Close Reading and Literary Devices

Language, Imagery, and Dramatic Meaning

In Prometheus Bound, dramatic tension develops through speeches, confrontations, and revelations rather than changes of setting. Prometheus remains physically confined, but his language challenges the authority of Zeus and reveals the importance of knowledge, suffering, and resistance. Close reading helps students understand how the playwright transforms a familiar myth into a sustained dramatic conflict.

Imagery: Chains, Fire, and the Natural World

The chains fastening Prometheus to the rock make divine punishment visible. They symbolize the attempt to control a rebellious figure through physical force. Fire, by contrast, represents the knowledge and practical abilities Prometheus has given humanity. The exposed landscape emphasizes isolation, while references to natural forces suggest the vast scale of the conflict.
Close-reading task: Identify a description of Prometheus' confinement and explain how its imagery contributes to the drama.

Characterization Through Contrasting Speech

Hephaestus expresses reluctance as he carries out Zeus' command. Power speaks with severity and certainty. Oceanus recommends caution, while Hermes demands submission. Prometheus' speeches combine indignation, pride, suffering, and confidence in his knowledge of the future.
Close-reading task: Compare the language of Hephaestus and Power in the opening scene.

Dramatic Irony and the Limits of Authority

Zeus possesses overwhelming physical power, yet Prometheus knows something important about the ruler's future that Zeus cannot compel him to disclose. The audience recognizes that imprisonment does not eliminate Prometheus' influence. This tension contrasts what Zeus can enforce with what he cannot know.

Prophecy and Foreshadowing

Prometheus' predictions concerning Io and her descendants connect present suffering with future events. His knowledge of a possible threat to Zeus points beyond the surviving play. These prophecies enlarge the timescale and sustain suspense.
Close-reading task: Examine a prophetic passage: what is revealed, and what remains withheld?

The Chorus as Witness and Moral Voice

The Oceanids respond with sympathy, fear, and concern. Their questions encourage Prometheus to explain his actions; their warnings emphasize the dangers of defying Zeus. Their decision to remain with him at the end gives dramatic expression to loyalty and solidarity.

Movement and Stillness

Prometheus cannot move, while others arrive, depart, or describe journeys. Io's restless wandering offers the clearest contrast with his fixed position. Both suffer under divine authority, but their circumstances are dramatically opposite.

The Unresolved Ending

The final confrontation with Hermes intensifies the conflict without resolving it. Prometheus refuses to reveal his secret, and the threatened catastrophe follows. The ending offers neither reconciliation nor release.

Questions for Literary Analysis

1. How does the imagery of chains contribute to the treatment of authority?
2. Why is fire an important symbol?
3. How does the contrast between Hephaestus and Power establish moral conflict?
4. What is the dramatic significance of prophetic knowledge?
5. How does Io's movement contrast with Prometheus' confinement?
6. How does the Chorus influence the audience's response?
7. Why might the playwright choose an unresolved ending?

Note to the Educator

Encourage students to connect literary techniques with dramatic meaning rather than identifying devices in isolation. Compare the opening exchange, Prometheus' gifts to humanity, Io's encounter, and the final confrontation with Hermes. Because wording varies among translations, students should use passages from their classroom edition. The play is traditionally attributed to Aeschylus, although its authorship remains disputed.

This guide accompanies the Richer Resources Publications edition translated by Ian Johnston.

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