

## *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) by Thomas C. Foster

### **Chapter 1 -- Every Trip Is a Quest (Except When It's Not) p. 1**

- A quest consists of 5 things:
  1. a quester (hero)
  2. a place to go
  3. the stated reason to go there
  4. challenges and trials along the way
  5. the real reason to go
- The real reason for the quest is always self-knowledge.

### **Chapter 2 -- Nice to Eat with You: Acts of Communion p. 7**

- Whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion
- "Communion" is not necessarily religious or holy
- Communion also needn't be decent. Food = sex
- A failed or canceled meal serves (get it, serves?) as a bad omen

### **Chapter 3 --Nice to Eat You: Acts of Vampires p. 15**

- Actual vampires are only the beginning
- Figurative vampirism: selfishness, exploitation, a refusal to respect others' autonomy
- Vampirism almost always has to do with sex.
  - Literal Vampirism: Nasty old man, attractive but evil, violates a young woman, leaves his mark, takes her innocence
  - Sexual implications—a trait of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature to address sex indirectly
- Scary things (vampires, ghosts, etc.) are about something else, something beyond themselves; "ghosts and vampires are never only about ghosts and vampires."
- "Writers ... use ghosts, vampires, werewolves and all manner of scary things to symbolize various aspects of our more common reality."
- What "vampires" do: place their desires, especially the uglier ones, above the needs of others

### **Chapter 4 --Now, Where Have I Seen Her Before? p. 23**

- "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**" is recognizing the connections between stories. It deepens our appreciation and experience, brings multiple layers of meaning to the text.

### **Chapter 5 -- When in Doubt, It's from Shakespeare... p. 32**

- Writers use what is common in a culture as shorthand. Shakespeare is pervasive, so he is frequently echoed.
- See plays as a pattern, either in plot or theme or both. Examples:
  - *Hamlet*—heroic character, revenge, indecision, melancholy nature
  - *Henry IV*—a young man who must grow up to become king, take on his responsibilities
  - *Othello*—jealousy
  - *Merchant of Venice*—justice vs. mercy
  - *King Lear*—aging parent, greedy children, a wise fool
- "There is a ubiquity to Shakespeare's work that makes it rather like a sacred text....There is a kind of authority lent by something being almost universally known."

### **Chapter 6 -- ...Or the Bible p. 42**

- Before the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, writers could count on people being very familiar with Biblical stories, a common touchstone a writer can tap

- Biblical allusions: garden, serpent, milk and honey, fatted calves, loaves, fishes, 40 days, 7 days, plagues, flood, parting of waters, betrayal, denial, slavery and escape
- Common Biblical stories with symbolic implications include:
  - Garden of Eden—women tempting men and causing their fall, the apple as symbolic of 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 and not the character’s 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 chapter)—in 20<sup>th</sup> century, often used ironically
  - The Apocalypse—Four Horseman of the Apocalypse usher in the end of the world.
  - Biblical names often draw a connection between literary character and Biblical character.
- Modern and postmodern texts sometimes use the bible ironically in order to illustrate disparities or disruptions

### **Chapter 7 -- Hansel and Gretel (fairy tales and kiddie lit) p. 52**

- What can writers use that most readers will understand? Fairy tales. Some major ones:
  - Hansel and Gretel: lost children trying to find their way home
  - Peter Pan: refusing to grow up, lost boys, a girl-nurturer
  - Little Red Riding Hood: See Vampires
  - Alice in Wonderland, The Wizard of Oz: entering a world that doesn’t work rationally or operates under different rules, the Red Queen, the White Rabbit, the Cheshire Cat, the Wicked Witch of the West, the Wizard, who is a fraud
  - Cinderella: orphaned girl abused by adopted family saved through supernatural intervention and by marrying a prince
  - Snow White: Evil woman who brings death to an innocent—again, saved by heroic/princely character
  - Sleeping Beauty: a girl becoming a woman, symbolically, the needle, blood=womanhood, the long sleep an avoidance of growing up and becoming a married woman, saved by, guess who, a prince who fights evil on her behalf.
  - Evil Stepmothers, Queens, Rumpelstiltskin
  - Prince Charming heroes who rescue women. (20<sup>th</sup> c. frequently switched—the women save the men—used highly ironically)
- Not necessary to use the whole story: pieces of it will suffice; details, patterns

### **Chapter 8 -- It’s Greek to Me p. 59**

- 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; Greek/Roman mythology is ingrained in our subconscious (instant intertextuality)
- Odyssey and Iliad
  - Men in an epic struggle over a woman
  - Achilles—a small weakness in a strong man; the need to maintain one’s dignity
  - Penelope (Odysseus’s wife)—the determination to remain faithful and to have faith
  - 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; Jason and Medea
- Mother love—Demeter and Persephone

### Chapter 9 -- It's More Than Just Rain or Snow p. 69

- Rain: fertility and life, Noah and the flood, Drowning—one of our deepest fears
  - plot device
  - atmospheric
  - misery factor—challenge characters
  - democratic element—the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike
- Symbolism of rain:
  - rain is clean—a form of purification, baptism, removing sin or a stain
  - rain is restorative—can bring a dying earth back to life
  - destructive as well—causes pneumonia, colds, etc.; hurricanes, etc.
  - Ironic use—April is the cruelest month (T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*)
  - Rainbow—God's promise never to destroy the world again; hope; a promise of peace between heaven and earth
  - fog—signals confusion; mental, ethical, physical “fog”; people can't see clearly
- Snow:
  - negative—cold, stark, inhospitable, inhuman, nothingness, death
  - positive—clean, pure, playful

### Chapter 10 -- Never Stand Next to the Hero p. 76

- The most “important thing that characters can do is change—grow, develop, learn, mature”
- The protagonist needs to grow and the plot needs to move along—how best to do that? Off the sidekick/bestie. Plot exigency.

### Chapter 11 --...More Than It's Gonna Hurt You: Concerning Violence p. 94

- Violence can be symbolic, thematic, biblical, Shakespearean, Romantic, allegorical, transcendent.
- Two categories of violence in literature:
  - Character caused—shootings, stabbings, drownings, poisonings, bombings, hit and run
  - Death and suffering for which the characters are not responsible. Accidents are not really accidents.
- Violence is 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?

### Chapter 12 -- Is That a Symbol? p. 104

- Some symbols are straightforward: waving the white flag for surrender. Others are more ambiguous.
- Some symbols only stand for one idea, making them allegories, not symbols.
- We each bring an individual, personal experience and understanding to each work of literature, which will influence what and how we understand
- Symbols can be objects and images, but they can also be events or actions (ex: take a knee)
- How to figure it all out? Pay attention to your instincts.

### Chapter 13 – It's All Political p. 115

- 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 vs the needs of society for conformity and stability power structures
  - relations among classes
  - issues of justice and rights
  - interactions between the sexes and among various racial and ethnic constituencies.
- Nearly all literature is political, on some level.
- Knowing something about the author's social and political world helps us understand the work

#### Chapter 14 -- Yes, She's a Christ Figure, Too p. 124

- Characteristics of a Christ Figure:
  - crucified, wounds in hands, feet, side, and head, often with arms outstretched in agony
  - self-sacrificing
  - good with children
  - good with loaves, fishes, water, wine
  - thirty-three years of age when last seen
  - employed as a carpenter
  - known to use humble modes of transportation, feet or donkeys preferred
  - believed to have walked on water
  - known to have spent time alone in the wilderness
  - believed to have had a confrontation with the devil, possibly tempted
  - last seen in the company of thieves
  - creator of many aphorisms and parables
  - buried, but arose on the third day
  - had disciples, twelve at first, although not all equally devoted
  - very forgiving
  - came to redeem an unworthy world
- As a reader, put aside belief system. (Understanding does not mean believing)
- 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
- A Christ figure does not have to hit all the marks (listed above). We're interested in the symbolic level, not the literal one.

#### Chapter 15 -- Flights of Fancy p. 133

- Culturally and literarily, cultures have played with the idea of flight since the beginning of time
- Christian beliefs about angels and witches, the soul "taking wing"
- Flying represents freedom, escape, the return home, the largeness of spirit, love
- We are thrilled by the idea of flying and frightened by the idea of falling
- Interrupted flight generally a bad thing
- Usually not literal flying, but might use images of flying, birds, etc.

#### Chapter 16 -- It's All About Sex... p. 143

- Female symbols: chalice, Holy Grail, bowls, rolling landscape, empty vessels waiting to be filled, tunnels, images of fertility
- Male symbols: blade, tall buildings, lances, swords, guns, keys
- Why?
  - Before mid 20<sup>th</sup> c., coded sex avoided censorship
  - Can function on multiple levels (think of all the jokes in Disney movies that are there for parents but go right over little kids' heads)
  - Can be more intense than literal descriptions

#### Chapter 17 -- ...Except the Sex p. 151

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

#### Chapter 18 -- If She Comes Up, It's Baptism p. 160

- 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—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.
- Rain can be symbolic baptism as well—cleanses, washes
- 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 (*Beloved*)
- There's also rebirth/baptism implied when a character is renamed.

### Chapter 19 -- Geography Matters... p. 171

- What represents home, family, love, security?
- What represents wilderness, danger, confusion? i.e. tunnels, labyrinths, jungles
- Geography can represent the human psyche (*Heart of Darkness*)
- Going south means 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
- Remember, the author is a product of his environment

### Chapter 20 -- ...So Does Season p. 183

- 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
- Irony trumps all: "April is the cruelest month" from *The Wasteland*

### Interlude -- One Story p. 193

- There is only one story. What's it about? Anything. Everything. Nothing.
- Pure originality is impossible (intertextuality). Literature acquires "depth and resonance from the echoes and chimes it sets up with prior texts"
- Writers and readers have a "gigantic subconscious database"
- Archetypes are patterns; they take on power with repetition

### Chapter 21 -- Marked for Greatness p. 201

- Physical marks or imperfections symbolically mirror moral, emotional, or psychological scars or imperfections.
- Landscapes can be marked as well—*The Wasteland* by T.S. Eliot
- 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—the real monster is the maker (Dr. Victor Frankenstein) not the monster—written when the industrial revolution was getting started; science threatened religion
  - 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.

### Chapter 22 -- He's Blind for a Reason, You Know p. 209

- Physical blindness mirrors psychological, moral, intellectual (etc.) blindness
- Sometimes ironic; the blind see and sighted are blind

- Many times, blindness is metaphorical, a failure to see—reality, love, truth, etc.
- darkness=blindness; light=sight
  - Ex: Oedipus Rex and Tiresias the seer (prophet)
  - Once we, as readers, become aware of references to blindness and sight, we notice more and more related images and phrases in the literature
- If authors want us to notice something, they'd better introduce it before we need to know. For example, the "Indiana Jones principle." We find out Indy is scared of snakes long before he is confronted with snakes, so that when he is confronted with snakes, we already know he'll freak out

### Chapter 23 -- It's Never Just Heart Disease...And Rarely Just Illness p. 215

- The heart is the symbolic repository of all emotion
- 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 (*Heart of Darkness*) aka a social metaphor
- Not all illnesses are created equal. Tuberculosis occurs frequently; cholera does not because:
  - It should be picturesque ("beautiful" suffering)
  - It should be mysterious in origin (until the 20<sup>th</sup> c., diseases were all mysterious)
  - It should have 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 by wholesale destruction; 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; passed on to a spouse or baby, men's exploitation of women
- 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
- The generic fever that carries off a child
- Sometimes the writer just makes an illness up

### Chapter 24 -- Don't Read with *Your Eyes* p. 232

- You must enter the reality of the book; don't read from your own fixed position today. 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.
- **Once again, for the folks in the back: *We don't have to accept the values of another culture to sympathetically step into a story and recognize the universal qualities present there.***