



Dr. Thomas Foster

# *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*

# “Every Trip Is a Quest”

- a. A quester
- b. A place to go
- c. A stated reason to go there
- d. Challenges and trials
- e. The real reason to go is never for the stated reason; the quester usually fails at the stated task; The real reason is educational --  
always self-knowledge

# “Nice to Eat With You: Acts of Communion”

- a. Whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion
- b. It need not be religious
- c. Pay attention to the relationships during the meal.
- d. A failed meal carries negative connotations (a bad sign!)

# “Nice to Eat You: Acts of Vampires”

- Vampiric characters are those who “suck the energy from others.
- Can take away their innocence.

# “Now, Where Have I Seen Her Before?”

- **“Intertextuality”**: The connections between one story and another deepen our appreciation and experience, brings multiple layers of meaning to the text. The more consciously aware we are, the more alive the text becomes to us.

# “Now, Where Have I Seen Her Before?”

- a. There is no such thing as a wholly original work of literature—stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems.
- b. There is only one story—of humanity and human nature, endlessly repeated.

# Biblical Connections

- a. Before the mid 20th century, writers could count on people being very familiar with Biblical stories. Therefore, it is often used in allusions.
- b. Biblical names often draw a connection between a literary character and Biblical character.

# “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 used as an allusion.

# “It’s Greek to Me”

Myth is a body of story that matters because the patterns present in mythology run deeply in the human psyche. Many myths reveal psychological patterns that cross cultures.

Many stories and characters use allusions to myths, or may be nods to the Greek heros.

# Examples

The Percy Jackson series. Connects greek mythology to deeper meanings. There are symbols prevalent throughout the books.

The Odyssey

The pegasus is huge in many books and movies in modern times.

Harry potter- the three headed dog.

The Italian poet Dante Alighieri used characters from the legend of Troy in his Divine Comedy, placing the Greek heroes in hell to show his contempt for their actions.

Superheros

# “It’s More Than Just Rain or Snow”

- a. Rain can symbolize:
  - i. fertility and life
  - ii. drowning -- one of our deepest fears
- b. Why?
  - i. plot device
  - ii. Atmospheric
  - iii. misery factor -- challenge characters
  - iv. democratic element -- The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.

# “It’s More Than Just Rain or Snow”

- c. Symbolically
  - i. rain is clean -- a form of purification, baptism, removing sin or a stain
  - ii. rain is restorative -- can bring a dying earth back to life
  - iii. destructive as well -- causes pneumonia, colds, etc.; hurricanes, etc.

# “It’s More Than Just Rain or Snow”

- iv. Ironic use -- April is the cruelest month (T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*)
- v. Rainbow—God’s promise never to destroy the world again; hope; a promise of peace between heaven and earth
- vi. fog—almost always signals some sort of confusion; mental, ethical, physical “fog”; people can’t see clearly

# “It’s More Than Just Rain or Snow”

## ■ d. Snow

- i. negatively -- cold, stark, inhospitable, inhuman, nothingness, death
- ii. Positively -- clean, pure, playful
- iii great unifier = snow falls on all-living and dead.

# “More Than It’s Gonna Hurt You: Concerning Violence”

- a. Violence can be symbolic, thematic, biblical, Shakespearean, romantic, allegorical, transcendent.
- b. Two categories of violence in literature:
  - i. Character caused -- shootings, stabbings, drownings, poisonings, bombings, hit and run, etc.
  - ii. Death and suffering for which the characters are not responsible.

# “More Than It’s Gonna Hurt You: Concerning Violence”

- c. Violence is **symbolic action**, but hard to generalize meaning
- d. Questions to ask:
  - i. What does this type of misfortune represent thematically?
  - ii. What famous or mythic death does this one resemble?
  - iii. Why this sort of violence and not some other?

# “Is That a Symbol?”

- Actions, as well as objects and images, can be symbolic. i.e. “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost
- 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:**
  - i. Individualism and self-determination against the needs of society for conformity and stability.
  - ii. Power structures
  - iii. Relations among classes
  - iv. issues of justice and rights
  - v. interactions between the sexes and among various racial and ethnic constituencies.

# “Yes, She’s a Christ Figure, Too”

- a. **Characteristics of a Christ Figure:**
  - i. crucified, wounds in hands, feet, side, and head, often portrayed with arms outstretched
  - ii. in agony
  - iii. self-sacrificing
  - iv. good with children

# “Yes, She’s a Christ Figure, Too”

- v. good with loaves, fishes, water, wine
- vi. thirty-three years of age when last seen
- vii. employed as a carpenter
- viii. known to use humble modes of transportation, feet or donkeys preferred
- ix. believed to have walked on water

## “Yes, She’s a Christ Figure, Too”

- x. known to have spent time alone in the wilderness
- xi. believed to have had a confrontation with the devil, possibly tempted
- xii. last seen in the company of thieves
- xiii. creator of many aphorisms and parables

# “Yes, She’s a Christ Figure, Too”

- xiv. buried, but arose on the third day
- xv. had disciples, twelve at first, although not all equally devoted
- xvi. very forgiving
- xvii. came to redeem an unworthy world

# “Yes, She’s a Christ Figure, Too”

- b. As a reader, put aside belief system.
- c. Why use Christ figures? Deepens our sense of a character’s sacrifice, thematically has to do with redemption, hope, or miracles.
- d. If used ironically, makes the character look smaller rather than greater

# “Flights of Fancy”

- a. Daedulus and Icarus
- b. Flying was one of the temptations of Christ
- c. Symbolically: freedom, escape, the flight of the imagination, spirituality, return home, largeness of spirit, love
- d. Interrupted flight generally a bad thing
- e. Usually not literal flying, but might use images of flying, birds, etc.
- f. Irony trumps everything

# “It’s All About Sex...”

- a. **Female symbols:** chalice, Holy Grail, bowls, rolling landscape, empty vessels waiting to be filled, tunnels, images of fertility
- b. **Male symbols:** blade, tall buildings
- c. Why?
  - i. Before mid 20th century, coded sex avoided censorship
  - ii. Can function on multiple levels
  - iii. Can be more intense than literal descriptions

# “...Except Sex”

- When authors write directly about sex, they're writing about something else, such as sacrifice, submission, rebellion, supplication, domination, enlightenment, etc.

# “If She Comes Up, It’s Baptism”

- a. Baptism is symbolic death and rebirth as a new individual
- b. 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.

# “If She Comes Up, It’s Baptism”

- c. Traveling on water—rivers, oceans—can symbolically represent baptism. i.e. young man sails away from a known world, dies out of one existence, and comes back a new person, hence reborn. Rivers can also represent the River Styx, the mythological river separating the world from the Underworld, another form of transformation, passing from life into death

# “If She Comes Up, It’s Baptism”

- d. Rain can be symbolic baptism as well -- cleanses, washed
- e. Sometimes the water is symbolic too -- the prairie has been compared to an ocean, walking in a blizzard across snow like walking on water, crossing a river from one existence to another
- f. There’s also rebirth/baptism implied when a character is renamed.

# “Geography Matters...”

- a. What represents home, family, love, security?
- b. What represents wilderness, danger, confusion? i.e. tunnels, labyrinths, jungles
- c. Geography can represent the human psyche (*Heart of Darkness*)
- d. Going south = running amok and running amok means having a direct, raw encounter with the subconscious.

# “Geography Matters...”

- e. Low places: swamps, crowds, fog, darkness, fields, heat, unpleasantness, people, life, death
- f. High places: snow, ice, purity, thin air, clear views, isolation, life, death

# “...So Does Season”

- a. Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter = youth, adulthood, middle age, old age/death.
- b. Spring = fertility, life, happiness, growth, resurrection (Easter)
- c. Fall = harvest, reaping what we sow, both rewards and punishments
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# “...So Does Season”

- d. Winter = hibernation, lack of growth, death, punishment
- e. Christmas = childhood, birth, hope, family
- f. Irony trumps all “April is the cruelest month” from *The Wasteland*

# “Marked for Greatness”

- a. Physical marks or imperfections symbolically mirror moral, emotional, or psychological scars or imperfections.
- b. Landscapes can be marked as well -- *The Wasteland* by T.S. Eliot
- c. 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

# He's Blind for a Reason, You Know

- a. Physical blindness mirrors psychological, moral, intellectual (etc.) blindness
- b. Sometimes ironic; the blind see and sighted are blind
- c. Many times blindness is metaphorical, a failure to see -- reality, love, truth, etc.
- d. darkness=blindness; light=sight

# “It’s Never Just Heart Disease...”

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

# “...And Rarely Just Illness”

- a. Not all illnesses are created equal. Tuberculosis occurs frequently; cholera
- does not because of the reasons below
- b. It should be picturesque
- c. It should be mysterious in origin
- d. It should have strong symbolic or metaphorical possibilities

# “...And Rarely Just Illness”

- i. Tuberculosis—a wasting disease
- ii. Physical paralysis can mirror moral, social, spiritual, intellectual, political paralysis
- iii. Plague: divine wrath; the communal aspect and philosophical possibilities of suffering on a large scale; the isolation and despair created by wholesale destruction; the puniness of humanity in the face of an indifferent natural world
- iv. Malaria: means literally “bad air” with the attendant metaphorical possibilities.

# ...And Rarely Just Illness

- v. Venereal disease: reflects immorality OR innocence, when the innocent suffer because of another's immorality; passed on to a spouse or baby, men's exploitation of women
- vi. AIDS: the modern plague. Tendency to lie dormant for years, victims unknowing carriers of death, disproportionately hits young people, poor, etc. An opportunity to show courage and resilience and compassion (or lack of); political and religious angles
- vii. The generic fever that carries off a child

# “Don’t Read with Your Eyes”

- a. You must enter the reality of the book; don’t read from your own fixed position in 2008. 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.
- b. 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”

- a. Irony trumps everything. Look for it.
- b. Example: *Waiting for Godot*—journeys, quests, self-knowledge turned on its head. Two men by the side of a road they never take and which never brings anything interesting their way.
- c. Irony doesn't work for everyone. Difficult to warm to, hard for some to recognize which causes all sorts of problems. *Satanic Verses*