

Wise Men vs. Blind Mice It's No Contest

Have you ever set in a classroom and carefully listened to the teacher's lesson, but you just don't get it when the lesson is finished? Then you go to lunch and tell your best friend about it, and they say, "Oh! That's easy," and they explain it to you in a way that was different from the way you heard it in class, and now everything the teacher was saying suddenly makes sense. It may make you wonder, "Who is the better teacher?" Sometimes the way a story is told or the way a lesson is taught just makes more sense than the way someone else tells it, and that is exactly what happens when you compare the fable, "The Wise Men and the Elephant" to Ed Young's version of the story, "Seven Blind Mice." Both of these versions tell the same story and teach the same lesson, and some will argue that the original is definitely the best, but Ed Young's version delivers where the original fable falls flat. "Seven Blind Mice" is a much better version of the fable because of the author's clever use of image and color, and because he adds an extra level of meaning that goes beyond the original.

Young's use of the images of the blind mice as they try to solve the mystery in their garden is just one of the reasons why his telling of the story is far superior to the original fable. As the reader turns each page, a different mouse is headed off to "see" the "something." Whenever a mouse leaves the group, the rest sit atop each other focused on the mission in progress because they all want to know what it is. However, when the reporting mouse returns to tell their tale, the others increasingly show less interest. The ones who have already been to the pond pay no attention to the reporting member of the group once they hear that his story is different from what they experienced themselves. The reader knows exactly why the stories are different because the reader can see the images that the mice cannot. The reader can see that each mouse experiences a different part of the "something." This is a perspective that the mice fail to see because they are blind. They all have a very specific, but limited view of the mystery, and since they all "see" the "something" differently, they all assume that the others must be mistaken. Since the reader can see what is causing the confusion, the reader can see exactly what they should be doing to solve the problem even if it takes the mice a bit longer to solve the mystery. These images take the story to a level completely beyond the original fable.

Young's use of color is brilliant, and it adds another level to the story that the original fable just can't touch. Each mouse is represented in one of the primary colors of the rainbow. The colors mean nothing to the mice as they are blind and can't see them. However, the colors make the mice easily identifiable to the reader and symbolize something important to the moral of the fable. When each mouse goes to experience the "something," they see it in their own color, and when they return to report what they have experienced, their tale is told in their color. This level of symbolism is completely missing in the original fable. But in Young's version, the reader can see that color cleverly symbolizes each individual's point-of-view. Since each mouse is blind, it is impossible for them to realize this, but the reader gets the message. Everything each individual mouse experiences and reports is stained in his own point of view and because of that, none of the mice can see beyond their own. The reader on

the other hand gets an image that contributes greatly to an increased understanding of the story. On the other hand, the original fable lacks this element along with the insightful contribution it makes to the understanding of the reader.

Finally, Young's addition of the white mouse helps the mice accomplish what the men in the fable cannot and adds an additional level of meaning to the story. White mouse is the last to go "see" the "something" in the pond. Because she goes last, she is the only one who listened to all of the reports that came in from the other mice. The other mice, just like the wise men, hearing stories different from their own, get caught up in arguments over who must be right. The problem with the wise men is that they never get past those arguments. The mice might have experienced the same fate had it not been for the one who listened while the others argued. She puts the pieces together and uses her time with the something to see how all of the pieces connected. She not only figures it out, but helps the others see how each one of their individual contributions were valuable and related. When she is able to do this, she has everyone's attention and can help them all see the elephant that is in their pond. The genius of white mouse goes beyond the fact that she is able to listen to all of the other mice. The actual scientific combination of all of the colors represented by the mice is actually white light. Her actions and her being take the reader far beyond the arguments that end the original fable.

One might argue that the original fable is a better teacher simply because of its simplicity, avoiding the extras included in Ed Young's version of the story. It requires the reader to think more for themselves. It is often said that the lessons we figure out for ourselves are the most powerful that we will ever experience. However, that argument assumes that the reader will in fact figure it out. Unfortunately, many readers of the original fable fail to understand the complete meaning. They may see what the blind men missed; they may understand why it is important to listen to others; but they may not fully understand what trapped the blind men in their argument. If that lesson isn't learned, then the complete meaning of the fable is lost and the reader is likely to one day suffer the same fate as the men in the fable. Like any great teacher, Ed Young helps the student get past some of the difficulty in the lesson. He gives the reader just enough to see the complete meaning of the fable and gives them a little extra helping the reader go even further than the original.

Ed Young is a master teacher, and his version of the fable reflects that. He understood the challenge represented by the original and not only improved it, but made the message more accessible to children. His use of imagery, color, and symbolism make his version a richer and more meaningful learning experience. Additionally, his version adds meaning that the original just can't deliver, overall, making it a much more effective teacher. On top of that, Young's addition of White Mouse is genius. The fact that white mouse is a "she" adds a level of meaning that the boys in the audience may struggle to see, but need to see. While they are fighting to prove who is right, someone is listening and seeing the bigger picture. The earlier the boys learn the value that the girls bring to their world, the more successful they will likely to be because of that value. The wise men can't take any of us *that* far.