

3.d.

What Makes a Question Good?

To prepare any facet of the academic process, be it class discussion, leading class, or composing a paper, you need to be able to formulate for yourself some good critical questions. “Critical,” in this sense, of course, does not mean “mean-spirited” but “analytical.”

Since there are many types of questions which produce a variety of answers, it would be helpful to go over the difference between a “critical” question and a “simple” question:

1. A simple question...
 - can be answered with a “yes” or “no” (this is not helpful when trying to elicit further questions, discussion, or analysis).
 - contain the answers within themselves.
 - can only be answered by a fact, or a series of facts

2. There are also questions which are concerned with morals or values, in the nature of “how do you feel about this text?” While these types of questions often produce interesting discussion (and students therefore tend to like them very much) they have nothing to do with a critical analysis of the text itself, which very often was not written with students in mind as the ideal audience.

3. A critical question...
 - leads to more questions
 - provokes discussion.
 - concerns itself with **audience** and **authorial intent**
 - derives from a critical or careful reading of the text, using the hermeneutic of suspicion
 - addresses or ties in wider issues or hermeneutical strategies
 - moves you out of your own frame of reference (“what does this mean in our context?” to your author’s (“what was the author trying to convey when he/she wrote this? how would the audience have responded?”)

Here are some sample questions. What makes them useful or not so useful?

- Did the Republican Party use racist images of blacks as inferior and immoral to further its cause?
- How did plantation owners try to keep former slaves on the plantation? How did they use vagrancy laws and property rights to do that?

- In the Declaration of Independence the Founding Fathers declared that “all men are created equal.” Yet those like Thomas Jefferson actually held slaves at the time they wrote such statements. Jefferson even had a black mistress, with whom he fathered several children. How could he have been so inconsistent?
- Some of Lincoln’s statements seem contradictory. On the one hand, he says during the Lincoln-Douglas debates that he thinks that blacks are inferior and that they should remain so. On the other, he frequently expressed his disdain for slavery, and in fact sought to free the slaves by preparing the Emancipation Proclamation. How do these conflicting statements and actions influence our view of Lincoln?
- (In considering photographs of the Civil War, and illustrations from magazines like *Harper’s Weekly* and *Leslie’s Illustrated*.) Art is able to illustrate a story, but it is done so through the eyes of the cultural context and time period. Once again we are seeing a reinterpretation of a story, and not necessarily the reality. Do we pick and choose which version suits us? Can there be so many sides to the stories about the Civil War? Do you think some or all of these images have some truth to them. If we put them all together would we get the whole story?
- Smith says that “the sort of stories made up about a man are often better evidence, more penetrating characterizations, than are exact reports of his actions” (Smith 149). As this applies to Lincoln, what do you think? Does this allow us to understand him more or simply work to confuse and frustrate us?