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### Mikaelsen's Cole Proves Foster's Theories

Literature is one of, if not the greatest gift we the people have received. No two people will have the same takeaways from the same piece of literature, and that is what makes it so beautiful. Literature, to the average thinker, is just a hard/soft cover book consisting of thousands of words strategically placed to form a story, or maybe, some sort of lesson in and of itself. But, above average thinkers know that the gift of literature is so much more than strategically placed words on some paper; they know that within literature are so many lessons, theories rather, that can help us become much deeper thinkers throughout everyday life. Throughout his book--*How to Read Literature Like a Professor*--Thomas C. Foster shares a plethora of his theories when it comes his literary knowledge, "teaching" readers per say, how to become better critiques of what they are reading. Many of Foster's theories can be applied, and proven throughout Ben Mikaelsen's novel *Touching Spirit Bear*, a real-world masterpiece depicting the life of a high school bully; Mikaelsen shows the reader how a loss of temper taken too far, sends a boy on a journey that changes the course of his life forever.

Mikaelsen's main character--high school bully, Clay Matthews--is on a journey, or as Thomas C. Foster puts it, a *quest* to acquire "self knowledge" (Foster, 3). The troubled teen has

been fighting, stealing, and raising hell for years; but one day, he takes his antics too far when he beats a classmate senseless--resulting in permanent brain damage--after the classmate turns him in for "breaking into a hardware store" (Mikaelsen, 7). Rather than jail, Cole agrees to a punishment given to him by a group within his town called Circle Justice (a group of Native Americans who have the power to decide punishment for troubled teens who are struggling to find their way); Cole is sentenced to "a whole year of isolation, alone on a Southeast Alaskan island" (Mikaelsen, 3) to avoid spending serious time in a jail cell. Foster argues that each trip taken by a fictional character can easily be classified into a five criteria quest: "(a) a quester, (b) a place to go, (c) a stated reason to go there, (d) challenges and trials en route, and (e) a real reason to go there" (Foster, 3). Cole fits the five criteria perfectly. Cole himself is the *quester*, the isolated Alaskan island is *his place to go*, Cole's *stated reason* to go to the island is to serve his punishment, Cole has plenty of *trials and challenges en route*, and while Cole may think he is just serving a punishment, the *real reason* Cole is going to this island is to discover things about himself he never thought he'd find. Foster goes on to say that "questers are so often young, inexperienced, immature, sheltered" (Foster, 3) as they are too young to have acquired much self-knowledge already. Foster also goes on to argue that every quester endures a hardship along their journey, and Cole definitely fits this requirement. Within his first days on the island, Cole is mauled by a mysterious, white "spirit bear" (Mikaelsen, 84) and is almost killed. Cole must show great resilience, as there is no one left to save Cole, but Cole himself. Cole's quest (punishment) lands him on a path of self discovery and hardship he didn't anticipate on enduring; this *forced* quest transformed Cole from a naive bully into a respectable young man as he becomes more mature and understanding of the people and world around him. This journey

proves Foster's theory of self discovery within a quest, a self discovery that is everlastingly life-changing.

In chapter 18 of his book, Foster argues his theory of *baptism*, elaborating that in all/most fictional & non-fictional stories, there is a point when the main character comes into contact with water, and this water represents a form of *baptism*; his theory is proven in Mikaelson's novel *Touching Spirit Bear*, when troubled teenage bully Cole Matthews experiences his own form of *baptism*. In Cole's first days of serving his punishment on the island, he believes that he is "above" his punishment in a way: he has burned all the supplies given to him, as well as his shelter the Circle Justice provided for him, and as these "gifts" are being engulfed by the flames Cole's "wild laughter mocked the world and everyone he had ever known. It mocked the loneliness, and every bully that had ever picked on him" (Mikaelson, 34). This part of the novel really shows how much Cole is hurting on the inside, showing the reader that he is more sensitive than he seems, using all of that anger and hurt inside of him to fuel his out of control actions. In the middle of a cold, fall day, Cole believes that he will be able to escape his *metaphorical prison of isolation* by swimming off of the island towards freedom, believing he has outsmarted the circle justice in a way because "No one in the circle knew how strongly he could swim. Not even Garvey" (Mikaelson, 35). This is Cole's form of baptism within the story. Foster argues that "death and rebirth" are produced "through the medium of water" (Foster, 155). At this point within Cole's *quest*, he has begun to realize that something within himself needs to change, and all it took was this bout of baptism to bring along the beginning of this change. The

arrogant, egotistical, “above the world” Cole Matthews died, and the new Cole Matthews was born, thanks to this metaphorical baptism.

When writing a fictional story, weather is one of, if not the main tool used by authors when foreshadowing. Foster argues that “weather creates atmosphere and mood” (Foster, 75) within a story, and often times, the reader can predict what will happen to the character in the story based on the weather. This theory is, again, proven within Mikaelson’s novel *Touching Spirit Bear*. Foster argues that “fog is a symbol for misery” (Foster, 76) and in this particular scene in *Touching Spirit Bear*, Foster is spot on. It is a very foggy, and rainy day on the island in which Cole is serving his punishment, when he comes across the enormous “spirit bear” he has heard so much about. Cole decides to pick a fight with this bear; the end result is what anyone would expect after a teenage boy takes on a fully grown bear--Cole is mauled, nearly to death, as “the bear sank its teeth into his thigh, lifting him like a rag doll...each time he stabbed the bear, he felt its jaw clamp harder. Cole felt his pelvis crack,” (Mikaelson, 78) and must show extreme resilience to live through this, despite suffering countless injuries. Throughout this entire scene, which lasted a full chapter of Mikaelson’s book, all weather that represents misery was at play. Weather not only has an impact on the story, and foreshadowing within; weather has a HUGE impact on how the reader reads the story! Weather builds mystery, and makes the reader tense when reading, keeping them on their toes all throughout the novel; this proves Foster’s theory that weather has an immense impact on a story.

Mikaelsen's novel *Touching Spirit Bear* proves Foster's theory of communion as well. One of Foster's strongest arguments within his novel is his argument regarding communion, elaborating that sharing a meal can strengthen a relationship emotionally, and helps to bring characters closer together. Foster states that "in the real world, breaking bread together is an act of sharing and peace, since if you're breaking bread, you're not breaking heads" (Foster, 8). This Theory is 100% proven in Mikaelsen's *Touching Spirit Bear*; Cole, at the end of his one year punishment on the isolated island, "breaks bread" with the boy he beat senseless at the beginning of the novel. The boy is seriously damaged, he has attempted to kill himself twice, and barely speaks to anyone, spending time with Cole on the island, mending a relationship that was broken physically, and emotionally is the only option for Peter. The boys share "Cole's favorite meal, and a snickers bar for dessert" (Mikaelsen, 258). The boys continue to share meals, and with each meal their relationship continues to grow. It takes all of his courage for Peter to forgive Cole, and even more courage to create a relationship with him; for all we know, this may never have been possible without this scene(s) of communion.

Embedded in the depths of Ben Mikaelsen's novel *Touching Spirit Bear*, many of Foster's literary theories appear, giving different elements of Mikaelsen's novel deeper meaning, making *Touching Spirit Bear* that much more captivating. Four of Foster's theories can *easily* be applied to Ben Mikaelsen's thrilling novel *Touching Spirit Bear*; with more digging, and more careful evaluation I'm sure countless others could be proven as well. The novel does so well in getting its most important lesson across: People can change. Mikaelsen takes us on a journey with a troubled young boy who has only been able to cause trouble his whole life; the reader

wants nothing more than for young Cole Matthews to have a change in heart, especially after a scuffle leads to permanently damaging another young boy for life. By looking at more than just the story Mikaelson is telling, you are able to uncover so much more within his heart-wrenching thriller depicting heartbreak, hurt, and most importantly, change.