

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):**
 - 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. If It's Square, It's a Sonnet**
- 5. 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 ok. If a story is no good, being based on Hamlet won't save it.
- 6. 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
- 7. ...Or the Bible**
 - a. Before the mid 20th century, writers could count on people being very familiar with Biblical stories, a common touchstone a writer can tap

- 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.

8. 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 used highly ironically)

9. 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 #4)
- 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

10. 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

11. ...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
- 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?

12. 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. i.e. "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost
- 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.

13. 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.

14. 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 us 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

15. 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

16. 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 c., coded sex avoided censorship
 - ii. Can function on multiple levels
 - iii. 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

- 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 (Beloved)
- f. There's also rebirth/baptism implied when a character is renamed.

19. 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.
- 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

20. ...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*

21. 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
- 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.

22. 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

23. 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)

24. ...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

25. Don't Read with Your Eyes

- a. 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.
- 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.

26. 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*, nknknl

27. Test Case: A Reading of "The Garden Party" by Katherine Mansfield

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

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 Lucas
	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 Gogol
	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	Ernest 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	SS	Edgar Allen Poe

	House of Usher		
	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	Ernest 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 an 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	Ernest 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	Ernest 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	Ernest 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. Illness	The Sisters (Dubliners)	SS	James Joyce
	Illness as Metaphor (literary criticism)	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 Allan 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	Ernest 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.		

Notes by Marti Nelson