The Lady or the Tiger?
by Frank R. Stockton

Things To Know/ Things To Think About

Francis Richard Stockton, in his story *The Lady or the Tiger?* essentially presents the reader with a puzzle to solve, but—intentionally or not—leaves pieces of the puzzle curiously absent. In the story, a “partially barbaric” king believes that virtue should be rewarded, and vice punished, based on the dictates of incorruptible chance. Fortunate for some, the king puts his beliefs into practice by holding all his trials in an arena, where the accused are presented with two identical doors. Behind one door is a tiger, and behind the other door is a beautiful woman. If the accused open the door with the tiger, they are mauled to death. If they open the door with the woman, they are instantly married—regardless of their current marital status—and go on to live a happy life. Undaunted by this arbitrary system of justice, a young man of common stock dares to become the secret lover of the king’s daughter. When he is caught, he is brought to trial in the king’s infamous arena. However, instead of having his fate determined by chance, it is determined by the will of his lover. Using her wealth and influence, the princess discovers which doors contains the tiger, and which door contains the woman. The princess is embittered to realize that the potential bride-to-be is a rival of hers. Despite her ambivalent feelings—although we never get complete insight into her thoughts or emotions—the princess attends the arena and tacitly, albeit unhesitatingly, indicates to her lover which door to choose. Yet, the narrator does not reveal which door the man opens. Instead, the narrator closes with a question to the reader: “Which came out of the opened door - the lady, or the tiger?”

Although our initial reaction is to try and answer Stockton’s question, did he provide enough evidence to arrive at a definitive answer? And is this question meant to be answered at all? Though trying to answer his question is a wonderful exercise in gathering and making sense of textual evidence, answering it may blind us to an even deeper level of analysis. In most works of fiction, the universe is self-contained and the author is the omniscient master of this universe, intimate with its characters and their world. In *The Lady or the Tiger?* however, Stockton maintains an unconventional amount of emotional distance from his characters, and more significantly, their ultimate fates. To emphasize the vagueness of his fairytale world, Stockton
leaves characters unnamed and provides an opaque window into their thought processes. Because of this knowledge gap, when the reader is presented with Stockton’s question, they cannot answer the question from the perspective of the princess, they can only answer the question from their own perspective. By doing so, Stockton makes the story less plot-centric, and more theme-centric. From this vantage point, Stockton’s unanswerable question is a stylistic element that reflects his thematic concerns with the inexplicable “mysteries of the human heart.”

Standards Addressed:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3
Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.5
Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.8
Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; recognize when irrelevant evidence is introduced

Before Reading

Questions for Students:

1. In small groups, discuss the author’s choice of title. Based on the title, what kind of assumptions do you make about the story? More specifically, because the title is framed as a question, what additional expectations do you have for the story?

Note, it can be effective to ask this second portion of the question only after the students have been discussing the title for a few minutes.
Questions for Students:

2. Stockton describes the barbarian king as someone who “engrafted on every adopted form of human thought and action the rich growth of his barbaric idealism.” In your opinion, what is Stockton trying to convey through this imagery? More importantly, what do the ideas conveyed suggest about the nature of the king’s system of justice? 

(CCSELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4)

Note: This question can only be answered by students with the authentic text in front of them.

Possible Answer:

Through his word choice, Stockton conveys the image of a plant being grafted with part of another plant. In this case, the main plant is supposed to symbolize logical human thought. The added appendage, however, symbolizes the king’s “barbaric idealism.” Taken together, the image suggests that the king’s idea of justice, although seemingly logical, is perverted by animalistic and inhumane ways of thinking.

3. When rewarding the formerly accused for their virtues, the king selects a female subject of his choosing and marries her off as a gift. Interestingly, a bride is selected regardless of whether or not the man is currently married, or if his affections are already promised to another. Although there is concern for the man’s sense of volition, Stockton doesn’t even mention any concerns faced by the soon-to-be brides, who are also being forced into a marriage. What does Stockton’s lack of commentary about the king’s female subjects suggest about the role they play in the kingdom? Use evidence from the text to support your answer. (CCSELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3)
Possible Answer:

- The king’s failure to acknowledge the concerns of his female subjects suggests they have secondary status in the kingdom. Not only are the concerns of his female subjects of no interest to him, but they simply don’t register with him as legitimate concerns. Furthermore, Stockton refrains from using feminine pronouns. When referring to a generic person on trial, the accused is always referred to as a “he.” This may reflect the time period Stockton was writing during, but it also likely implies that women were relegated such secondary status that the law didn’t even apply to them.

After Reading

Questions for Students:

4. What happened to the man after he opened the door? Provide a logical argument with sound reasoning and evidence from the text to support your answer. Before writing your response, create a small evidence chart where you document supporting evidence for both possible outcomes. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.8)

Possible Answers:

- The answers will vary, but it is important that students clearly state their position: either he opened the door with the tiger and died, or he opened the door with the woman and got married.

5. Often, the structure and themes of a text are mutually exclusive, but there are exceptions. With this thought in mind, think about instances in The Lady or the Tiger? when theme and structure overlap. Look for examples in Stockton’s word choice, tone, or rhetorical devices. Write down a few of these examples in a short paragraph. Be creative! (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4)

Possible Answers:

- A theme is human nature. Stockton often uses descriptive language like “partially-barbaric,” that reveals considerable information about his conceptualization of human nature. In this case, that it is more animalistic than we would like to think.
● One of Stockton’s themes is the “mysteries of the human heart” or the inability to understand human motivation and behavior. This theme is reflected through Stockton’s use of unconventional narrative techniques. For example, Stockton directly engages with the reader to admit that he doesn’t know the way the story ends, and even asks the reader for their opinion. In this way, Stockton’s lack of omniscience about the plot’s outcome reflects his inability to understand the motives of his own characters.

Connections In Text

6. In *The Lady or the Tiger?* Stockton relies on some unconventional narrative techniques. For example, he directly engages with his reader, and poses them a question. In her famous work of short fiction, *The Mark on the Wall*, Virginia Woolf also uses some unconventional narrative techniques. In a short essay, note some of the narrative techniques adopted by Woolf, and compare their rhetorical effects to the effects achieved by Stockton. Do Stockton and Woolf use unconventional techniques to serve the same ends? Support your answer using details from the texts. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.8)

Further Readings

**For Students:**

This link provides students with a breakdown of the story’s literary elements. This includes a discussion of plot, setting, characterization, conflict and resolution.

**For Teachers:**
http://www.enotes.com/topics/lady-tiger/in-depth#in-depth-historical-context

This link provides teachers with a thoughtful analysis of the role the author, and narrator play in *The Lady and the Tiger*. This critical essay differentiates between the roles of author and narrator in the story, and the implications of this for making sense of the story’s famous conclusion.
G9 Challenging Vocabulary list:
amphitheater (9), impartial (9), doleful (9), fervid (9), aspiring (9), wholly (8), genial (7),
barbaric/barbarism (7), merited (7), admittance (7)

G7 Challenging Vocabulary list:
barbaric/barbarism (7), agent (7), admittance (7), arrested (7), domestic (7), reputation (7), pious (7),
genial (7), ascended (7), congested (7), authority (6), crush (6), witness (6), deed (6), transmitted (6),
anxious (6), firm (6), despair (6), covered (6), considered (6), extent (5), verdicts (5), method (5),
ceremony (5), administering (5), bloody/blood (5), affair (5), disposed (5), advanced (5), fixed (5),
character (5)

G5 Challenging Vocabulary list:
passage (5) method (5) affair (5) character (5) ceremony (5) dispose (5) blood (5) arena (4) agony (4)
absurd (4) bold (4) court (4) grind (4) passion (4) point (4) band (3) clue (3) interfere (3) groan (3)
power (3) reveal (3) satisfied (3) wonder (3)

G3 Challenging Vocabulary list:
interfere (3) groan (3) power (3) reveal (3) satisfied (3) wonder (3) clue (3) announce (2) audience (2)
admiration (2) chance (2) contain (2) discover (2) discuss (2) energy (2) expect (2) final (2) gloom (2)
groans (2) identical (2) improve (2) instant (2) influence (2) interested (2) involve (2) jealous (2) matter
(2) occasion (2) opposite (2) popular (2) posses (2) proceed (2) punish (2) purpose (2) respect (2)
slaughter (2) shriek (2) sign (2) soul (2) surprise (2) time (2) absent (1) beast (1) brave (1) breath (1)
bride (1) choose (1) command (1) cry (1) drown (1) enter (1) fair (1) follow (1) forward (1) glance (1)
gather (1) gold (1) hate (1) hope (1) land (1) lady (1) guide (1) ideas (1) moment (1) often (1) old (1)
order (1) open (1) people (1) person (1) quick (1) raise (1) reward (1) study (1) terrible (1) thought (1)
trial (1) triumph (1) time (1) wait (1)