**From** ***How to Read Literature Like a Professor***

**Thomas C. Foster**

Notes by Marti Nelson

1. **Every Trip is a Quest (except when it’s not):**
	1. A quester
	2. A place to go
	3. A stated reason to go there
	4. Challenges and trials
	5. The real reason to go—always self-knowledge
2. **Nice to Eat With You: Acts of Communion**
	1. Whenever people eat or drink together, it’s communion
	2. Not usually religious
	3. An act of sharing and peace
	4. A failed meal carries negative connotations
3. **Nice to Eat You: Acts of Vampires**
	1. Literal Vampirism: Nasty old man, attractive but evil, violates a young woman, leaves his mark, takes her innocence
	2. Sexual implications—a trait of 19th century literature to address sex indirectly
	3. 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. **If It’s Square, It’s a Sonnet**
5. **Now, Where Have I Seen Her Before?**
	1. There is no such thing as a wholly original work of literature—stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems.
	2. There is only one story—of humanity and human nature, endlessly repeated
	3. “Intertexuality”—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.
	4. If you don’t recognize the correspondences, it’s ok. If a story is no good, being based on Hamlet won’t save it.
6. **When in Doubt, It’s from Shakespeare…**
	1. Writers use what is common in a culture as a kind of shorthand. Shakespeare is pervasive, so he is frequently echoed.
	2. See plays as a pattern, either in plot or theme or both. Examples:
		1. Hamlet: heroic character, revenge, indecision, melancholy nature
		2. Henry IV—a young man who must grow up to become king, take on his responsibilities
		3. Othello—jealousy
		4. Merchant of Venice—justice vs. mercy
		5. King Lear—aging parent, greedy children, a wise fool
7. **…Or the Bible**
	1. Before the mid 20th century, writers could count on people being very familiar with Biblical stories, a common touchstone a writer can tap
	2. Common Biblical stories with symbolic implications
		1. 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
		2. David and Goliath—overcoming overwhelming odds
		3. Jonah and the Whale—refusing to face a task and being “eaten” or overwhelmed by it anyway.
		4. Job: facing disasters not of the character’s making and not the character’s fault, suffers as a result, but remains steadfast
		5. The Flood: rain as a form of destruction; rainbow as a promise of restoration
		6. Christ figures (a later chapter): in 20th century, often used ironically
		7. The Apocalypse—Four Horseman of the Apocalypse usher in the end of the world.
		8. Biblical names often draw a connection between literary character and Biblical charcter.
8. **Hanseldee and Greteldum--using fairy tales and kid lit**
	1. Hansel and Gretel: lost children trying to find their way home
	2. Peter Pan: refusing to grow up, lost boys, a girl-nurturer/
	3. Little Red Riding Hood: See Vampires
	4. 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
	5. Cinderella: orphaned girl abused by adopted family saved through supernatural intervention and by marrying a prince
	6. Snow White: Evil woman who brings death to an innocent—again, saved by heroic/princely character
	7. 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.
	8. Evil Stepmothers, Queens, Rumpelstilskin
	9. Prince Charming heroes who rescue women. (20th c. frequently switched—the women save the men—or used highly ironically
9. **It’s Greek to Me**
	1. Myth is a body of story that matters—the patterns present in mythology run deeply in the human psyche
	2. Why writers echo myth—because there’s only one story (see #4)
	3. Odyssey and Iliad
		1. Men in an epic struggle over a woman
		2. Achilles—a small weakness in a strong man; the need to maintain one’s dignity
		3. Penelope (Odysseus’s wife)—the determination to remain faithful and to have faith
		4. Hector: The need to protect one’s family
	4. The Underworld—an ultimate challenge, facing the darkest parts of human nature or dealing with death
	5. Metamorphoses by Ovid—transformation (Kafka)
	6. Oedipus: family triangles, being blinded, dysfunctional family
	7. Cassandra: refusing to hear the truth
	8. A wronged woman gone violent in her grief and madness—Aeneas and Dido or Jason and Medea
	9. Mother love—Demeter and Persephone
10. **It’s more than just rain or snow**
	1. Rain
		1. fertility and life
		2. Noah and the flood
		3. Drowning—one of our deepest fears
	2. Why?
		1. plot device
		2. atmospherics
		3. misery factor—challenge characters
		4. democratic element—the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike
	3. Symbolically
		1. rain is clean—a form of purification, baptism, removing sin or a stain
		2. rain is restorative—can bring a dying earth back to life
		3. destructive as well—causes pneumonia, colds, etc.; hurricanes, etc.
		4. Ironic use—April is the cruelest month (T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*)
		5. Rainbow—God’s promise never to destroy the world again; hope; a promise of peace between heaven and earth
		6. fog—almost always signals some sort of confusion; mental, ethical, physical “fog”; people can’t see clearly
	4. Snow
		1. negatively—cold, stark, inhospitable, inhuman, nothingness, death
		2. positively—clean, pure, playful
11. **…More Than It’s Gonna Hurt You: Concerning Violence**
	1. Violence can be symbolic, thematic, biblical, Shakespearean, Romantic, allegorical, transcendent.
	2. Two categories of violence in literature
		1. Character caused—shootings, stabbings, drownings, poisonings, bombings, hit and run, etc
		2. Death and suffering for which the characters are not responsible. Accidents are not really accidents.
	3. Violence is symbolic action, but hard to generalize meaning
	4. Questions to ask:
		1. What does this type of misfortune represent thematically?
		2. What famous or mythic death does this one resemble?
		3. Why this sort of violence and not some other?
12. **Is That a Symbol?**
	1. Yes. But figuring out what is tricky. Can only discuss possible meanings and interpretations
	2. 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)
	3. Actions, as well as objects and images, can be symbolic. i.e. “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost
	4. 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.
13. **It’s All Political**
	1. Literature tends to be written by people interested in the problems of the world, so most works have a political element in them
	2. Issues:
		1. Individualism and self-determination against the needs of society for conformity and stability.
		2. Power structures
		3. Relations among classes
		4. issues of justice and rights
		5. interactions between the sexes and among various racial and ethnic constituencies.
14. **Yes, She’s a Christ Figure, Too**
	1. Characteristics of a Christ Figure:
		1. crucified, wounds in hands, feet, side, and head, often portrayed with arms outstretched
		2. in agony
		3. self-sacrificing
		4. good with children
		5. good with loaves, fishes, water, wine
		6. thirty-three years of age when last seen
		7. employed as a carpenter
		8. known to use humble modes of transportation, feet or donkeys preferred
		9. believed to have walked on water
		10. known to have spent time alone in the wilderness
		11. believed to have had a confrontation with the devil, possibly tempted
		12. last seen in the company of thieves
		13. creator of many aphorisms and parables
		14. buried, but arose on the third day
		15. had disciples, twelve at first, although not all equally devoted
		16. very forgiving
		17. came to redeem an unworthy world
	2. As a reader, put aside belief system.
	3. Why us Christ figures? Deepens our sense of a character’s sacrifice, thematically has to do with redemption, hope, or miracles.
	4. If used ironically, makes the character look smaller rather than greater
15. **Flights of Fancy**
	1. Daedalus and Icarus
	2. Flying was one of the temptations of Christ
	3. Symbolically: freedom, escape, the flight of the imagination, spirituality, return home, largeness of spirit, love
	4. Interrupted flight generally a bad thing
	5. Usually not literal flying, but might use images of flying, birds, etc.
	6. Irony trumps everything
16. **It’s All About Sex…**
	1. Female symbols: chalice, Holy Grail, bowls, rolling landscape, empty vessels waiting to be filled, tunnels, images of fertility
	2. Male symbols: blade, tall buildings
	3. Why?
		1. Before mid 20th c., coded sex avoided censorship
		2. Can function on multiple levels
		3. Can be more intense than literal descriptions
17. **…Except Sex.** When authors write directly about sex, they’re writing about something else, such as sacrifice, submission, rebellion, supplication, domination, enlightenment, etc.
18. **If She Comes Up, It’s Baptism**
	1. Baptism is symbolic death and rebirth as a new individual
	2. 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.
	3. 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.
	4. Rain can by symbolic baptism as well—cleanses, washes
	5. 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)
	6. There’s also rebirth/baptism implied when a character is renamed.
19. **Geography Matters…**
	1. What represents home, family, love, security?
	2. What represents wilderness, danger, confusion? i.e. tunnels, labyrinths, jungles
	3. Geography can represent the human psyche (Heart of Darkness)
	4. Going south=running amok and running amok means having a direct, raw encounter with the subconscious.
	5. Low places: swamps, crowds, fog, darkness, fields, heat, unpleasantness, people, life, death
	6. High places: snow, ice, purity, thin air, clear views, isolation, life, death
20. **…So Does Season**
	1. Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter=youth, adulthood, middle age, old age/death.
	2. Spring=fertility, life, happiness, growth, resurrection (Easter)
	3. Fall=harvest, reaping what we sow, both rewards and punishments
	4. Winter=hibernation, lack of growth, death, punishment
	5. Christmas=childhood, birth, hope, family
	6. Irony trumps all “April is the cruelest month” from *The Wasteland*
21. **Marked for Greatness**
	1. Physical marks or imperfections symbolically mirror moral, emotional, or psychological scars or imperfections.
	2. Landscapes can be marked as well—*The Wasteland* by T.S. Eliot
	3. 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
	4. Monsters
		1. Frankenstein—monsters created through no fault of their own; the real monster is the maker
		2. Faust—bargains with the devil in exchange for one’s soul
		3. 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.
		4. Quasimodo, Beauty and the Beast—ugly on the outside, beautiful on the inside. The physical deformity reflects the opposite of the truth.
22. **He’s Blind for a Reason, You Know**
	1. Physical blindness mirrors psychological, moral, intellectual (etc.) blindness
	2. Sometimes ironic; the blind see and sighted are blind
	3. Many times blindness is metaphorical, a failure to see—reality, love, truth, etc.
	4. darkness=blindness; light=sight
23. **It’s Never Just Heart Disease...**
	1. Heart disease=bad love, loneliness, cruelty, disloyalty, cowardice, lack of determination.
	2. Socially, something on a larger scale or something seriously amiss at the heart of things (Heart of Darkness)
24. **…And Rarely Just Illness**
	1. Not all illnesses are created equal. Tuberculosis occurs frequently; cholera does not because of the reasons below
	2. It should be picturesque
	3. It should be mysterious in origin
	4. It should have strong symbolic or metaphorical possibilities
		1. Tuberculosis—a wasting disease
		2. Physical paralysis can mirror moral, social, spiritual, intellectual, political paralysis
		3. Plague: divine wrath; the communal aspect and philosophical possibilities of suffering on a large scale; the isolation an despair created by wholesale destruction; the puniness of humanity in the face of an indifferent natural world
		4. Malaria: means literally “bad air” with the attendant metaphorical possibilities.
		5. 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
		6. 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
		7. The generic fever that carries off a child
25. **Don’t Read with Your Eyes**
	1. You must enter the reality of the book; don’t read from your own fixed position in 2005. 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.
	2. We don’t have to accept the values of another culture to sympathetically step into a story and recognize the universal qualities present there.
26. **Is He Serious? And Other Ironies**
	1. Irony trumps everything. Look for it.
	2. 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.
	3. Irony doesn’t work for everyone. Difficult to warm to, hard for some to recognize which causes all sorts of problems. *Satanic Verses* , nknknl
27. **Test Case: A Reading of “The Garden Party” by Katherine Mansfield**

**Works referenced in *How to Read Literature Like a Professor***

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Chapter** | **Title** | **Genre** | **Author** |
| 1. Quest | The Crying of Lot 49 | novel | Thomas Pynchon |
|  | Adventures of Huckleberry Finn | novel | Mark Twain |
|  | Lord of the Rings | novel | J.R.R. Tolkein |
|  | Star Wars | movie | George Lucus |
|  | North by Northwest | movie | Alfred Hitchcock |
| 2. Food as Communion | Tom Jones (excerpt) | novel | Henry Fielding |
|  | Cathedral | SS | Raymond Carver |
|  | Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant |  | Anne Tyler |
|  | The Dead  | SS | James Joyce |
| 3. Vampires and Ghosts | Dracula | novel | Bram Stoker |
|  | Hamlet | play | William Shakespeare |
|  | A Christmas Carol | novel | Charles Dickens |
|  | Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde | novel | Robert Louis Stevenson |
|  | The Turn of the Screw | novella | Henry James |
|  | Daisy Miller | novel | Henry James |
|  | Tess of the Dubervilles | novel | Thomas Hardy |
|  | Metamorphosis and Hunger Artist  | novel | Franz Kafka |
|  | A Severed Head, The Unicorn | novels | Iris Murdoch |
| 4. Sonnets |  |  |  |
| 5. Intertextuality | Going After Cacciato | novel | Tim O’Brien |
|  | Alice in Wonderland | novel | Lewis Carroll |
|  | The Overcoat | SS | Nikolai Gogal |
|  | The Overcoat II” | SS | T. Coraghessan Boyle |
|  | Two Gallants | SS | James Joyce |
|  | Two More Gallants | SS | William Trevor |
|  | Beowulf | poem |  |
|  | Grendel | novel | John Gardner |
|  | Wise Children | novel | Angela Carter |
|  | Hamlet, Much Ado About Nothing | play | William Shakespeare |
| 6. Shakespeare Allusions | Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead | play | Tom Stoppard |
|  | A Thousand Acres | novel | Jane Smiley |
|  | The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock | poem | T.S. Eliot |
|  | Master Harold…and the boys | play | Athol Fugard |
|  | numerous TV shows and movies |
| 7. Biblical Allusions | Araby | SS | James Joyce |
|  | Beloved | novel | Toni Morrison  |
|  | The Sun Also Rises | novel | Hemingway |
|  | Canterbury Tales | poem | Geoffrey Chaucer |
|  | Holy Sonnets | poems | John Donne |
|  | The Wasteland | poem | T.S. Eliot |
|  | Why I Live at the P.O. | SS | Eudora Welty |
|  | Sonny’s Blues, Go Tell It on the Mountain | SS | James Baldwin |
|  | Pulp Fiction | movie | Quentin Tarantino |
|  | East of Eden | novel | John Steinbeck |
| 8. Fairy Tales | Alice in Wonderland, Sleeping Beauty, Snow white, Cinderella, Prince Charming, Hansel and Gretel,  |  | Angela Carter |
|  | The Gingerbread House | SS | Robert Coover |
|  | The Bloody Chamber (collection of stories) | SS | Angela Carter |
| 9. Greek Mythology | Song of Solomon | novel | Toni Morrison  |
|  | Musee des Beaux Arts | poem | W. H. Auden |
|  | Landscape with Fall of Icarus | poem | William Carlos Williams |
|  | Omeros (based on Homer) | novel | Derek Walcott |
|  | O Brother, Where Art Thou | movie | Joel and Ethan Coen |
|  | Ulysses | novel | James Joyce |
| 10. Weather | The Three Strangers | SS | Thomas Hardy |
|  | Song of Solomon | novel | Toni Morrison |
|  | A Farewell to Arms | novel | Earnest Hemingway |
|  | The Dead | SS | James Joyce |
|  | The Wasteland | poem | T.S. Eliot |
|  | The Fish | poem | Elizabeth Bishop |
|  | The Snow Man | poem | Wallace Stevens |
| 11. Violence | Out, Out… | poem | Robert Frost |
|  | Beloved | novel | Toni Morrison |
|  | Women in Love | novel | D.H. Lawrence |
|  | The Fox | novella | D. H. Lawrence |
|  | Barn Burning | SS | William Faulkner |
|  | Beloved | novel | Toni Morrison |
| 12. Symbolism | Pilgrim’s Progress | allegory | John Bunyan |
|  | Passage to India | novel | E.M. Forster |
|  | Parable of the Cave (The Republic) |  | Plato |
|  | The Bridge (poem sequence) | poem | Hart Crane |
|  | The Wasteland | poem | T.S. Eliot |
|  | Mowing, After Apple Picking, The Road Not Taken, Birches | poems | Robert Frost |
| 13. Political Writing | A Christmas Carol | novel | Charles Dickens |
|  | Masque of the Red Death, The Fall of the House of Usher | SS | Edgar Allen Poe |
|  | Rip Van Winkle | SS | Washington Irving |
|  | Oedipus at Colonus | play | Sophocles |
|  | A Room of One’s Own | NF | Virginia Woolf |
|  | Mrs. Dalloway | novel | Virginia Woolf |
| 14. Christ Figures | Old Man and the Sea | novella | Earnest Hemingway |
| 15. Flight | Song of Solomon | novel | Toni Morrison  |
|  | Nights at the Circus | ? | Angela Carter |
|  | A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings | SS | Gabriel Garcia Marquez |
|  | Satanic Verses | novel | Salmon Rushdie |
|  | Portrait of and Artist as a Young Man | novel | James Joyce |
|  | Wild Swans at Coole | poem | William Butler Yeats |
|  | Birches | poem | Robert Frost |
| 16. All About Sex | North by Northwest | movie | Alfred Hitchcock |
|  | Janus | SS | Ann Beattie |
|  | Lady Chatterly’s Lover, Women in Love, The Rocking-Horse Winner (SS) | novel | D.H. Lawrence |
| 17. Except Sex | French Lieutenant’s Woman | novel | John Fowles |
|  | A Clockwork Orange | novel | Anthony Burgess |
|  | Lolita | novel | Vladimir Nabokov |
|  | Wise Children | novel | Angela Carter |
| 18. Baptism | Ordinary People | novel | Judith Guest |
|  | Love Medicine | novel | Louise Erdrich |
|  | Song of Solomon, Beloved | novel | Toni Morrison |
|  | The Horse Dealer’s Daughter | SS | D.H. Lawrence |
|  | The Unicorn | novel | Iris Murdoch |
| 19. Geography | The Old Man and the Sea | novel | Earnest Hemingway |
|  | The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn | novel | Mark Twain |
|  | The Fall of the House of Usher | SS | Edgar Allen Poe |
|  | Bean Trees | novel | Barbara Kingsolver |
|  | Song of Solomon | novel | Toni Morrison  |
|  | A Room with a View, A Passage to India | novel | E.M. Forster |
|  | Heart of Darkness | novel | Joseph Conrad |
|  | In Praise of Prairie | poem | Theodore Roethke |
|  | Bogland | poem | Seamus Heaney |
|  | In Praise of Limestone | poem | W.H. Auden |
|  | The Snows of Kilimanjaro | novel | Earnest Hemingway |
| 20. Seasons | Sonnet 73, Richard III opening, etc. | poem | William Shakespeare |
|  | In Memory of W.B. Yeats | poem | W.H. Auden |
|  | After Apple Picking | poem | Robert Frost |
|  | The Wasteland | poem | T.S. Eliot |
| 21. Physical Marks | Richard III | play | William Shakespeare |
|  | Song of Solomon, Beloved | novel | Toni Morrison |
|  | Oedipus Rex | play | Sophocles |
|  | The Sun Also Rises | novel | Earnest Hemingway |
|  | The Wasteland | poem | T.S. Eliot |
|  | Frankenstein | novel | Mary Shelley |
|  | versions of Faust, Dr. Faustus, The Devil and Daniel Webster, Bedazzled (movie), Star Wars | novel, play | Goethe, Marlowe, Stephen Vincent Benet |
|  | The Hunchback of Notre Dame | novel | Victor Hugo |
|  | Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde | novel | Robert Louis Stevenson |
| 22. Blindness | Oedipus Rex | play | Sophocles |
|  | Araby | SS | James Joyce |
|  | Waiting for Godot | play | Samuel Beckett |
| 23. Heart Disease | The Good Soldier | novel | Ford Madox Ford |
|  | The Man of Adamant | SS | Nathaniel Hawthorne |
|  | Lord Jim | novel | Joseph Conrad |
|  | Lolita | novel | Vladimir Nabokov |
| 24. Illiness | The Sisters (Dubliners) | SS | James Joyce |
|  | Illness as Metaphor (literary criticsm) | NF | Susan Sontag |
|  | The Plague | novel | Albert Camus |
|  | A Doll’s House | play | Henrik Ibsen |
|  | The Hours | novel | Michael Cunningham |
|  | The Masque of the Red Death | SS | Edgar Allen Poe |
| 25. Don’t Read with Your Eyes | The Dead | SS | James Joyce |
|  | Sonny’s Blues | SS | James Baldwin |
|  | The Merchant of Venice | play | William Shakespeare |
| 26. Irony | Waiting for Godot | play | Samuel Beckett |
|  | A Farewell to Arms | novel | Earnest Hemingway |
|  | The Importance of Being Earnest | play | Oscar Wilde |
|  | Howard’s End | novel | E.M. Forster |
|  | A Clockwork Orange | novel | Anthony Burgess |
|  | Writers who frequently take ironic stance: Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, Angela Carter, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Salman Rushdie |
| 27. A Test Case | Uses “The Garden Party” by Katherine Mansfield as an application of the concepts found in this book. |  |  |