

Notes from Thomas Foster's *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*

1. **Every Trip Is a Quest (except when it's not):**
 - 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—always self-knowledge
2. **Nice to Eat with You: Acts of Communion**
 - a. Whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion
 - b. Not usually religious
 - c. An act of sharing and peace
 - d. A failed meal carries negative connotations
3. **Nice to Eat You: Acts of Vampires**
 - a. Literal Vampirism: Nasty old man, attractive but evil, violates a young woman, leaves his mark, takes her innocence
 - b. Sexual implications—a trait of 19th century literature to address sex indirectly
 - c. Symbolic Vampirism: selfishness, exploitation, refusal to respect the autonomy of other people, using people to get what we want – placing our desires, particularly ugly ones, above the needs of another.
4. **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
 - c. “Intertextuality”—recognizing the connections between one story and another deepens our appreciation and experience, brings multiple layers of meaning to the text, which we may not be conscious of. The more consciously aware we are, the more alive the text becomes to us.
 - d. If you don't recognize the correspondences, it's okay. If a story is no good, being based on *Hamlet* won't save it.
5. **When in Doubt, It's from Shakespeare...**
 - a. Writers use what is common in a culture as a kind of shorthand. Shakespeare is pervasive, so he is frequently echoed.
 - b. See plays as a pattern, either in plot or theme or both. Examples:
 - i. *Hamlet*—heroic character, revenge, indecision, melancholy nature
 - ii. *Henry IV*—a young man who must grow up to become king, take on his responsibilities
 - iii. *Othello*—jealousy
 - iv. *Merchant of Venice*—justice vs. mercy
 - v. *King Lear*—aging parent, greedy children, a wise fool
6. **...Or the Bible**
 - a. Before the mid 20th century, writers could count on people being very familiar with Biblical stories
 - b. Common Biblical stories with symbolic implications
 - i. 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
 - ii. David and Goliath—overcoming overwhelming odds
 - iii. Jonah and the Whale—refusing to face a task and being “eaten” or overwhelmed by it anyway.
 - iv. Job: facing disasters not of the character's making and not the character's fault, suffers as a result, but remains steadfast
 - v. The Flood: rain as a form of destruction; rainbow as a promise of restoration
 - vi. Christ figures (a later chapter): in 20th century, often used ironically
 - vii. The Apocalypse—Four Horseman of the Apocalypse usher in the end of the world.
 - viii. Biblical names often draw a connection between literary character and Biblical character
7. **Hansel and Gretel--Using Fairy Tales and Kid Lit**
 - a. Hansel and Gretel: lost children trying to find their way home
 - b. Peter Pan: refusing to grow up, lost boys, a girl-nurturer
 - c. Little Red Riding Hood: See Vampires
 - d. 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
 - e. Cinderella: orphaned girl abused by adopted family saved through supernatural intervention and by marrying a prince
 - f. Snow White: Evil woman who brings death to an innocent—again, saved by heroic/princely character
 - g. 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.
 - h. Evil Stepmothers, Queens, Rumpelstiltskin
 - i. Prince Charming heroes who rescue women. (20th c. frequently switched—the women save the men—or ironically)

8. It's Greek to Me

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

9. It's more than just rain or snow

- a. Rain
 - i. fertility and life
 - ii. Noah and the flood
 - iii. 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
- 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.
 - 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
- d. Snow
 - i. negatively—cold, stark, inhospitable, inhuman, nothingness, death
 - ii. positively—clean, pure, playful

10. ...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. Accidents are not really accidents.
- c. Violence is symbolic action, but hard to generalize meaning

11. Is That a Symbol?

- a. Yes. But figuring out what is tricky. Can only discuss possible meanings and interpretations
- b. There is no one definite meaning unless it's an allegory, where characters, events, places have a one-on-one correspondence symbolically to other things. (*Animal Farm*)
- c. Actions, as well as objects and images, can be symbolic
- d. 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.

12. It's All Political

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

13. 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
 - 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
 - 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
 - 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
- b. As a reader, put aside belief system.
- c. Why Christ figures? Deepens our sense of a character's sacrifice, thematically: redemption, hope, or miracles.
- d. If used ironically, makes the character look smaller rather than greater

14. Flights of Fancy

- a. Daedalus 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

15. It's All About Sex...

- a. Female symbols: chalice, Holy Grail, bowls, rolling landscape, empty vessels, tunnels, images of fertility
- b. Male symbols: blade, tall building

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

17. 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.
- 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.
- d. Rain can be symbolic baptism as well—cleanses, washes
- 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.

18. 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
- d. Going south=running amok and running amok means having a direct, raw encounter with the subconscious.
- 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

19. ...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
- 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*

20. Marked for Greatness

- a. Physical marks or imperfections symbolically mirror moral, emotional, or psychological scars or imperfections.
- b. Landscapes can be marked as well
- 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
- d. Monsters
 - i. *Frankenstein*—monsters created through no fault of their own; the real monster is the maker
 - ii. *Faust*—bargains with the devil in exchange for one’s soul
 - iii. *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.
 - iv. Quasimodo, Beauty and the Beast—ugly on the outside, beautiful on the inside. The physical deformity reflects the opposite of the truth.

21. 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

22. 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

23. ...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
 - 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.
 - 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

24. Don’t Read with Your Eyes

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

25. 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.