

How to Read Literature Like a Professor

By Thomas C. Foster



Every Trip is a Quest

5 elements of a quest tale

- A Quester
- A place to go
- A stated reason to go there
- Challenges and trials
- The real reason to go—always self-knowledge



Nice to Eat With You: Acts of Communion

- Whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion
- Not usually religious
- An act of sharing and peace
- A failed meal carries negative connotations



If It's Square, It's a Sonnet

- Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Now, Where Have I Seen That Before?

- There is no such thing as a wholly original work of literature—stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems.
- There is only one story—of humanity and human nature, endlessly repeated
- “Intertextuality”—recognizing the connections between one story and another deepens our appreciation and experience, it brings multiple layers of meaning to the text.

When in Doubt, It's From Shakespeare

- Writers use what is common in a culture as a kind of shorthand. Shakespeare is pervasive, so he is frequently echoed.



. . . Or the Bible

- Writers can count on people being familiar with Biblical stories.
- A common touchstone a writer can tap.



Common Biblical Stories with Symbolic Implications

- Garden of Eden--women tempting men and causing their downfall, the apple as an object of temptation, a serpent who tempts men to do evil, and a fall from innocence.
- David and Goliath—overcoming overwhelming odds.
- Jonah and the Whale—refusing to face a task and being “eaten” or overwhelmed by it anyway.
- Job—facing disasters not of the character’s making or fault, suffers as a result, but remains steadfast.
- The Flood—rain as a form of destruction; rainbow as a promise of restoration.
- Christ figures—(a later slide) in 20th century, often used ironically.
- The Apocalypse—Four Horsemen usher in the end of the world.
- Biblical names often draw a connection between literary character and Biblical character.

Using Fairy Tales and Kiddie Literature



- Hansel and Gretel—lost children trying to find their way home.
- Peter Pan—refusing to grow up.
- Little Red Riding Hood—see vampirism
- Alice in Wonderland, The Wizard of Oz—entering a world that doesn't work rationally or operates under different rules.
- Cinderella—orphaned girl abused by adopted family saved through supernatural intervention and marrying a prince.
- Snow White—evil woman who brings death to an innocent, saved by heroic character.
- Sleeping Beauty—a girl becoming woman, the long sleep an avoidance of growing up.
- Prince Charming heroes who rescue women (20th c. frequently switched—the women save the men—or used highly ironically)

It's Greek to Me

- Myth is a body of story that matters—the patterns present in mythology run deeply in the human psyche.
- Why writers echo myth—because there's only one story (see # 5).
- Odyssey and Iliad: Men in epics struggle over a woman. Achilles—a small weakness in a strong man; the need to maintain one's dignity. Penelope—the determination to remain faithful and to have hope. Hector—the need to protect one's family.
- The Underworld: An ultimate challenge, facing the darkest parts of human nature or dealing with death.
- Metamorphoses by Ovid—transformation (Kafka)
- Oedipus: family triangles, being blinded, dysfunctional family
- Cassandra: refusing to hear the truth
- A wronged woman gone violent in her grief and madness—Aeneas and Dido or Jason and Medea
- Mother love: Demeter and Persephone

It's More than Just Rain or Snow

Rain

- Fertility and life
- Noah and the flood
- Drowning—one of our deepest fears
- Why?
- Plot device
- Atmospheric
- Misery factor—challenge characters
- Democratic element—the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike
- Symbolically
- Rain is clean—a form of purification, baptism, removing sin or stain. Rain is restorative—can bring a dying earth back to life. Destructive—causes pneumonia, colds, etc.; hurricanes, etc. Rainbows—Promise, hope. Fog—almost always signals some sort of confusion; mental, ethical, etc.



Snow

- Negatively—cold, stark, inhospitable, inhuman, nothingness, death.
- Positively—clean, pure, playful.



... More Than It's Going to Hurt You: Concerning Violence

- Violence can be symbolic, thematic, biblical, Shakespearean, allegorical, etc.
- Violence is a symbolic action, but hard to generalize meaning



Questions to ask:

- What does this type of misfortune represent thematically?
- What famous or mythic death does this one resemble?
- Why this sort of violence and not some other?

It That a Symbol?

- Yes. But figuring out what it is might be tricky.
- There is no one definite meaning unless it's an allegory, where events or characters have a one on one correspondence symbolically to other things.
- Actions, as well as objects and images, can be symbolic.
- How to figure it out?
- Symbols are built on associations readers have, but also on emotional reactions. Pay attention to how you feel about a text.

It's All Political



- Literature tends to be written by people interested in the problems of the world, so most works have a political element in them.

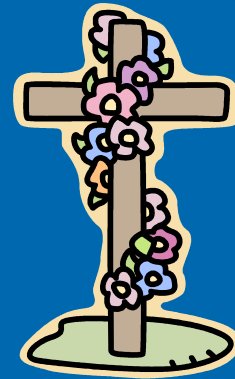
Issues:

- Individualism and self-determination against the needs of society for conformity and stability.
- Power structures
- Relations among classes
- Issues of justice and rights
- Interactions between sexes and among various racial and ethnic constituencies.

Yes, She's a Christ Figure, Too

Characteristics of a Christ Figure:

- Crucified, wounds in hands, feet, side, and head, often portrayed with arms outstretched.
- In agony
- Self-sacrificing, very forgiving
- Good with children
- Known to have humble modes of transportation
- Known to have spent time alone in the wilderness
- Believed to have had a confrontation with the devil, possibly tempted
- Creator of many aphorisms and parables
- Came to redeem an unworthy world
- Why use Christ figures? Deepens our sense of a character's sacrifice, thematically has to do with redemption, hope, or miracles.
- If used ironically, makes the character look smaller rather than greater.



Flights of Fancy



Daedalus and Icarus

- Symbolically: freedom, escape, the flight of the imagination, spirituality, return home, largeness of spirit, love.
- Interrupted flight is generally negative.
- Usually not literal flying, but might use images of flying, birds, etc.

If She Comes Up, It's Baptism

- Baptism is symbolic death, and rebirth as a new individual.
- Drowning is symbolic baptism, IF the character comes back up, symbolically reborn. But drowning on purpose can also represent a form of rebirth, a choosing to enter a new, different life, leaving an old one behind.
- Traveling on water—river, oceans—can symbolically represent baptism Rivers can also represent the River Styx, the mythological river separating the world from the Underworld, another form of transformation, passing from life to death.
- Rain can be symbolic baptism as well—cleanses, washes
- There's also rebirth/baptism implied when a character is renamed.





Geography Matters

- What represents home, family, love, security?
- What represents wilderness, danger, confusion?
i.e. tunnels, labyrinths, jungles
- Geography can represent the human psyche
- Going south=running amok, and running amok means having a direct, raw, encounter with the subconscious.
- Low places: swamps, crowds, fog, darkness, fields, heat, unpleasantness, people, life, death.
- High places: snow, ice, purity, thin air, clear views, isolation, life, death.



.. So Does Season

- Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter=youth, adulthood, middle age, old age/death.
- Spring=fertility, life happiness, growth, resurrection (Easter)
- Fall=harvest, reaping what we sow, both rewards and punishments.
- Winter=hibernation, lack of growth, death, punishment.
- Christmas=childhood, birth, hope, family.



Marked for Greatness

- Physical marks or imperfections symbolically mirror moral, emotional, or psychological scars or imperfections.
- Landscapes can be marked as well.
- Physical imperfection when caused by social imperfection, often reflects not only the damage inside the individual, but what is wrong with the culture that causes such damage.

Monsters

- Frankenstein—monsters created through no fault of their own; the real monster is the maker.
- Faust—bargains with the devil in exchange for one's soul.
- Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—the dual nature of humanity, that in each of us, no matter how well-made or socially groomed, a monstrous Other exists.
- Quasimodo, Beauty and the Beast—ugly on the outside, beautiful on the inside. The physical deformity reflects the opposite of the truth.

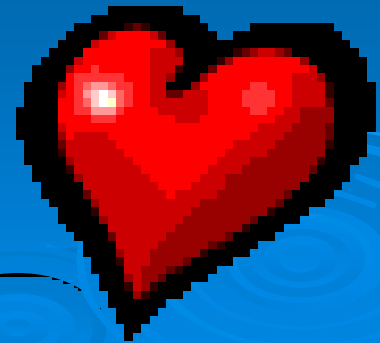
He's Blind for a Reason, You Know

- Physical blindness mirrors psychological, moral, intellectual blindness.
- Sometimes ironic; the blind see and sighted are blind.
- Many times blindness is metaphorical, a failure to see—reality, love, truth
- Darkness=blindness; Light=sight



It's Never Just Heart Disease

- Heart disease=bad love, loneliness, cruelty, disloyalty, cowardice, lack of determination.
- Socially, something on a larger scale or something seriously amiss at the heart of things.



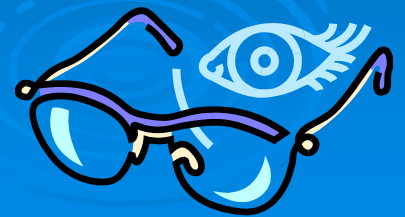
. . . And Rarely Just Illness

- Not all illnesses are created equal.
- It should have a strong symbolic or metaphorical possibilities.
- Tuberculosis—a wasting disease.
- Physical paralysis can mirror moral, social, spiritual, intellectual, political paralysis.
- Plague—divine wrath, the communal aspect and philosophical possibilities of suffering on a large scale; the isolation and despair created; the puniness of humanity in the face of an indifferent natural world.
- Malaria—means literally “bad air” with the attendant metaphorical possibilities.
- Venereal disease: reflects immorality OR innocence, when the innocent suffer because of another’s immorality, men’s exploitation of women.



Don't Read With YOUR Eyes

You must enter the reality of the book; don't read from your own fixed position in 2010. Find a reading perspective that allows for sympathy with the historical movement of the story, that understands the text as having been written against its own social historical, cultural, and personal background. We don't have to accept the values of another culture to sympathetically step into a story and recognize the universal qualities present there.



Is He Serious? And Other Ironies

- □ Irony trumps everything. Look for it.



Works Cited

Foster, Thomas. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher Inc., 2003.

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