

Ella Minnow Pea Socratic Seminar Collective Notes

Prompt #1: Theme of Communication

- Use words wisely. There is a point to words. Not necessarily a point to just using words, but words can help make a point.
 - Without the ability to communicate, we struggle to be people. We can't get the points we want across.
 - Nations can crumble. We can find ways to communicate still. But we can find ways to still communicate even with banishment of letters.
- Blind idolatry starts to become an issue. The High Island Council shows signs of corruption, but to these people see that they are "obeying the word of their God" ...
 - We follow, blindly. The goal is to suggest that you can follow, but don't do so blindly. Follow because you believe, and because it is right. Not because it is merely a command.
- Communication is what ties the community together – we can only be unified because we cannot communicate.
 - Community breaks down. They start to turn on one another, they fail to aid others. What does this suggest?
 - Before the linguistic failures, people were already at each other's back. They turned each other in on the honor system.
- Words can be innovative and creative, but also limiting.
 - Communication within a community is so important, because without it – we're thrown into chaos. It allows expression, it helps to promote love and sharing and other ideal behaviors.
- The comparison is to Americans.... They are "vocabu-lazy" and they do not try to appreciate their linguistic abilities
 - We have freedom of speech, and we take it for granted. We abuse it, even.
 - These people abused language, but the idea is that we can't use and abuse language. We have to find a medium to where words can have gravity and meaning.
- Using the High Council to say Nevin Nollop: it's foolish, it's the heart of the satire.
 - Nollop: he was a con artist, a fraud. Why would he be a deity? There is a statement about the separation of church and state. Consider the Borgia family or the English monarchy. Things spiral out of control when the two are blended.
 - Interpretation is a dangerous thing. We cannot be 100% sure that it is accurate.
 - Ironically, they are unable to even communicate towards the end and they lose their power. It is a statement about the corruption of man. When given too much power, we always fail. It's a repeated cycle throughout history and literature (eg: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth).

Prompt #2: Whimsical Fable vs. Anti-Authoritarian Satire

According to Wikipedia: "**Fable** is a literary genre. A fable is a succinct fictional story, in prose or verse, that features animals, mythical creatures, plants, inanimate objects or forces of nature which are anthropomorphized (given human qualities such as verbal communication), and that illustrates or leads to an interpretation of a moral lesson (a "moral"), which may at the end be added explicitly in a pithy maxim."

What makes it a fable?

- The statue. It is the voice of their God.
- The lesson is only made possible by the statue.

Elements of Light-Heartedness:

- It's epistolary (the letters themselves set a tone of playfulness)
- Change of days: Sunshine, Monty, Toes, Wetty, Thurby, Fribs, Satto-Gatto
- The method of speech, the falling away of letters and how they change and welcome names
- Mitty's character is welcoming and fun to remember
- The duck masks and the jars of oatmeal, the oppression is lost because of the ridiculousness of the rebellion

- Council is hard to take seriously; it's when it is impossible to read
- One sentence that can alter and crumble an entire government
- The human abstract painting of Towgate: it's a "colorful ending"
- The bee's cannot buzz and people change their names – and the abuse of the z words in Ella's letter is just fun
- The irony of the musical notes (the letters are the notes themselves)
- Ella's father saves the island despite the fact that he is an underdog
- The inventive fabrication of letters

Elements of Pointed-ness:

- Banishment
- Exile
- Suicide
- Nate as the "outsider" targeting the island – revealing the truth of Nollop
- The betrayal of neighbor's
- Even a child was not safe in this island; they are innocent and do not mean to use a "banned letter"
- Using stereotypes to identify and debase a man capable of much more (Amos is a kind and compassionate father, but because he does drink a lot he becomes merely the "town drunk" and faces this stigma)

Prompt #3: Satirical Targets & How They Are Satirized

Religion:

- The alteration of the Ten Commandments to fit the "will of Nollop" is something of consideration – almost feels like bitter mockery.
- The novel really discusses how religion can be shifted and molded to fit the needs of man, not the right will of a single deity. In some ways, it also discusses the idea of how religion can "box" you in too specifically if you take it to an extreme.
- It is not a mockery of religion, it is an examination of human action *within* religion
- In this novel, it is a focus on the High Council and how they feel they were appointed by God himself. When a person believes that, it is a pointed comment on how that much power can affect and change you.
 - More pointedly, people might take a single sentence too far. When the punishment might be death or banishment of a child... at what point do we question if our actions are just within that religious framework?
 - There seems to be a unique blended balance of science and religion. Is it the will of Nollop, or does the scientific proof that the glue was failing (at the very end of the novel) make sense?
- The people are worshipping a deity that is a con artist, and are being punished for using specific letters. Wouldn't that be a bit extreme?
 - Predestination / eternal damnation – concepts that were used to scare people (Puritan era)

Idolization of Divine Beings:

- The pangram is not just any accomplishment of technology, it was an act of someone far superior (worthy of being a deity)
 - Nollop was just a regular man. But, the novel forces the question as to why we idolize, why we follow... it's all a statement to simply know why and to rationalize your actions with logic and want on yourself.
 - Amos becomes the next focus of a "supreme being" – it was done on accident and with fewer letters. To them, we need something to worship.
- Nollop = the imbecile. They idolize an open fool. By the end, they openly declare him as such and see the error of their ways.
- Due to the epistolary nature, you have direct insight to the characters. You get to see something deeper than you would through the "typical novel format."
 - As the language falls, you aren't receiving a "true perception" of the character. They're being watched and as such, the letters are heavily moderated.
- The people of the island are lost in the past, but fail to know a lot of the truth of Nollop. It's a shame that it keeps them in the dark.
 - The High Council refused to admit that they were wrong, because with the power of Nollop being misinterpreted, there are repercussions. There were no ways to justification; it was all about a veil of power. It was about keeping the lie alive.

Ignorance of Citizens:

- Towgate's (specifically Georgeanne)
 - She is lost and blind to the actions of the Council until it affects her
 - She believed, truly, that it was easier that Nollop was doing this than a corrupt government. She uses her son to report a teacher. She is blind to the fact that she is abuses her loss of rights.
 - Her ignorance lead to her death – the only solution is enlightenment (the freedom of speech). But if you choose ignorance, you are helping only yourself (selfishness).
- Nate
 - He revealed the truth and yet the social experiment did not end
 - He doesn't quite "stop" the experiment. He only offers a solution (find a new sentence to worship). Why didn't he bring something better for help?
- Island People
 - They blinding followed, they never questioned or rebelled despite the fact that they had the power and the ability (in numbers and in words)
 - Everyone is quick to conform. They don't try to think of a new solution. An outsider had to step in and provide the solution.
 - There is the repeated cycle of building a new statue.
 - They do not stop the actual punishments. There is a question when we examine the morality of some of the issues (flogging vs. stocks: they attempt to justify and rationalize one punishment for the next).
 - The selfish nature is also something of consideration: they had a home, land, property, etc. What they had wasn't worth rocking the boat.
- Ella
 - She does seem to believe in the beginning of the novel, and as the main voice of the novel she is a direct reflection of the ignorance of the town.
- There is an understanding of a repeated cycle. We're always going to blindly follow. At the same time, it can be part of the fable's moral: it can be a reminder that we can prove we are wrong, that we can learn a lesson, etc. It is a glaring scar that is on the face of the city that can only be forgotten generations down the line.

Language (chaos vs. restriction):

- The argument is that language should be chaotic and not restricted. The best parts of the English language are that we're ridiculous and amazing when we use our words.
- The freedom to express yourself can create a community, but when you restrict it – you create chaos. Ultimately, you destroy not only a language but also a family, a friend, an entire community.
- The extra words at the beginning showcase that language doesn't have to be overdone. As it is restored, we realize the value of "the economy of words."
- You can control quality; you cannot control the quantity of the words.
- To control language is to control the ability to think. Most totalitarian governments target thought processes (propaganda, Orwellian, etc.). The idea is to control the masses, you must control their ability to think. If you control the language, you force a methodology of how they will think (and without question, you already control the masses).

Greed/Corruption:

- High Council
 - Corruption/Greed
 - They gained the property when people left and did take homes for "their own wish"
 - They turned a home into a temple, it was "their wish" but not "Nollop's wish"
 - They banished letters as the "will of Nollop"
 - Not Corrupted/Not Greedy
 - They were given this power
 - They didn't really "gain" anything – except an island
 - There is no real proof to say that they were going to use the belief of Nollop to their advantage despite people not really worshipping Nollop in the beginning (they seemed to revere language more than Nollop itself)
- Corruption goes deeper than the Council. Nollop was greedy for power – the truth of Nollop revealed by Nate was that he wanted to be worshipped and revered.

- The townspeople did not fight the Council. They chose to blindly follow the Council's wishes. Those who revolted were punished swiftly.
- The school was unable to teach – so the corruption and the new rules actually affected the children and made it impossible to teach and make further brilliant linguists

Communications (reading, writing and speaking):

- The lose education: they cannot read, they cannot speak freely. They are limited to phonetics. Writing seemed to be easier, as it forced you to think and you had time to plan. When they speak, it's much harder to figure out how and what to do.
 - How do you teach? How do you learn?
- The irony of losing communication is that you also lose power. The Council doomed itself with its own ruling.
- Without communication, there can be no community. The tight knit community gets lost, despite its once strong foundations.
- Without communication, we also lose a sense of ourselves. Towgate went insane. Ella, in many ways, loses herself at the end with the final five letters. Interaction is a healthy part of human behavior, but as the language deteriorates they become paranoid and anxious and are forced to turn to isolation.