

Divining the Literary Stylistics of the Ecclesiastical Imagination

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Jeanie C. Crain. *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. 213 pages. ISBN 9780745 635088.

Most literature departments require students to study a wide array of classical texts and one will find that the Bible is more often than not assigned as one of the readings. Apart from the sanctity of its ecclesiastical content, this ancient text intersperses multiple genres and styles of articulation that are immensely literary. The budding literary student might very well be overwhelmed by the density of the material at hand and this is where Jeanie C. Crain's text can play a significant role in the road towards *divining* the literary features of the Bible.

Crain offers an extremely well structured path towards acquiring critical awareness of the various literary devices and forms that abound in the Bible. Heralding each of the chapters (seven in total) is an outline of the content that awaits the reader, and this shows a systematic template that is followed through until the end, as it delineates a structure that is framed by a number of preliminary considerations that contextualise the focus of discussion; a list of key aspects that are central to the topic in question; a number of exercises that guide one towards applying the key principles introduced in the chapter through close readings of various extracts from the Bible; and concludes with a set of reflective questions that provide the reader a chance to independently engage with the text through critical considerations of the key terms presented through the course of discussion.

The discussion is presented in six main threads that primarily focus on the formal aspects of the literariness of the Bible. This is preceded by an introductory chapter that provides the context to this ancient ecclesiastical text, establishing the kinds of readership, accentuating key literary features such as genre, plot, allusions and meta-narratives, illustrating the pedagogical approaches to its instruction within the classroom context and the history and culture of the communities that are represented in the Bible.

The argument in the text takes the reader through a primarily formalist analytical investigation of the literary features of the Bible. We are first taken through an in-depth demonstration of tone, style and rhetorical strategy. This chapter is particularly useful as it provides a rather thorough explanation of key terms before proceeding with textual illustrations that are accompanied with explications that

reveal meticulous eye to detail. We are then introduced to the significance of the figurative language that abounds in the Bible through an exposition that ranges from the most basic of images to the more complex metaphors and archetypes that offer remarkable revelations of the creative ingenuity invested in the articulation of the chronicles of ecclesiastical events.

Attention is also given to the major genres as well as the sub-genres of the Bible. The reader is first tutored through key definitions and reviews of the topic to set the scene and thereafter presented with illustrations of key extracts that demonstrate the major genres of the dramatic, the poetic and the prosaic. The last is extended further through detailed explication of the correlations that intricately link the myriad plots that proliferate in the narrative space, urging us to adopt a more holistic view of the unity and coherence of the macro plot. The elucidation of genre is subsequently amplified with details of the sub-genres that exist within these major forms and Crain focuses on four significant categories, mainly song, allegory, parable and prayer. The last is an interesting inclusion as it accentuates the unique nature of this particular sub-genre which places it within the realm of the communicative poetics of conversational discourse and the ways in which it is distinguished from the sub-genre of song though the formal structure appears to be similar.

The last two chapters are devoted to characterisation and themes, propelling the reader into the finer tenets of developing a critical awareness of the details of characterisation, the complexities of human relationships and the salve of solutions that can be found at the heart of every situation. What is most promising about the chapter on characterisation is the emphasis on gender relations. While most scholarship on the literariness of the Bible focus on the main male figures, Crain demonstrates a resoluteness in emphasising the correlation between the male and female figures in the ancient text. In choosing to use as illustrations to her discussion the intricacies of the relationships between King Saul and the witch of Endor, King Solomon and the two prostitutes, King Josiah and the prophetess Huldah as well as Ezekiel's wife and Eunice, Crain successfully illuminates the heretofore equivocal Biblical gendered subaltern figures and through such revelations demonstrates the threads of female agency invested in these characters especially with regards to the development of the numerous plots. She ends with a discussion of the major themes and motifs in the Bible, again with an emphasis on relationships, except here the focus is on the aspect of the covenant, of promises kept and those broken and the motifs as well as leitmotifs related to power, obedience, mercy and faithfulness, through the central figures of Noah, Abraham, Moses and David.

The pedagogical usability of this book is enhanced through the added feature of an exhaustive glossary that includes both Biblical and literary terms. Crain's text thus reveals a holistic approach to the study of the literary features of the Bible. The extremely well structured discussion, the tone and method of delivery and the thought put into every explication of the numerous Biblical episodes reveal the

conscientiousness with which this book was threaded together. As such, this text is not only significant for the uninitiated student of literature but also for the academic who may wish to use it as resource book when teaching this classical text.