

Mary Hall Surface: Sample Activity Understanding Multilayered Stories in Writing and Art



Jan Steen, *The Dancing Couple*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

If great stories ask a **central question** [Remember: Will Dorothy get home from Oz?] what for you is the central question of Steen's story?

Take a moment to think about that and then write down what that question is for you right now. You might change your mind or shift or shape it as your relationship to the story deepens today. Keep it tight – include a character (or characters) and an action. If you have more than one idea, write them both down.

Let's collect a few central questions

Collect responses.

Save your central question because you'll be using it in our first full writing exercise.

For this exercise, you will be telling the story of this couple **in this moment**, but from whose **point of view? From whose perspective?** Most stories are told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator who is outside of the story but sees and knows all. But what if we were to tell the story from the point of view of someone **inside** the painting. Like in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we experience the story from the point of view of Scout, a child. What are some possible points of view for the telling of this story?

Collect responses.

The way that X (*based on one collected*) would see and experience the characters and what is happening in the story would be very different from the lens that X (*based on another collected*) would offer. The story of the three little pigs is a very different story if you tell it from the perspective of the wolf. Imagine if the famous first line of *Moby Dick* was, rather than, "Call me Ishmael" was "His name was Ishmael." *Moby Dick* would be a very different book if it was told from Ahab's point of view – or the whales!

Exercise One:

Capture the Story of the Couple from the Point of View of a Character in the painting.

- Chose a character in the painting from whose point of view you will tell the story of the **central couple in this moment**.
 - *While we could all chose any of these characters and imagine a story for them separate from this moment, this exercise is about telling the story of this moment.*
 - Include what happens leading up to this moment but **not** afterwards.
 - Let your **central question** shape of your story.
 - Name your characters.
 - Write in third person "close."
 - Story is told within that person's scope of thought and senses.
 - The medium + tight shots.
- Examples:
- "Hans touched only the girl's finger tips as he drew her toward the music."
 - "Hannah looked away from the city girl, summoning her courage to speak."
- Root your story in **specifics** (evidence) of the painting.