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Back to Isidora

Italo Calvino, in his short modern parable titled “Cities and Memories: Isidora”, excerpted from a collection of parables that he wrote that all ostensibly refer to fantasized cities, writes about a man arriving to Isidora, the utopian city of his dreams, after a long journey and realizing that this place contained himself as a young boy. The man’s travels and observations metaphorically show the effect of retrospect: that sometimes one does not understand the happiness and joy of their situation until after the fact; they realize that what they had is what they always wanted and now it is all memories to them. The structure of the parable follows suit. Calvino withholds the meaning until the end of the parable to emphasize the importance and effect of perspective not only through the extended metaphor for the journey of life to Isidora, but also by requiring the reader to engage with the text such that they experience retrospect.

The opening metaphor in “Cities and Memory: Isidora” is of a man, representing all people, whose eventual actions reveal the importance of perspective. By adopting a “special [and imaginative] attitude” needed to grasp the metaphors in place, one can find deeper meaning, as Brown and Herrick state, within Calvino’s tale (Brown 69). The man “rides a long time through wild regions” and “feels the desire for a city” like Isidora (Calvino 134). Later explained to be a “dreamed-of city”, the outset of the story can be interpreted, metaphorically that is, to be about the “long” and “wild” life journey one has, resulting in their desire for a utopian state of life full

of deep happiness and no struggles (Calvino 134). Technically speaking, the man, his journey, and Isidora are Calvino's vehicles that carry in the metaphor his tenors of people as a whole, one's life, and utopian dreams, respectively. By accepting this correspondence between tenor and vehicle, one can understand the rest of the story in appropriate metaphor as well. Isidora "contained him [the man] as a young man" and shows that people often live the good life, the life they desire, in their young years. People may take the utopia they are living in their moment of youth for granted because they cannot see the "ride...through [the] wild" that is coming in the future (Calvino 134). The phrase "old men sit and watch the young" certainly indicates that people, the man, can view their memories and retrospectively see with nostalgia the Isidorian lifestyle they lived in their young prime (Calvino 134). Watching the naïve young living the utopian lifestyle without knowing it, potentially including visions of his past self, the man seems to understand that it is difficult to know that you are in the good days before leaving them. The phrase "he [the man] arrives at Isidora in his old age" may indicate that one reaches Isidora again, in heaven possibly, where the ability to view memories like movies exists (Calvino 134). The extended metaphor of one's path in life and their desires shows the importance of perspective. The man understands that his everlasting "desires are already memories" from his past only from a retrospective point of view in his old age, while a young boy living in the present seems to understand no such concept (Calvino 134). The parable itself may act as a lesson, a warning perhaps, to today's youth to be grateful for the times they are living because soon they will become memories they long to live again.

Parables, by nature, tend to create a sense of ambiguity, search, and confusion within the reader as they try to decipher the superficial plot and understand the "depth meaning" (Brown 71) and Calvino's parable is no exception to this regularity. The particular structure of "Cities

and Memory: Isidora” keeps the reader in suspense and confusion until the very end of the tale. All seems to become clear in the last sentence, “desires are already memories”, as it is the first time in the text that a connection is drawn between the desired Isidora and the memories the old man ‘watches’ (Calvino 134). Prior to the dramatically brief concluding sentence, the arrival and existence within Isidora and the viewing of the young seem to be independent events. The finale ties the events together and reveals to the reader the message of the story: the importance of perspective, specifically a word of caution that in retrospect one may realize that all their wishes and wants have been lived in their past and an implicit word of advice to appreciate every moment before it becomes a distant memory to be only re-watched like a movie. Both the metaphorical play out of events and the structure in which meaning becomes evident only after the parable has been read through show that retrospect may be needed for understanding. The old man requires retrospect to understand that his desires were already met and issue advice to the young. The reader in hindsight understands Isidora.

A parable is a story that is easy to understand on the surface level but has complex meaning at its heart. The value of this persisting writing style is easily underestimated, yet it has great merit. In the particular case of “Cities and Memories: Isidora”, the usual parable ambiguity conceals the deep-seated message until the end about life and the human journey, retrospect and perspective, while still allowing the reader to follow a clear story line. Had this meaning been conveyed in a more direct manner as opposed to the multifaceted approach of the parable, the twofold view of retrospect would have been lost. The double (the superficial and the deeper) meaning, which is an essential quality in parables - in this case the storyline of the man arriving to a city and the metaphorical life journey to utopia - is thought provoking as one tries to decipher the text and ideally provides a strong sense of caution and advice from Calvino to the

reader. In the end, using the qualities of parables to his advantage, Calvino seems to successfully convey the relevance and effect of retrospect not only through the extended metaphor for the journey of life, but also through the structure of his writing which leads the reader to complete understanding only after the last sentence of the parable is read through.

Works Cited

Calvino, Italo. "Cities and Memory: Isidora." *Text Book: Writing Through Literature*, edited by Robert Scholes, Nancy Cornley, and Gregory Ulmer, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002, pp. 134

Brown, Roger. "What Words Are: Metaphor." *Text Book: Writing Through Literature*, edited by Robert Scholes, Nancy Cornley, and Gregory Ulmer, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002, pp. 68-