical aspects of the writing process and help the author improve upon the believability of the text in the process. Style, as Burke states in *Permanence and Change*, is of great importance in this situation because "style is ingratiation" (50). The style the author uses (from word choice to tonality) ingratiate the audience to the story; the editor can play an important role in molding the stylistic choices for increased ingratiation. The author as "magician" and "teller of truths" metaphor complicates the editor's job as intermediary between the author and the audience because of its implication that the process that creates the story and the characters is not easily analyzed.

However, it brings rich knowledge of the ways in which an author can see herself as more than just a writer of words on a page, but a performer of allusions that engage the audience and bring them back to see more.

Food, Water, and Life

One of the more interesting metaphors Stephen King uses is that the process of writing can be like “creating a kind of hilarious stew” (142). When King was learning how to write, he describes how he used to mimic the styles of authors that he enjoyed reading. He recalls writing stories that combined many of those styles within the same text. Here, he is referring to the ingredients of the stew as the use of different styles within a piece of writing that are mimicking different writers. In this case, if the writing style is an ingredient in the stew it would probably be ingredients that don’t really go together, it being a “hilarious stew” and all. The usual advice for writers learning how to write is to start out mimicking the style of an author or genre that they enjoy reading, and, once again, style is very important in the process of engaging the audience with the story being unfolded. Kenneth Burke’s perspective by incongruity states that the bringing together of incongruous ideas can lead to a new understanding of an idea, thought, or situation (*PC* 90). This shows how the bringing together of different and often conflicting styles can lead an author to come up with a new style that is all her or his own. The development of those styles into their own style would be the creation of a more refined stew; the perspective by incongruity mixes in ingredients (bits and pieces of those styles and conventions with the author’s own originality) that complement the formerly incongruous ingredients to make the stew more delicious.

The author as “cook” metaphor is also used when King writes about why he decided to write a book about writing:

What made me think I had anything worth saying? The easy answer is that someone who has sold as many books of fiction as I have must have something worthwhile to say about writing, but the easy answer isn't always the truth. Colonel Sanders sold a hell of a lot of fried chicken, but I'm not sure anyone wants to know how he made it. (xv)

The author is placed in the position of a cook with a recipe for writing. In this case, King is questioning whether or not his audience cares or wants to know how he writes: do the patrons care how the food gets on their table? The truth is that some do and some don't. Some feel it would break the "magic" of the dining experience; or, they just might not want to think about the processes required to bring their hamburger to the table. In this same way, some of the audience just doesn't care to read about how a writer writes because they do not think it is interesting; or they feel it is simply too technical and are more interested in participating in the illusion of reality that the book presents. However, there is a large part of the audience that does want to know all the little details. Usually, and this is where King shows how well he knows his audience (and how to bring in new readers), the people who want to read a book about writing are writers or prospective writers who enjoy reading King's books and want to write things like he writes.

King demonstrates that he not only knows his own audience in this book (he brings in his fans by presenting the book as part memoir as well as bringing in those who have expressed interest in his process of writing), but he brings in an audience of people who may have never read his books before but are interested in writing and want to hear some advice from someone who has demonstrated great success in the process (I had never read anything by King before when I read this book, and I picked it up because I am interested in the process of writing). This is an example of the author seeing the very obvious relationship he has with his audience: his "food" will be readily eaten by the audience, and the whole purpose of cooking is for people to consume the product. An author as a "cook" knows very well that they have an audience and that that audience is important.

However, the author may not know exactly what is in her “recipe”; she may just be experimenting with different styles, characters, and genres to see what works. Either way, the editor can play a very vital role in this equation. The editor can help the author as cook refine her recipe and help her identify those who will consume her product.

When King discusses the issue of pace he refers to the belief that a book needs to be fast-paced in order to be successful: “the underlying thought is that people have so many things to do today, and are so easily distracted from the printed word, that you’ll have to become a short-order cook, serving up sizzling burgers, fries, and eggs over easy just as fast as you can” (222). In this instance, the author as short-order cook demonstrates the way a writer can be sloppy and care less about the product and the story than what they think the audience wants. Once again, King is aware of his own audience because he knows very well that most of his most popular novels are not very fast-paced (*The Stand* is over a thousand pages long and the first half is mainly concerned with character development). The audience is misrepresented in the metaphor as liking only the kind of books that they can read quickly and move on with their lives. Although many people’s day-to-day lives involve this way of eating, most people still enjoy a nice relaxing meal with a great deal of choice and complexity. King understands that the author needs to be more like a chef than a short-order cook. Readers may enjoy fast-paced books, but one of the main reasons most readers read is for pleasure and relaxation. In this metaphor the editor plays a vital role in the presentation of the text to the audience. Sometimes the editor as “manager” or “mâitre-de” critiques the ingredients that go into the text, and she will make sure that the dish not only tastes good but makes the reader want to consume the meal. In the metaphor of the author as short-order cook, the editor does not have much of a place because there is no time or need to care about the details: the audience is just going to shove it into their mouths because they need something to eat.

“Writing is magic, as much the water of life as any other creative art” (275). The use of the metaphor of writing being the “water of life” connect easily to the author as “cook” metaphor because water is a vital component of most meals and people need to eat to live. Water is a necessary component to life in the same way King feels like writing (the product and the process) is as necessary to life as other creative arts. The author is a cook that makes food that is vitally needed. The editor is necessary to this equation because they are needed in order to make the food good, interesting, and different enough in order to bring in the customers and serve the food to the audience (both a part of the editor’s job and the publisher’s). For whatever reason the audience needs to read the text, scholarly pursuits, pleasure and relaxation, quest for knowledge, the author as “cook” and the editor as “manager/mâitre-de” metaphor demonstrate the importance of the product on the audience’s life and happiness.

Arts, Crafts, and Tools

Returning to the ongoing quote, “[w]riting is magic, as much the water of life as any other creative art”, one of King’s most prevalent metaphors, and one that is often reiterated but rarely analyzed, is writing as a “creative art” (275). Writing as an art, the writer as an artist, and the textual product as a work of art may seem like a given. However, the question of what *is* art is just as prevalent in our society, if not more so, as what *is* truth. Literature is considered art; but what “literature” is being referred to? Is it limited to the Canon? Or does it include romance novels you can find in a grocery store? Describing all writing as an art can be a problematic metaphor if our society has deemed some writing art and other writing trash. Most would agree, however, that the process of good writing (whatever that is deemed to be) takes technique, careful attention, and a well-rounded knowledge of the language one is writing in, just like any other kind of artist. The process of writing is more often than not considered an, at least, artistic endeavor.

This *process of writing* is what King refers to as art and never directly refers to himself as an artist. Related to this metaphor, he refers to the “craft” of writing in the title of the book, “A Memoir of the Craft”, and often refers to the many methods he uses in his writing as tools of the craft: “The writer’s job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each [fossil] out of the ground intact as possible” (160). Uncovering a fossil becomes an analogy that King uses to detail the way he sees writing as the art of crafting a story. Here, King is using the craft of uncovering a fossil as a way of describing his process of writing. King sees the process of writing as the process of uncovering a story that already exists in his mind: “Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world” (160). This is a way to understand the writing process as a natural progression towards something that can be found through hard work rather than created out of thin air. This may seem like a conflict between the idea of invention being something all together new or coming from a multiple of sources. But when King refers to writing as uncovering as fossil, it is mostly meant to be a description of his process of finding that new within the knowledge he already has (the “truth” within the story).

He refers to this process as intuitive once the writer has done all of the work to develop their skills. He describes his process as beginning with “stark simplicity” (160) of placing a character or set of characters “in some sort of predicament and then watch them work themselves free . . .” (161). He describes his job as “to watch what happens and then write it down” (161). He explains that the process of creating the story is “arising naturally from the initial situation” (167). This style of writing is not one that can come to everyone in the same way, with the same quality and with the same technique. But, as with painting, composing, and every other art, every artist has his or her own way of creation. Some see every detail before they even start to use their tools, while others start with a small idea and let the idea build as they go. Of course, all with different results.

The tools that King refers to in order to create a compelling story are narration, description, and dialogue. He refers to the tool of plot as “a writer’s jackhammer” (160). He explains that “[y]ou can liberate a fossil from hard ground with a jackhammer . . . but you know as well as I do that the jackhammer is going to break almost as much stuff as it liberates” (160). King is not just describing the tools he uses to create his stories; he is saying that some tools are better than others. In the same way an artist may prefer pen and ink, oils, or a blow torch, the writer has his or her preference for certain tools. This metaphor also extends itself to the mastering of a different set of tools: “good writing consists of mastering the fundamentals (vocabulary, grammar, the elements of style) and then filling the third level of your toolbox with the right instruments” (136). He is placing importance on understanding fundamentals of writing; but he is again referring to the process of writing needing the “right instruments”. The use of these right instruments is how he begins the craft of writing.

With the use of this metaphor King sees himself as more like an archaeologist than a painter, sculptor, or music composer. But he uses the same terminology a painter, sculptor, or musical composer would use when he refers to the writing process; also, the skills and techniques an archaeologist uses to uncover fossils have an art and craft to them that allows both metaphors to coexist. A writer could see herself as any one of these kinds of artists and understand what she does in relation to the performance of one of these arts. But if an author, like King, refers to their process of writing as a process of finding something hidden, what role does the editor play in assisting in the uncovering? The editor can brush the sand from the cracks of the fossil and find the places where the fossil needs to be more cleanly seen and work with the author to clarify what he or she is trying to say. The editor has the role of polishing the fossil, which works with the way King continues his metaphor of the fossil into the editing process: “[e]ach of the novels . . . was smoothed out and detailed by the editorial process” (167). King explains the editor’s role further when he

continues, “most of the elements existed to begin with” (167). Although he points out that the author has most of the story figured out before the editorial process begins, the editor still has the important role of smoothing out, detailing, and adding to the elements of the text. The editor is important in the context of author as artist because the editor assists the author in crafting her story through her process and in her end product. The editor assists the artist in turning their art into something that engages the art appreciator to look into the work of art and see what was once only a relic in the back of the artist’s mind.

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