How to Read Literature Like a Professor

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS C. FOSTER

Thomas C. Foster is a retired professor of English at the University of Michigan-Flint. He grew up in rural Ohio, where he says he staved off childhood loneliness by reading obsessively. He then studied at Dartmouth College and Michigan State University, joining the Michigan-Flint faculty in 1987. His expertise is in early 20th century British, Irish, and American writers, and he has written a number of popular books that aim to increase the accessibility of literature and literary analysis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

How to Read Literature Like a Professor was written in the context of ongoing conversations about the accessibility of higher education to groups of people who historically have been denied such access. Although colleges and universities are in many ways more open than they used to be, many people remain critical of "Ivory Tower" culture, pointing to the ways in which assumptions about students' backgrounds and the over-use of technical language can subtly leave students feeling excluded. Foster explains that he first imagined his ideal reader would be adult learners and other non-traditional students who might be intimidated by literary criticism. As an instructor at the University of Michigan-Flint, Foster encountered many such students, and found that they often had brilliant ideas but sometimes needed guidance and reassurance in mastering the conventions of scholarly analysis. However, the success of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* resulted in it being put on high school syllabi and even the AP Literature syllabus, and thus Foster's most common readers are in fact high school students.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Foster references dozens of literary works covering the expanse of the Western canon and beyond. Although he does not mention very many works of literary theory directly, there are a few texts that vitally inform the arguments within *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. These include Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1967), and Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975). Foster provides a short list of suggested relevant readings at the end of the book.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines
- **Where Written:** Flint, Michigan, USA
- **When Published:** 2003
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Non-fiction
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, Literary Criticism

EXTRA CREDIT

Teaching. Foster claims that his students have been his greatest teachers—he's learned more from them than in all the literature classes he's ever taken.

PLOT SUMMARY

Foster introduces the book by explaining that it was intended for adult learners and other non-traditional college students new to the practice of literary analysis. It was a huge surprise, therefore, that the book became so popular in high schools and was even put on the AP Literature syllabus. Foster begins his explanation of how professors read by noting the resistance most students have to "professional" ways of reading. It might seem as though the professor is simply pulling analysis out of thin air, when in fact he or she has just mastered the "language of reading," a set of tools and conventions that allow scholars to engage with literature on a deeper and more complex level. The three key elements of the language of reading are memory, symbol, and pattern.

Foster proposes the idea that every journey depicted in a work of literature can be seen as a quest, even an ordinary trip to the grocery store. The important part of a quest isn't the swords and dragons, but rather the character's path to self-knowledge. Similarly, every time characters eat together is an act of communion—not in the traditional Christian sense necessarily, but in the sense of engaging in a ritual of sharing that creates a temporary community around the meal.

Vampires are a major phenomenon in literature, but the reason for this is not simply to scare readers. Rather, vampire stories are usually stories about sexuality, with the vampire figure symbolizing a sexual predator pursuing an innocent, virginal victim. The same characters, symbols, plots, and themes occur across different works of literature because no work of literature is ever completely original. Indeed, it is possible to think of all literature as relating back to "one story," that has exists across time and space.

Arguably the most important figure in English literature is William Shakespeare. The Elizabethan playwright has had a singular influence on subsequent authors and on the development of English language, and allusions to his work are ubiquitous in literature. The Bible is another major influence on

literature; a text doesn't have to be religious in order to be filled with Biblical symbolism and imagery. Other important influences include fairy tale and Greek myth. Stories from these genres are deeply imbedded within our collective cultural imagination and surface within literature in both direct and indirect ways.

In the first interlude, Foster admits that it may be hard to believe that authors deliberately create so many layers of meaning within their work. However, just because we can never have certain knowledge of an author's intentions doesn't make the search for complex symbolic and intertextual meaning any less legitimate. Descriptions of the weather in literature, for instance, are never accidental; they always have symbolic significance.

Like the weather, depictions of violence in literature also always have symbolic meaning. This includes violence that characters enact on one another as well as authorial or narrative violence, meaning events that kill or harm characters in order to advance the plot. Foster moves on from the chapter on violence to discuss symbolism more generally. Pretty much everything in a work of literature can be read as a symbol, though things rarely have only one symbolic meaning (if they did, they would not be symbols, but allegory).

Foster distinguishes between two kinds of political literature—works whose main purpose is to advance a direct, historically-specific political agenda, and literature that is "political" in a more general sense, meaning it is produced in a specific political climate by an author with a particular relationship to the world around them. Under this second definition, almost all literature is political, at least to some degree.

Having introduced the notion that literature is filled with Biblical symbolism, Foster points out the importance of the Christ figure in literature, noting that Christ figures often come in surprising forms. Flying is also a particularly important literary device, and is almost always related to the concept of freedom.

While it might seem that English professors are unduly obsessed with reading sexual subtext in the most unlikely circumstances, there are good reasons for this. Throughout most of history, authors could not depict sexuality explicitly in their writing without being censored for obscenity. As a result, authors tend to depict sexuality in indirect ways. Another important reason for the importance of sexual subtext is the influence on literary scholarship of Sigmund Freud. Foster warns the reader, however, that when sex *is* explicitly depicted in literature, these depictions—like those of the weather and violence—almost always have symbolic meaning beyond the sexual act itself.

Returning to the theme of Christian imagery, Foster points out the trope of characters emerging from water, an event that symbolizes baptism. Foster then moves on to discuss how geography—the features of the landscape in which a given literary work takes place—tends to be associated with certain conventions of meaning. The same goes for seasons; although authors tend to play around with the meaning of seasons in an ironic way, this is facilitated by the pre-existing conventional significance of seasons, such as the association between spring and rebirth.

The second interlude returns to the idea of the "one story." Foster argues that our culture is full of interrelated stories, and that by infusing their work with references to these stories authors create a sense of richness. Following this interlude, Foster moves on to discuss the way that physical abnormalities convey information about the characters who have them, particularly in texts written during the time in which people associated these physical marks with moral deficiency. Blindness in particular has a special legacy in literature, with physical blindness often used as a metaphor for lack of self-awareness or foresight. Similarly, illness usually indicates a problem not only within a character's physical body but also within their soul; depictions of heart disease are thus extremely common in literature, as the heart has long been considered the core of human emotion.

In the next chapter, Foster highlights the importance of suspending one's own personal, historical perspective in order to engage with a work of literature in its own context. To a certain degree, we have to let go of our own judgments in order to properly understand works of literature that were written in a different time, place, and culture from our own. Foster then discusses the difficulty of interpreting "private symbols," meaning symbols that have particular resonance for the author themselves but not within the outside world. Although analyzing such symbols can be challenging, through practice and confidence the reader will eventually be able to discover their meaning. Introducing the final chapter on irony, Foster emphasizes that "irony trumps everything." All the literary devices described in the book thus far can be used in an ironic manner, leading to altogether new and more complex results.

Toward the end of the book, Foster includes a short story, Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" (1922), as a way for the reader to practice the reading techniques he has described. "The Garden Party" tells the story of a wealthy English family throwing a garden party at their mansion. One of the family's daughters, a young woman named Laura, is excited about the party until she discovers that a man from the impoverished village near her family's property has been thrown out of a horse-and-cart and killed. Laura tries to persuade her family to cancel the party out of respect for the man's family, but her relatives laugh at her, claiming that this is an absurd idea. The party goes ahead and Laura manages to enjoy herself. Once it is over, she takes a basket of leftover food to the man's house, where she is forced to view his body. On seeing his peaceful

expression, Laura feels better about everything that has taken place, although still bewildered by the strangeness of life.

Foster includes examples of interpretations by some of his students, who point to the class tensions within the story, as well as the significance of certain symbols, such as birds. This is the kind of analysis that Foster hopes *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* will encourage readers to perform. Foster's own interpretation of "The Garden Party" rests on its relationship to the Greek myth of Persephone, whose descent in the underworld represents the transition from childhood to adulthood (and particularly sexual initiation).

In the book's conclusion, Foster points out that it can be hard to have confidence in one's own interpretation of a text, but that readers should trust their instincts and have faith that their own analysis is valuable in its uniqueness. Although there are many literary devices and reading techniques that the book has not covered, those featured in *How to Read Like a Professor* should set readers off in the right direction and allow them to develop their skills through practice.

CHARACTERS

Jesus Christ – Jesus of Nazareth, now thought to have been born around 4 BC, was a religious leader who some consider to be the Son of God and Messiah (savior) of the Jewish people. During his life, Jesus worked as a carpenter, performed miracles, preached, and conversed with his disciples. He was crucified at 33 years old, and Christians believe he was resurrected after death, appearing to followers before ascending to the Kingdom of Heaven. His life and death are recorded in the New Testament of the Bible. Christianity (and thus Jesus himself) is of central importance within *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, due to the fact that the book is primarily concerned with the Western canon, which has been heavily influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, Foster devotes an entire chapter to discussing Christ figures in literature, arguing that authors experiment with this archetype in ways that can be surprising and even offensive to religious readers. When engaged in critical reading, Foster encourages the reader to "put aside" their personal relationship (or lack of relationship) to Jesus, and try to examine Christ figures from an informed, yet neutral perspective.

William Shakespeare – William Shakespeare was a British playwright and poet born in Stratford-Upon-Avon in 1564. He is thought to have written 38 plays and 154 sonnets, although there is some disagreement over whether all Shakespeare's plays are correctly attributed and whether he was in fact more than one person. Some of Shakespeare's most famous plays include *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He had a singular impact on the development of English language and literature, and is considered by many to be the greatest writer who ever lived. Indeed, Foster suggests that Shakespeare has had the biggest impact on Western literature of any single author, a claim that is widely agreed upon within the academic community. In Chapter 5, Foster argues that Shakespeare's work is so deeply embedded within our culture that readers may well have already encountered a Shakespearean reference today.

Sigmund Freud – Sigmund Freud, born in 1856, was a doctor, psychiatrist, and the founder of psychoanalysis. Freud produced a number of hugely important and influential theories about the human mind and behavior. Among the most important was the notion that humans repress sexual desires in their subconscious, which in turn causes them to act in neurotic, sometimes destructive ways. Later in life, Freud shifted his attention from clinical psychoanalysis to the ways that his theories could be applied to anthropology, art, and literature, and he is one of the most important figures in the history of literary criticism. While many of Freud's scientific theories have since been discredited, his ideas remain enduringly authoritative within literary analysis. As Foster demonstrates, the centrality of discussions of sexual symbolism within literary scholarship can in large part be blamed on Freud.

James Joyce – James Joyce was an Irish novelist and poet born in Dublin in 1882. He was one of the key figures of the Modernist movement, producing works of literature that are notoriously complicated and cutting-edge for the time. His most famous works include *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*, *Dubliners*, and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He died in Zurich in 1941. Foster uses several of Joyce's works to illustrate concepts ranging from weather symbolism to mythological archetype to irony. He also uses Joyce's oeuvre as an example of literature that is extremely difficult to analyze, claiming that "the only thing that can really prepare you to read *Ulysses* is reading *Ulysses*."

Toni Morrison – Toni Morrison is an American writer born in Lorain, Ohio in 1931. She has written 11 novels in addition to work in other genres; her most famous novels include *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*. Her work explores themes of race, gender, and American history. In 1993 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, making her the first African-American woman to receive the honor. She is considered by many to be one of the most important living writers. Foster refers to Morrison's work more frequently than perhaps any other writer, a fact that indicates the extent of her influence. As Foster points out, Morrison's work provides a great example of the way that literature can fuse multiple cultural traditions, such as Christianity and African American myth.

TERMS

Intertextuality – Invented by the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, intertextuality simply refers to the relationship between different literary works. It might help to think of all texts as existing in a giant network or web, with inherent connections between one book and others. Note that intertextuality is at play even when texts aren't explicitly borrowing from or referring to other literary works. Intertextual elements often come in subtle forms, and can be difficult to identify—especially to the less experienced reader.

Archetype – The word archetype means the original type from which other copies are produced. It has different meanings within different contexts—for example, psychology or philosophy—but in literary analysis it refers to the shared understanding of certain types created through myth. For example, thanks to ancient myths and subsequent literary traditions, we have a shared understanding the archetype of the "hero." Elements of literature (like characters) that seem particularly close to this original form are then referred to as "archetypical."

Canon – The canon refers to a list of texts though to be essential to a given literary tradition. One can refer to the English canon or the Western canon, and indeed, in a Western context if someone simply says "canon" this is likely what is implied. However, there are also more specific canons, such as the British canon or canon of women writers. Note that the canon isn't an actual list and is constantly changing; indeed, some of the fiercest debates in literary scholarship are over which texts should be considered canonical.

Conceit – A conceit is an extended metaphor that is used to structure a text. The example Foster cites is John Donne's "The Flea," a poem structured around the flea-as-metaphor for sexuality. It might be difficult to distinguish between a central symbol and a conceit, as both could appear throughout a text. In order to identify a conceit, look for signs that this metaphor is what is fundamentally structuring the text, as opposed to simply being a major element.

Noumenal – Noumenal means something related to the "noumenon"—originally a philosophical concept, used by Plato to refer to the essence of something (which cannot be detected through the senses, only through thought). In the context of literature, it can refer to the fundamental essence of a work of literature, beyond the surface level phenomena of plot details, writing style, and so on.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SURFACE READING VS. DEEPER READING

Foster explains that he wrote *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* in order to address a particular problem: the fact that untrained readers tend to read literature in a surface-level way. This kind of reading is akin to the way one "reads" real-life situations, such as taking people at their word when they speak, or assuming there is no symbolic significance to the fact that someone has developed a disease. Foster includes examples of this kind of literal, surface-level interpretation throughout the book as a way of convincing the reader that he understands their resistance to the way professors read literature. Frequently, he begins his explanations of deeper reading techniques by contrasting them with a more superficial interpretation; for example "Sometimes a meal is just a meal… More often than not, though, it's not."

The problem with surface reading is not that it will leave readers unable to understand a work of literature (although this may be true of more complex, modern texts). Rather, it simply means that they will miss key information that makes the text richer, more insightful, and enjoyable to read. Unlike surface-level reading, deep reading is an active, imaginative exercise. It encourages the reader to collaborate with the author in the creation of meaning, and allows for multiple points of view regarding what a text means, some of which may completely contradict one another.

SYMBOL AND METAPHOR

Of all the literary devices examined within the book, symbol and metaphor are arguably the most important. Although they have similar meanings, there is an important distinction between them. A symbol is something that, within the context of a literary work, has a different meaning or meanings from its literal or primary one. A metaphor, meanwhile, is a figure of speech in which an idea is conveyed in an indirect, non-literal way. For example, in a particular poem flowers might be a symbol of natural beauty, or female sexuality, or renewal (or all three!). The "flower of youth," on the other hand, is a Biblical metaphor for virginity.

Foster stresses that objects, images, and even acts and events within literature usually have a symbolic meaning beyond their literal significance within a text. Once readers get accustomed to using the symbolic imagination—in other words, being alert to symbolic meaning—their understanding of literature will be transformed.

The importance of identifying symbol and metaphor underpins almost all the different reading strategies covered in each distinct chapter of the book. The chapters on quests, eating

scenes, vampires, the Bible, seasons, and so on all primarily deal with symbolic or metaphorical meaning, even as they examine very different frameworks for how to identify symbols and what these symbols signify. In Chapter 3, for example, Foster explores how certain symbolic objects link *Dracula* to *Twilight*, thereby creating a shared plane of meaning within which these two very different texts explore the same themes (such as sexuality).

Foster also addresses symbol specifically in Chapters 12 and 25. In Chapter 12, Foster stresses the benefits to be gained from confidently naming things as symbols, and reminds readers that symbolic meaning is rarely definitive. He argues that the answer to the question "Is that a symbol?" is usually yes, but that what a particular thing symbolizes does not usually have a single right or wrong answer. Chapter 25, meanwhile, highlights the challenge that comes when authors use "private symbols," meaning symbols whose significance is unique to that author or text. Although these symbols can be difficult to decipher, it is possible to understand their reading by trusting your instincts and relying on your knowledge of other works of literature.

ARCHETYPE AND PATTERN RECOGNITION

Archetypes are figures which are imprinted on readers' minds through repetition in myth and other cultural narratives, and which are imitated, modified, and subverted within works of literature. The archetype of the hero, for example, began in ancient myths, and was defined by certain qualities such as strength, courage, and physical beauty. Nowadays, a hero figure may appear in literature who shares some of these qualities but not others, and yet is still recognizable as representing the hero archetype.

Identifying archetypes can be tricky, as they can sometimes come in unlikely forms. For example, a character fitting the hero archetype in contemporary literature might be female, whereas in Ancient Greek times all heroes were male. Discovering archetypes depends on the reader's ability to see patterns, one of the key skills laid out in the book. Pattern recognition consists not only of identifying patterns within a single text, but between texts as well (and is thus closely related to the concept of intertextuality).

As with symbol and metaphor, there is also a specific section of the book dedicated to archetype, which discusses the concept in the context of C.G. Jung's psychoanalytic writings and how this was then transferred to literary criticism by Northrop Frye. Foster also examines a selection of key archetypes, including the young person on the brink of adulthood, the vampiric predator, the hero (and his unfortunate sidekick, the surrogate), and the Christ figure. Although all these examples are characters, archetypes can take other forms as well, such as the archetype of the sleepy suburb, dysfunctional family, or haunted house.

INTERTEXTUALITY

Interextuality is a relatively simple concept; it simply refers to the connection between all texts (especially works of literature) across history. Throughout the book, Foster encourages the reader not to think of literary texts as existing in an isolated vacuum, but as having connections to particular cultural and religious traditions (Greek myth, the Bible), genres (vampire stories, fairy tales), and authors (Shakespeare, the Brothers Grimm). By describing these links as intertextual, Foster emphasizes the fact that the connection between works of literature is important in the same sense as the connection between literature and reality.

Foster argues that intertextuality creates richness through the harmonious mix of "strangeness and familiarity" within a piece of literature. Surface-level reading that does not consider other texts as being part of a given literary work tends to leave that work looking rather thin or opaque. Paying attention to intertextuality, however, illuminates many further layers of meaning within a given literary work, and can clarify part of the text that would otherwise be obscure or confusing.

Furthermore, looking out for intertextual references is useful even in contexts in which the reader might not actually be able to correctly identify the text being referenced. As Foster writes, "*But we haven't read everything*. Neither have I. Nor has anyone." It would be impossible to expect anyone—particularly a "beginning reader"—to correctly identify all the intertextual elements in a given literary work. However, paying attention to intertextuality is important because it builds confidence and encourages readers to view texts in a comparative way, which is vital in examining the significance of literature in society.

LITERATURE, LIFE, AND SOCIETY

The overall aim of the book is not simply to help high school students pass their English classes or to introduce college students to the world of literary scholarship. Rather, it is clear that the skill of "reading literature like a professor" serves a purpose beyond the confines of the classroom. On one level, literature can help us understand our own minds and lives by a version of the "one story" to which we are all inevitably connected.

Moreover, just as reading skills such as pattern recognition can be useful beyond the specific task of identifying archetypes, so too do reading skills in general serve an important function in creating a harmonious and compassionate society. If readers are able to search for multiple layers of meaning, make connections across texts, understand irony, and so on, they are more likely to be able to engage in sophisticated and nuanced

dialog with others in real life, and to empathize with those who are different from themselves. As Foster stresses in the final chapter, the power of literature lies in its ability to create sympathy with others through fostering "sympathy with the historical moment of the story."

Throughout the book, Foster makes connections between literary texts and historical events, philosophical debates, and contemporary popular culture. Just as the book's focus on intertextuality emphasizes that texts don't exist in a vacuum separated from other texts, so does the whole of literature not exist in a vacuum separated from real life. Through discussions of the Bible and psychoanalysis, dining and disease, the book demonstrates how readers can learn about history, culture, and even science from reading and analyzing works of literature.

Foster also stresses the fact that each work of literature is situated in a particular culture at a particular historical moment. For example, his chapter on weather notes that "stormy evenings" would have been particularly dark in the era before street-lights, thereby leading authors of this era to associate intense emotions with such storms. For this reason, literature invites us to move beyond our own perspective and engage with other cultures, religions, and moral systems that might at first seem alien to us.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE ONE STORY

Throughout the novel Foster refers to the idea that "there is only one story," and that all works of literature are part of this same enormous, universal narrative. Of course, Foster does not mean this in a literal sense. There is no actual story memorized or written down anywhere from which other pieces of literature are lifted. Rather, the idea of a single story emerges from the sense that, although people's lives are infinitely varied, we all share a single human experience.

The concept of there being "one story" also helps to understand intertextuality. Although an author might not explicitly reference other literary works, the idea of the single story suggests that all texts are always in dialogue with one another. Readers must therefore search for clues of how this dialogue plays out in a text.

THE BIBLE

There is no text more important to the Western literary tradition than the Bible. While the Bible itself is a remarkable piece of literature, filled with epic tales, memorable characters, and poetic imagery, the Bible's influence on subsequent literary traditions has often been indirect and subtle. As Foster demonstrates, picking up on Biblical archetypes and symbolism can be tricky, especially when they appear in decidedly modern, secular texts.

However, drawing out these connections is useful as a way of understanding how all literature is connected through a giant web of intertextuality. It also reveals the way that patterns and symbols can be transposed and given a completely new meaning in a different context. From a religious perspective, the stories in the Bible each have a strong moral message that helps people live their lives according to God's will. Once material from the Bible is recycled within a piece of literature, however, the original moral message will often be modified, complicated, or subverted.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* published in 2014.

Introduction Quotes

"The professor, as the slightly more experienced reader, has acquired over the years the use of a certain "language of reading," something to which the students are only beginning to be introduced. What I'm talking about is a grammar of literature, a set of conventions and patterns, codes and rules, that we learn to employ in dealing with a piece of writing.

Related Themes:

Page Number: xxv

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has introduced an example situation from his own classroom: he is teaching Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*, and has pointed out that the character of Mr. Lindner represents the devil, who offers a deal akin to that of the devil in the Faust legend. Foster says that students are often suspicious of this reading, and the reason why is that they are not familiar with the "language of reading" described in this passage. In some ways what Foster describes is literally a distinct language in itself—after all, literary analysis does involve a lot of terms and phrases that don't appear in ordinary life—but this language is also somewhat metaphorical. It refers to the system scholars use to describe literature in order to make sense of literary techniques and patterns.

The major aim of Foster's book is to familiarize readers with this language. Although Foster avoids using too much technical vocabulary, he explains the language of reading insofar as he introduces the set of conventions professors use to understand how literature works. As a result, readers will better understand why professors make claims like Foster's argument that Mr. Lindner signifies the devil, and will be able to perform such analysis on their own.

❝ Memory. Symbol. Pattern. These are the three items that, more than any other, separate the professorial reader from the rest of the crowd.

Related Themes:

Page Number: xxvii

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has introduced the concept of the "language of reading" and explained that this analytic, deep form of reading will improve the experience of reading literature. In the next section of the introduction, Foster argues that memory, symbol, and pattern are the three most important aspects that "separate the professorial reader from the rest of the crowd." Note that "memory" and "pattern" are other ways of referring to the concepts of archetype and intertextuality, which Foster has not yet introduced. Of course, all of these literary devices and reading techniques are deeply implicated in each other. Skilled readers use their memories to compare one work of literature to others, thus identifying intertextual patterns, archetypes, and symbols.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ "Always" and "never" are not words that have much meaning in literary study. For one thing, as soon as something seems to always be true, some wise guy will come along and write something to prove that it's not.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has explained the concept of the quest narrative, and provided examples of quests that are very different from the original quest stories of medieval knights searching for the Holy Grail. He has argued that the "Holy Grail" (or its symbolic equivalent) is only the superficial reason for the quest; the real reason is for the quester to gain self-knowledge. In this passage, Foster explains that although he sometimes speaks about literary conventions in a definitive way, all rules of literature are made to be broken—and indeed *are* broken, by writers who deliberately seek to disrupt tradition and create new, avant-garde literary works.

Foster's claim that "always and never" don't "have much meaning in literary study" might seem strange at first. Throughout the book, Foster identifies patterns and conventions that scholars use in order to analyze and compare works of literature. A helpful way to understand Foster's distinction is that it functions as a reminder of the difference between the study of literature and scientific study. The sciences are more concerned with true and false claims than the humanities, and it is easier in the sciences to say that a certain claim is either true or false. In literature, there is not much use in identifying facts that are "always" true; these facts basically don't exist, and aren't the object of literary study.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Because there was so much the Victorians couldn't write about directly, chiefly sex and sexuality, they found ways of transforming those taboo subjects and issues into other forms. The Victorians were masters of sublimation.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has presented the argument that vampire literature is "not just about vampires," but reflects society's anxieties (and desires) around sexuality. He points out that many of the writers we associate with literature about vampires and other monsters lived during the Victorian era, and that this is no coincidence. Social custom during this period dictated that writers not mention sexuality in an explicit way, and thus sexuality is "sublimated" within Victorian literature, meaning that sexual content is channeled in indirect or unexpected ways.

Although most scholars agree on this point, the historical representation of sexuality is a matter of considerable debate within the academic community. Some professors—particularly those specializing in gender and sexuality studies and psychoanalytic theory—tend to read sexual subtext into a number of unlikely situations. Others

argue that this strategy of analysis has been taken too far, and that people can be too quick to interpret symbols as representing sexuality. Finally, there is also an ongoing discussion of what "direct" and "indirect" representation of sexuality even means. Does "direct" depiction of sexuality have to feature literal descriptions of sexual intercourse? Foster explores this point further in Chapters 16 and 17.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ There is only one story. Ever. One. It's always been going on and it's everywhere around us and every story you've ever read or heard or watched is part of it.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has explained that reading literature involves identifying characters that are versions of characters from other literary works (these are archetypes, although Foster doesn't use that word explicitly here). The reason why these characters appear over and over is because "no work of literature is wholly original." As Foster explains in this passage, all works of literature are inherently interrelated because "there is only one story," and every literary text is a part of it.

Foster goes on to show that this *doesn't* mean there is only one plot, and that every work of literature is a variation on this plot. Rather, the idea of the one story interprets all of human existence and creative output as a narrative, with common themes, symbols, plots, and characters that appear in seemingly unrelated literary works. The interconnection of these disparate works of literature forms an enormous network that scholars invoke using the word "intertextuality."

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The devil, as the old saying goes, can quote Scripture. So can writers. Even those who aren't religious or don't live within the Judeo-Christian tradition may work something in from Job or Matthew or the Psalms.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Having described the extraordinarily widespread influence of Shakespeare in the subsequent literary canon, Foster explains that the same is true of the Bible. In this quotation, he clarifies that invoking the Bible is not limited to Jewish or Christian authors who are writing books with a deliberately religious message. Although of course there are Jewish and Christian authors who do this, it is far more common that writers use Biblical references, archetypes, and themes for other reasons.

As well as being the foundational sacred text of Judaism and Christianity, the Bible is also an aesthetic artifact with enormous *cultural* significance. Throughout the book, Foster encourages the reader to dissociate the religious beliefs of individuals—whether those of the reader or, in this case, the author—in order to maintain a literary (as opposed to theological) analytic lens.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ What we mean in speaking of "myth" in general is story, the ability of story to explain ourselves to ourselves... That explanation takes the shape of stories that are deeply ingrained in our group memory, that shape our culture and are in turn shaped by it, that constitute a way of seeing by which we read the world and, ultimately, ourselves.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has emphasized the importance of myth both to literature and to culture in general, and stated that the Bible, Shakespeare, and fairy tales are all forms of myth. In this passage, Foster provides a definition of myth that encompasses these very disparate literary traditions, arguing that myths are embedded in our collective memory and that they are a way to "read the world and, ultimately, ourselves."

This definition of myth is useful both because it provides a shared lens through which to read texts from "Hansel and Gretel" to the Book of Genesis, a lens that emphasizes myth's role in creating a shared understanding of who we are and how we should behave. In addition, it demonstrates

why myths have become such a popular basis for later works of literature—they are a way for writers to connect their work to "a body of story that matters."

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ We want [a symbol] to mean some*thing*, one thing for all of us and for all time. That would be easy, convenient, manageable for us. But that handiness would result in a net loss: the novel would cease to be what it is, a network of meanings and significations that permits a nearly limitless range of possible interpretations.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has stated that it is safe to assume that pretty much anything in a work of literature is a symbol, meaning it has a layer of symbolic meaning beyond its surface significance. In this passage, he says that he understands the desire for symbols to have a single, fixed meaning, but claims that this desire is short-sighted, as it will ultimately result in a "net loss" for the reader. Although readers—and particularly students—can be intimidated by the range of possible interpretations that symbols contain, this fear is somewhat misguided. Students should see the infinite variety of analytic perspectives on literature as a positive thing, an opportunity for enlivening debate, creative thinking, and richer understanding.

❝ The more you exercise the symbolic imagination, the better and quicker it works. We tend to give writers all the credit, but reading is also an event of the imagination; our creativity, our inventiveness, encounters those of the writer, and in that meeting we puzzle out what she means, what we understand her to mean, what uses we can put her writing to.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has described the "symbolic imagination," meaning the state of mind that allows people to interpret symbolic significance. He has admitted that it can be tricky to uncover symbolic meaning, particularly if the reader is new to literary analysis. However, with practice every reader will improve. Foster also emphasizes the idea that reading is a creative, productive activity that requires active use of the imagination.

This is important, as it helps to explain the concept of deep reading. Although Foster characterizes all reading as imaginative, his words suggest that there are different levels on which readers can actively engage with a literary work. Surface-level reading, then, would likely involve minimal use of the symbolic imagination. Readers may be somewhat aware of the fact that symbols exist within the text, yet stop short of considering the full range of possibilities of what those symbols might convey and evaluating which of these is most convincing.

Indeed, note the way Foster describes this process of evaluation by referring both to what readers understand and also "what uses we can put [the text] to." This is a distinctly academic way of conceptualizing literature. While all literature provides a primary "use" of entertaining or absorbing the reader, there are an infinite number of further uses of literature that professors seek to uncover. Does the text provide insight into a particular culture? Does it aim to shape the reader's moral compass? Or does it put into question the idea of morality altogether? These are but a tiny fraction of the possible "uses" to which critical readers might put the books they are studying.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ Fiction and poetry and drama are not necessarily playgrounds for the overly literal. Many times I'll point out that a character is Christlike because he does X and Y and you might come back with, "But Christ did A and Z and his X wasn't like that, and besides, this character listens to AC/DC."

Related Characters: Jesus Christ

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has pointed out that, because the U.S. is essentially a Christian culture, it is useful to be somewhat familiar with Christianity if you are studying American literature. He has argued that one thing students should be especially alert to is the presence of Christ figures, which can sometimes come in surprising forms. For this reason, it is important not to

read too literally—otherwise no literary characters would ever qualify as Christ figures. Indeed, Foster's advice in this passage is applicable not only to the specific task of identifying Christian imagery, but to reading in general. Literary analysis, as Foster argues throughout the book, is not about identifying airtight "proof" that a certain interpretation is correct, but rather making an argument that is imaginative, interesting, and illuminating.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ Literary geography is primarily about humans inhabiting spaces, and at the same time the spaces inhabiting humans.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 173-174

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has stressed the importance of geography within literature, arguing that both the broader setting of a story as well as the details of the space in which the action takes place are full of symbolic meaning. In this quotation, he establishes a way of thinking about geographical setting that might seem strange to readers unfamiliar with academic analysis. Of course humans inhabit spaces—but what does it mean to say that spaces inhabit humans? As Foster demonstrates in this chapter and throughout the book, the landscapes depicted in literature often speak to the inner landscape of the characters' mental and emotional lives.

This is not always a direct reflection; sometimes the landscape represents an ironic twist on what the character is experiencing, or perhaps highlights something about the characters' minds that they themselves are shown to be unaware of. Note Foster's stress on the "human" aspect of analyzing literary geography. Although there are some works of literature (particularly poetry) that do not feature any human characters, in most cases geography is significant because of its relation to the people depicted in the text.

Interlude: One Story Quotes

❝ Don't bother looking for the originals, though. You can't find the archetype, just as you can't find the pure myths. What we have, even in our earliest recorded literature, are variants, embellishments, versions, what Frye called "displacement" of the myth.

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has now explicitly introduced the concept of archetype, showing how the term was first used in a literary context by the critic Northrop Frye. Archetypes are the original models upon which variations are produced. In this passage, Foster explains that "archetype" functions more as a concept than a literal "original" that can be found in some first myth or other early work of literature. Indeed, one of the defining aspects of myth is the fact that we almost never determine for sure when and where they originated; we may identify the earliest version that we know of, but that version will always seem to be based on a preexisting story.

❝ We—as readers or writers, tellers or listeners—understand each other, we share knowledge of the structures of our myths, we comprehend the logic of symbols, largely because we have access to the same swirl of story.

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Having outlined the terms "archetype" and "intertextuality," Foster explains how these concepts are related to one another, and to the idea of the "one story." Rather than being a single narrative, the one story is closer to the network of literature that is all connected through intertextuality. It is this network (or overarching "swirl of story") that makes it possible for us to identify familiar structures and symbols and interpret their meaning. Note the way that Foster evokes a community of "readers… writers, tellers or listeners" who all participate in the creation, consumption, and comprehension of the one story. Indeed, rather than each taking individual roles in the process of producing and understanding literature, Foster's words suggest that to some extent we all play each of these roles.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ Don't read with *your* eyes. What I really mean is, don't read only from your own fixed position in the Year of Our Lord two thousand and some. Instead try to find a reading perspective that allows for sympathy with the historical moment of the story, that understands the text as having been written against its own social, historical, cultural, and personal background.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has explained that readers are always going to have "blind spots," or layers of meaning—whether historical, symbolic, intertextual, or otherwise—that they simply do not pick up on. This is okay, but it is nonetheless important not to read only from one's own fixed position, but to try and approach the book within the context it was written as much as possible. Such a reading method is useful not only because it extracts the most information possible out of the text, but also because it can help the reader to avoid morally judging the characters in the story.

Of course, there is a degree to which moral evaluation is impossible to avoid. We cannot simply switch off our instinctive reactions to certain behaviors, however much we try—and the moral judgment of the reader is an important part of any work of literature. On the other hand, Foster's advice to have "sympathy with the historical moment of the story" illuminates a form of reading that allows for (in his opinion) more sophisticated analysis. Rather than trying to hold texts to standards that do not fit the context in which they are written, we ought to take a more analytic, detached approach.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ The primary meaning of the text is the story it is telling, the surface discussion (landscape description, action, argument, and so on). There comes a point in our literary development when we nearly all lose sight of that fact.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has explained that we are able to deduce symbolic meaning because there exists a "bank" of symbols in our shared cultural memory. Symbols can have many different meanings, but Foster reminds the reader that these readings are always secondary; the primary meaning is the "surface-level" meaning. In this passage, then, Foster encourages the reader not to completely lose interest in the primary function of the text while "deep reading." Often, academic literary criticism can become so complex and dislocated from the text's surface-level content that advanced students and scholars forget that the story itself has any importance at all. This passage suggests that, even as we become skilled analytical thinkers, we should always mix these deep reading techniques with sustained attention to the primary meaning of the story.

❝ By "reading" here, I am taking a liberal view. You read novels and poems, of course. But you also "read" a play even if you see it in its proper setting, a theater, and not between the covers of a book. Well, then, do you also "read" a movie? I believe so, although some films may reward reading more than others.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has conceded that there are many works of literature that are intimidating in their complexity, and that might seem impossible to decode. He has emphasized, however, that many of these difficult texts teach the reader how to unravel them as they go. Furthermore, even people who have not read a great number of books have read more than they think they have, especially if you consider reading in a more expansive sense, and include watching plays, movies, and TV as a form of "reading." While it may seem that Foster is being overly generous here, this idea is in fact a key component of contemporary literary criticism.

Although in the past there were strict rules about what counted as "serious" literature worthy of academic analysis, in today's world these rules have been called into question by scholars who deem them elitist and unnecessarily exclusionary. Nowadays, it is common for English scholars to focus on film, TV, song lyrics, and even advertisements in their research. Furthermore, the "deep reading" skills used in literary criticism are considered useful in contexts as far-ranging as historical research, political commentary, and intercultural communication, and not just the English classroom.

Chapter 26 Quotes

❝ What is a sign? It's something that signifies a message. The thing that's doing the signifying, call it the signifier, that's stable. The message, on the other hand, the thing being signified (and we'll call that the signified), that's up for grabs. The signified in other words, while being fairly stable itself, doesn't have to be used in the planned way. Its meaning can be deflected from the expected meaning.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has explained that irony vastly expands the range of meanings that are possible within a work of literature. Whereas we may have accepted a particular set of associations for a given archetype or symbol, irony "trumps" these and essentially makes anything possible. In this passage, Foster explains how irony works on a technical level. This explanation might appear confusing at first, particularly because "signify," "signifier," and "signified" are all very similar words that in this context perform crucially different functions.

However, an easy way to make sense of these concepts is by first envisioning a literal sign, as Foster does. The example he uses is for a sign advising car passengers to wear seatbelts. The sign itself is the signifier, and the pro-seatbelt message is the signified. So the sign signifies the seatbelt message. In an ordinary case, this is simply what pro-seatbelt signs do. However, in an ironic context—such as Foster's example of the seatbelt sign accidentally crushing a driver to death—the meaning is "deflected." In other words, it doesn't work as we expect it to, and takes on a different meaning *in addition* to its primary (pro-seatbelt) meaning. In this way, irony makes symbols richer and more complex.

Chapter 27 Quotes

❝ There, just inside the door, stood a wide, shallow tray full of pots of pink lilies. No other kind. Nothing but lilies—canna lilies, big pink flowers, wide open, radiant, almost frighteningly alive on bright crimson stems.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter 27 begins with a "test case," Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Garden Party." Foster includes this story in order to allow readers to try out the reading skills outlined in the book. The story is set in early 20th century England, and features a wealthy family who are throwing a garden party at their mansion. The narrator has described the luscious landscape of the house and garden in terms that relate this fertile richness to the excitement building as the party approaches. This passage describes the narrator, Laura, observing a tray filled with pots of lilies, and provides a useful example of the multiple levels of deep reading it is possible to perform on the story.

In the most immediate sense, Laura's reaction to the lilies builds suspense and excitement in the lead-up to the party. It also gives a sense of Laura's family's wealth that they are able to purchase such a stunning display of flowers. According to the reading Foster eventually gives, the flowers symbolize the Garden of Eden and also confirm the sense that Laura is a Persephone figure and that her mother represents Demeter, the Greek goddess of agriculture.

Finally, the flowers are also a striking symbol of sexuality. While flowers are perhaps the symbol most commonly associated with female genitalia, the connection in this case is made even more powerful by their pink and crimson colors, and by the fact that Laura perceives them to be "almost frighteningly alive." Note that the story portrays Laura on the precipice of adulthood. The symbolism of the flowers suggests that she is frightened by this transition, and of her own sexuality.

Postlude Quotes

❝ A reader's only obligation, it seems to me, is to the text. We can't interrogate the writer as to intentions, so the only basis of authority must reside in the text itself.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296-297

Explanation and Analysis

Foster has mentioned that he notices students can sometimes feel anxious or uncertain about whether or not their reading is "correct." It is difficult for students—particularly because they are accustomed to being evaluated and graded—to accept that there is no clear-cut right or wrong when it comes to literary analysis. In this passage, Foster argues that students ought to let go of the notion that the author is a source of authority when it comes to deciding whether an interpretation of their text is

correct. First of all, many authors are literally dead, and the ones who are still alive are rarely available for commentary.

Even if they were, however, the aim of deep reading is not to produce analysis that the author themselves would approve of. Recall that once an author publishes a text, that text exists in its own right, taking on a "life of its own." The reader's obligation, then, is to the words of the text, not the presumption of the author's intentions.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

Foster begins by noting that authors have control over their books while they are writing them, but as soon as a book is published it's a different story. It's impossible to predict how a piece of literature will be received and interpreted by readers; for example, books such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) were poorly regarded when they were first published, even though they are now considered masterpieces of English literature.

The notion that literature has a "life of its own" is one of the most important concepts in the book. Rather than being attached to what the author intended or what other people think, readers should use "deep reading" techniques to create their own interpretation. As the examples of "Moby Dick" and "The Great Gatsby" show, other people can be wrong!

Foster expresses gratitude for the nontraditional students he has taught at the University of Michigan-Flint, who have been instrumental in the writing and revising of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. These students—many of them adult learners—prove that the best thing for a professor to do (once he or she has properly explained different reading techniques) is "stand aside" and allow students to analyze texts for themselves.

Here Foster contextualizes the book and gives a sense of the audience for whom it was written. Literary analysis might have a reputation for being elitist and inaccessible, but Foster aims to counter this by making "reading like a professor" possible for anyone.

Foster moves on to thank the high school English teachers who assign *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* to their students. The inventive teaching methods of these teachers and the positive feedback they report about the book helps to show that young people's engagement with literature is alive and well. Foster lists contemporary authors who similarly prove that, contrary to what some people believe, reading is not dead. He argues that "literature does not die… it expands." Finally, Foster expresses thanks to the students who show enthusiasm about the book and the study of literature.

Foster emphasizes that the practice of reading can be just as creative and important as writing. His words create the impression of a global community of readers—including scholars, students, and teachers—who together ensure that literature will never "die." Furthermore, Foster indicates that the contributions of students and "beginner readers" to this community are just as valuable as those of authors and professors.

INTRODUCTION: HOW'D HE DO THAT?

The introduction begins in Foster's college classroom, where he and the students are discussing Lorraine Hansbery's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Students are often shocked when Foster suggests that the character of Mr. Lindner represents the devil, and that when the protagonist, Walter Lee Younger, considers Mr. Lindner's offer to buy out Younger's claim on his house, this is the narrative trope of making a "deal with the devil." Foster explains that this trope stretches back throughout Western literary culture, for example in the many versions of the Faust legend. Unlike in Faust, however, *A Raisin in the Sun* portrays Younger as refusing to make the deal and sell his soul to the devil. Hansberry thus employs an archetypical storyline but adds her own twist.

Throughout the book, Foster shows that he understands students' skepticism to the literary analysis he presents. By showing step-by-step how he reaches the conclusion that Mr. Lindner represents the devil, Foster allows the reader to better understand how this kind of "deep reading" works. Indeed, this one example of analysis includes symbol, archetype, myth, intertextuality, and religious imagery, all of which will be explained in the chapters to come.

When a professor suggests an interpretation of a work of literature that students feel is unreasonable, this is a "communication problem." Although it might seem like the professor is inventing interpretations with no real evidence, in fact he or she is simply using the "language of reading." This language is a method of talking about literature in an analytic manner, "a set of conventions and patterns, codes and rules." The language of reading is arbitrary, but so is any language, and indeed any artistic convention deemed important within a particular culture.

Foster's characterization of misunderstandings between students and professors as a "communication problem" is important. The problem is not that professors are more intelligent or sophisticated thinkers than students, but rather that they are simply employing a different language. If students familiarize themselves with that language, then they too will be able to read like professors.

The best way to understand this language of reading is simply through practice. When the average person reads, they are primarily interested in following the plot and letting the story affect them on an emotional level. When professors read, they may have an emotional response to the text, but their focus is on how the text works. This means they will be seeking out patterns, symbols, references, and other literary devices. While neither method of reading is right or wrong, reading like a professor will ultimately make engaging with literature a deeper, more satisfying experience.

This passage explains the distinction between surface reading and deep reading. Note that deep reading is not only a more complicated practice, but also a productive one; it includes creating *something (an interpretation), as opposed to passively consuming the writer's words. Although some people claim that deep reading makes literature less enjoyable, Foster argues the opposite, suggesting that deep reading makes for a better experience.*

There are three key elements of reading that separate professors of literature from the lay reader: memory, symbol, and pattern. Professors are constantly searching for "correspondences and corollaries" with other texts, and will *assume* elements of a text have symbolic meaning, rather than waiting for this to be proven beyond doubt. Pattern recognition, meanwhile, requires stepping back from the "foreground" of the text in order to analyze its structure and identify repetition, pace, archetype, and other devices at work.

Memory, symbol, and pattern are three of the most important words in the book. Although they work together, they are all distinct, and require different skills. This means that even if a reader has a poor memory, for example, he or she could still produce excellent literary analysis by mastering the art of recognizing symbols or viewing literature in a structural way.

Foster presents an example of the way that "the symbolic mind" can work not only when reading a work of literature but also in real life situations. Say you meet a man who hates his father and seems overly-attached to his mother; then you meet another man who exhibits the exact same qualities, and then another, and another. The symbolic imagination will allow you identify this man as a "type," and employing the language of reading and your knowledge of literature may help you identify this type as related to the "Oedipus complex" (the subconscious sexual desire for one parent and hatred/jealousy of the other). Indeed, Sigmund Freud invented the Oedipus complex by "reading" his patients like a professor reads a work of literature––namely, by seeking out patterns, symbols, and correlations. With training and practice, everyone can perfect these skills and use them to come to their own conclusions about literature and life.

This passage serves as a great example of the way reading like a professor comes in handy outside of the classroom. The "symbolic imagination" helps people not only to recognize patterns in literature, but also in real life, thereby creating a deeper understanding of the world around us. The example of Sigmund Freud proves that the "language of reading" is also useful in other disciplines. These connections help to show the value in literary scholarship, and remind the reader that literature does not exist in a vacuum, but in a constant dialogue with life and society.

CHAPTER 1: EVERY TRIP IS A QUEST (EXCEPT WHEN IT'S NOT)

Foster asks the reader to imagine they are reading a story about an average sixteen-year-old boy named Kip during the summer of 1968. The boy rides his bike to the A&P to buy a loaf of Wonderbread; on the way, he encounters his crush, Karen, in the car of his enemy, Tony. At the store, he decides to lie about his age to a Marine recruiter, meaning he will be sent to Vietnam—or, alternatively, he sees a vision of St. Abillard in a balloon. This story is simply a hypothetical invention, but Foster explains that an English professor would read it as a knight going on a quest. Although on the surface the story simply describes an average American boy's trip to the store, Foster identifies different elements of the story that represent the key components of the quest narrative: a knight (Kip), a princess (Karen), a nemesis (Tony), a Holy Grail (the Wonderbread), and so on.

This hypothetical account of the "quest" to obtain Wonderbread helps to demonstrate the concept of intertextuality. Just because a story might be set in 1960s suburban America does not mean it is disconnected from the medieval stories of knights and the Holy Grail. This comparison in turn suggests that literary genres that might feel far away from our own personal experience could be more relevant than we expect. Although a story might be set in a time and place different from ours, the symbols and figures it employs (such as quests, crushes, and enemies) are often universal.

In order to see how a boy's trip to the grocery store to buy some bread can fit the archetype of the quest narrative, readers must view the story structurally. A quest narrative doesn't need to be set in any particular time or place, but it does need to contain five structural elements: 1) a quester 2) a place to go 3) a reason to go there 4) obstacles along the way and 5) the real reason for the quest. The reason to go (3) is different from the real reason for why the quest takes place (5) because the real reason for any quest is to gain self-knowledge.

Although it involves "stepping back" from the story, reading structurally is also a form of deep reading. It means looking beyond the surface facts of the story in order to view the story's components in an analytical way. Pay particular attention to the end of this passage; the reason why the quest narrative is so enduring is because the journey to gain self-knowledge is universal.

Foster turns to a real example, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), which he claims is the best quest novel of the 20th century. Some people find the book odd due to its "cartoonish" quality, yet Foster argues that many classic quest stories, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Faerie Queen*, share this cartoonish side. Foster explains how *The Crying of Lot 49*—despite its modern elements, including a female protagonist and setting in San Francisco—does indeed have the five structural points necessary to qualify it as a quest story.

Here, Foster provides an example of how deep reading can make literature more enjoyable. He implies that the reason some people object to Pynchon's "Crying of Lot 49" is because they don't understand its cartoonish quality. However, if people read widely and develop their ability to pick up on intertextual connections, they will better understand (and enjoy) more works of literature.

The Crying of Lot 49 is not the only contemporary book that fits the archetype of the quest narrative. Other texts, such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and even *Star Wars* can also be read as quests. Foster finishes the chapter by reminding the reader not to get stuck on figuring out the "right" or "wrong" analysis of a work of literature, as this is not what literary study is about. Words like "always" and "never" do not have concrete meaning within the language of reading. Rules such as those governing the quest narrative are routinely twisted and broken by authors reacting against previous literary conventions.

Although it might seem that Foster is encouraging the reader to follow a very particular path of analysis, in fact he is simply providing a framework—a representative example of what "deep reading" looks like. Indeed, if the reader were to follow Foster's example too faithfully, this would not constitute good literary analysis, as the important thing about interpretation is that it is unique.

CHAPTER 2: NICE TO EAT WITH YOU: ACTS OF COMMUNION

According to a well-known anecdote, Sigmund Freud was once teased for his love of cigars by someone who pointed out that cigars are phallic symbols. Supposedly, Freud responded by saying that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar"––a statement that can also be said about meals and the role they serve in works of literature.

Even Sigmund Freud, the master of sexual subtext, dismisses the notion that absolutely everything *has a symbolic meaning.*

Foster regularly tells his students that anytime characters eat together, this is communion. This can be confusing, as many people associate communion with the specific Christian ritual that takes place during a church service. However, this is only one example of communion; the broader definition of the term is anytime people come together to share food and, in doing so, create a temporary community with one another.

As Foster will show throughout the book, it is helpful for students of literature to have a basic understanding of Christianity (no matter their personal religious beliefs). This is because, for better or worse, many Western literary and cultural conventions have a connection to—or origin within—Christian tradition.

The eating scene in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) is an example of communion, even though it is far from a religious event. This scene describes eating in highly sensual, vulgar terms, highlighting the way in which eating together can be a sexual act, a process of "devouring the other's body." Likewise, the film version of *Tom Jones* (1963) couldn't depict sex explicitly because this was still taboo in the 1960s, so it relied on the eating scene as a way of depicting sexuality. This in turn reveals the connections between sharing a meal and sex: both are ritualistic ways of becoming closer to other people through a shared bodily experience.

Here, Foster emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the historical and cultural context in which a text was produced. In these examples, societal convention forbade the explicit depiction of sexuality, meaning the reader should be alert to moments when sexuality might be indirectly represented. It is thus important that we don't only read a text through the perspective of our own era, which has different standards around the representation of sexuality.

Foster introduces another example, Raymond Carver's short story "Cathedral" (1981). The main character of the story is a man filled with prejudice and bitterness. When the man's wife's blind friend comes to stay, the man is forced to confront his bigoted, unjust view of disabled people. The two key turning points in his change of opinion are when he watches the blind man eat, and when the two of them smoke marijuana together. Although it might not be obvious, Foster argues that both these events are acts of communion.

Once again, Foster demonstrates how deep reading can illuminate important themes within a work of literature. A surface-level analysis would simply identify that the bigoted man changed his mind; deep reading, on the other hand, shows that the man's change of opinion results from moments of shared consumption, and highlights the thematic link between these moments.

Just as a harmonious meal signals interpersonal connection and community, so does a difficult meal spell disaster. Sometimes, a single meal can contain many complex and even contradictory layers of meaning. In James Joyce's short story "The Dead" (1914), the main character, Gabriel Conroy, attends a lavish dinner party during which a series of tense and difficult moments make him realize that he is not superior to other people. Joyce provides a detailed, sensual description of the dishes, and in doing so creates the impression that the reader themselves is attending the dinner party. This in turn implicates the reader in the story's message: that people are made equal by the fact that they will all eventually die.

Foster's interpretation in this passage may at first seem strange. How is Joyce's description of the lavish meal connected with the idea that everyone is made equal by death? However, Foster here highlights the connection between food and death; after all, humans have to eat because they are mortal, and thus elaborate meals are, in some sense, reminders of our shared mortality. This logic emphasizes the idea that food is never simply food, but often has a more profound symbolic meaning.

CHAPTER 3: NICE TO EAT YOU: ACTS OF VAMPIRES

Most people are familiar with vampires in literature, but Foster argues that "actual vampires" are not even the scariest thing about this genre. Consider the character of Dracula, who is presented both in Bram Stoker's novel (1897) and subsequent film versions as an immortal, evil, yet strangely attractive male figure who preys upon young, beautiful, innocent virgins. This dynamic shows that vampires are frightening not only because they are monstrous creatures, but also because they play on fears about sexuality. Vampirism is as much about "body shame and unwholesome lust," seduction, temptation, selfishness, and exploitation as it is about actual bloodsucking bat-people.

Here, Foster shows how understanding archetype can help reveal the symbolic meaning of literature. It is unlikely that many people genuinely worry that they will encounter a vampire in real life; however, many people fear the archetype of the sexual predator, whether in the form of an alleyway rapist, a man abusing his position of power, or a pedophile. Although none of these figures have fangs and a cape, they are all part of the same archetype as vampires and generate a version of the same fear.

Just as vampires symbolize more than monstrous horror, so too do ghosts and doppelgangers (doubles). Often, ghosts exist in order to convey a message or teach living characters a lesson—this is true of the ghosts in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1605) and Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Doppelgangers, on the other hand, emphasize the idea that everyone has a dark side (think of the doubles in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886)).

This passage connects the three major literary devices Foster outlines in the book: symbol, archetype, and intertextuality. Ghosts and doubles are archetypes that tend to share similar symbolic meanings. These archetypes appear in different works of literature separated by time and space, but their thematic connections emerge through intertextuality.

Dickens, Stoker, Stevenson—all these authors featured monstrous characters in their fiction, and all lived during the Victorian era. This is no coincidence, Foster claims. During Victorian times, explicit depiction of sexuality was forbidden in works of literature. As a result, authors developed covert techniques of portraying sex and sexual themes—methods that have survived in the present day. Consider the success of the "teen vampire" era, which began with Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire* (1976) and achieved a climax of popularity with Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005). Although sex is generally considered less scandalous now than it was in the 19th century, authors still utilize vampires and other figures as ways of indirectly representing sexuality.

Once again, Foster uses historical context to explain literary phenomena—in this case, the genre of vampire literature. His connection of the Victorian craze for depicting monsters (known as gothic literature) to the present-day success of the "teen vampire" genre highlights a surprising parallel between our current culture and the Victorian era. We like to think of ourselves as more sexually progressive than the Victorians, yet "teen vampire" literature suggests we perhaps still retain many of the same fears as those who lived in the 19th century.

Foster concludes that "ghosts and vampires are never only about ghosts and vampires." This is also true of other scary stories, even if these stories do not feature any fantastical figures. Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) features a governess who believes she is being haunted by ghosts. James makes it deliberately unclear whether the ghosts are real or if the governess is insane, or some combination of the two; yet no matter whether the ghosts are real, their presence in the narrative symbolizes the same themes of madness, neglect, and claustrophobic love.

A surface-level reading of "The Turn of the Screw" would likely fixate on the question of whether or not the ghosts are real. More analytical readings, however, also go on to focus on the novella's themes. Scholarly interpretation also leaves room for ambiguity. The question of whether the ghosts are real doesn't need to be resolved; in fact, it can be left deliberately unresolved.

Foster turns to another work by Henry James, the novella *Daisy Miller* (1878). Unlike *The Turn of the Screw*, this story doesn't feature any ghosts or ghouls. However, when the independent female protagonist contracts malaria and dies, Foster argues that it is actually a vampire that kills her. Foster explains that Winterbourne, the man Daisy loves, is a vampiric character; while he represents coldness, evil, and death, Daisy symbolizes innocence, youth, and life. "Daisy Miller" is a realist story and thus contains no monstrous creatures but, as Foster explains, "you don't need fangs and a cape to be a vampire."

Foster has already shown that monsters in literature often symbolize other things, and in this passage he argues that monsters themselves are not always directly represented in the text. The character of Winterbourne contains multiple layers of symbolic meaning; his cruelty and coldness symbolically mark him as a vampire, which in turn marks him as a predatory figure.

Henry James is one of many Victorian writers who use ghoulish figures in order to depict psychosocial disturbance. Edgar Allen Poe, Thomas Hardy, and J. S. Le Fanu were all influenced by the naturalist movement of the late 19th century, which explored the harsh, animalistic side of human nature. Meanwhile, 20th century writers such as Franz Kafka, Gabriel García Márquez, and Iris Murdoch depict the ways in which humans (metaphorically) devour one another through scheming, voyeurism, and exploitation. Although there are many books that also feature actual ghosts, vampires, and monsters, Foster argues that these tend to be less haunting than literature depicting the "horrors" of human psychology.

Some works of literature contain a stereotypical antagonist (villain) who is evil in a straightforward sense. However, other texts portray humanity in a more subtle and complicated way, pointing to the fact that "villains" can be sympathetic, or that the capacity to behave cruelly is within all of us. This is one example of the way that a given archetype (such as a villain) can change quite drastically over different literary periods and contexts.

CHAPTER 4: NOW, WHERE HAVE I SEEN HER BEFORE?

Foster claims that one of the delightful things about being an English professor is being able to recognize recurring characters and archetypes within literature, which he compares to "meeting old friends." As a beginner reader, it can be hard to identify the connections between different texts, authors, characters, genres, and tropes. Although some people might be particularly gifted when it comes to the ability to find these connections and patterns, this ability mostly comes as a result of practice. Reading widely and often allows people to learn how to look for patterns within and between books.

Throughout the book, Foster emphasizes the importance of practice in order to develop the skill of analytical reading. This is important, as we don't usually think of reading as a skill that needs to be practiced (unlike sports, for example, or playing an instrument). In this passage, Foster makes it clear that the more people read, the better they will be at identifying and interpreting intertextuality.

The literary critic Northrop Frye claimed that literature always grows out of other literature; in a similar vein, Foster emphasizes that "there is no such thing as a wholly original work literature." To demonstrate this point, Foster cites Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978), a novel about the Vietnam War which consists entirely of material borrowed from other sources. O'Brien uses multiple narrative frames to draw attention to this patchwork process of assembling a central story from many different fragments.

"Borrowing" from other preexisting works has something of a bad image, especially among students who are strongly discouraged from plagiarism. Here Foster shows that—unlike plagiarizing academic work—there are productive ways of "borrowing," and that it would actually be impossible to write a work of literature without doing so.

At one point, a character in *Going After Cacciato* falls down a hole in the road, an episode Foster links to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Meanwhile, the protagonist's love interest, Sarkin Aung Wan, can be viewed as a Vietnamese version of Sacajawea. The fact that Sacajawea was a real historical figure and not a literary character is not important; history is, after all, also a story, and thus the connection between Sarkin Aung Wan and Sacajawea is part of a network of intertextuality.

In addition to being examples of intertextuality, the connections Foster cites in this passage are also examples of symbol and archetype. The hole that characters fall down is a symbol of the unknown, of transformation, and of moving from one "world" to another. Sacajawea and Sarkin Aung Wan arguably originate from the same archetype of the indigenous woman who acts as a guide to invaders of her land.

Foster claims that the reason this network of intertextuality exists is because "there is only one story." This universal story has always been happening all over the world, and thus connects works of literature from ancient epics to fairy tales to 20th century memoir to contemporary TV. All stories grow out of one another, crossing boundaries of genre as well as time and place.

Note that when Foster argues that there is "one story," he doesn't mean that every work of literature in the world has the same plot, or archetypes, or themes. Rather, the single story refers to the interconnection of all works of literature, and the huge variety of themes resulting from universal human experience.

Connections between stories can be explicit, but more often they are subtle and will only be detectable by the reader who is well-practiced in pattern recognition. As a result, many readers will fail to identify intertextual references within a literary work. There is nothing wrong with this, as almost all works of literature can be enjoyed in their own right. Identification of patterns and archetypes can thus be thought of as a "bonus." Understanding intertextual gestures, parallels, and archetypes enriches our reading of a text, adding layers of meaning that make the narrative more vibrant and complex.

The sheer amount of intertextual references in a given literary work can be overwhelming, particularly when they are alluded to in subtle, barely-noticeable ways. However, as Foster explains, it is rarely necessary to identify all of the intertextual layers at play. Even finding one intertextual reference can have a transformative impact on one's interpretation of a book.

Contemporary writers in particular are known to deliberately play around with intertextuality, and the results can be difficult to untangle. Angela Carter's novel *Wise Children* (1992) portrays a family of Shakespearean actors whose lives imitate, parallel, and at times pervert narratives from Shakespeare's plays. Carter anticipates the reader's reactions and expectations in order to subvert them and catch the reader by surprise. Crucially, Carter's tricks are effective regardless of whether or not the reader is a Shakespeare buff.

Starting in the modernist period at the beginning of the 20th century, writers began consciously infusing their work with many complex intertextual references. Such experimentation creates a kind of puzzle for readers and scholars. This trend shows that many authors self-consciously anticipate how their work will be received and studied, another hallmark of 20th and 21st literature.

This brings Foster back to the earlier point that recognizing intertextual features is not necessary to understanding and enjoying a book; rather, it is a "bonus" technique that will deepen and complicate the reader's understanding of the book. Although finding intertextual references can be difficult at first, part of developing the ability to recognize these patterns consists of simply having the confidence of knowing that they are there. In this way, literature professors can help readers identify intertextual features without necessarily pointing them out directly.

Just like other aspects of literary analysis, identifying intertextuality is less a question of "proof" and more of making a convincing argument. There are cases in which we can know definitively whether or not an author intended to make an intertextual reference—for example, by looking at drafts of the novel in the author's archive. However, most of the time we must rely on our own instincts and logic.

CHAPTER 5: WHEN IN DOUBT, IT'S FROM SHAKESPEARE...

The plays of William Shakespeare have been endlessly adapted, transformed, and used loosely as inspiration for a countless number of artistic works, from TV shows to Broadway musicals. Shakespeare is "everywhere, in every literary form you can imagine," although sometimes this can be difficult to see, as many versions of Shakespeare depart drastically from the original. Not all adaptations retain the same title, not all use Elizabethan English, and many move beyond the stage or screen, appearing in forms such as an opera or a novel.

Shakespeare's plays are perhaps the preeminent example of literature taking on a "life of its own." It is pretty much impossible to avoid encountering Shakespeare's work if you live in the English-speaking world—although much of the time, you likely won't even notice it! For this reason, gaining familiarity with Shakespeare is one of the most useful things students of literature can do.

Of all the Shakespearean-inflected works, Foster declares that his favorite is Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1992), which he first referenced at the end of the previous chapter. The novel follows a dynasty of famous Shakespearean actors, and allusions to Shakespeare's plays come in the form of a spousal murder-suicide, death by drowning, women dressed as men, and more. However, Shakespeare's influence is not only found within works of art and literature. Quotations from Shakespeare's plays are so commonplace that there's a large chance you might have already heard one today.

Shakespeare's plays provide a great example of the impact literature can have on society. The English language is full of Shakespearean "neologisms," meaning words or phrases that Shakespeare invented himself. Furthermore, Shakespeare's place in our collective memory has helped shape a sense of Western cultural identity, and can connect our current society with those who lived centuries before us.

Foster argues that part of the reason why Shakespeare is so popular is because writers are obsessed with him. Quoting Shakespeare makes you seem smart, though Foster is quick to point out that you don't necessarily have to be familiar with Shakespeare's work in order to quote him. Rather, many of us have Shakespeare's words at the forefront of our minds simply because they are so emotionally powerful. Furthermore, quoting Shakespeare "confers authority" in a similar way to quoting the Bible, simply because more people have read his work than that of any other author of literature.

In this passage Foster implies that Shakespeare's impact on literature and culture is akin to that of a religion. Although this might at first seem far-fetched, Foster offers convincing examples to back up his point. The similarity between the "authority" given by quoting Shakespeare and the authority of quoting the Bible is based on the fact that Shakespeare's plays investigate the deepest questions about human existence and morality.

Another, less obvious reason why writers love Shakespeare is because they can "struggle" against him. The (sometimes fraught) relationship of writers to their literary predecessors is all part of the web of intertextuality. In T.S. Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917) the main character bashfully declares that he is no Hamlet, thereby emphasizing Shakespeare's intimidating legacy. Note that this is a typical way in which authors feature allusions to Shakespeare—while it is rare for exact passages and plots of Shakespeare's to reappear in other literary works, countless authors engage in dialogue with Shakespeare by reworking, alluding to, or responding to the Bard's work within their own.

The literary critic Harold Bloom is famous for his argument about the relationship of writers to their predecessors, which he describes as the "anxiety of influence." Here, Foster shows how this phenomenon is a crucial component of intertextuality. Foster also suggests that, due to Shakespeare's vast influence, writers end up in dialogue with his work whether they like it or not.

One example of a writer reworking Shakespeare is the South African writer Athol Fugard in his play *Master Harold... and the Boys* (1982). Fugard explores similar themes to Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part II*, invoking the figure of a young man who must become mature in order to assume power within an unjust system. In doing so, Fugard suggests that the South African Apartheid regime emerged from the same misguided, immoral thinking that stated monarchs had a "divine right" to rule. This connection both deepens our understanding of *Master Harold* and simultaneously presents *Henry IV, Part II* in a critical new light.

Here Foster returns to the idea that Shakespeare deals with themes that are universally resonant. On the surface, 1950s South Africa and medieval England are very different places, facing completely different issues. However, by alluding to "Henry IV, Part II," Fugard shows that the political climate that led to Apartheid was plagued by many of the same problems that have afflicted humanity throughout history.

CHAPTER 6: ...OR THE BIBLE

Just as writers everywhere have been reworking and responding to Shakespeare's work since his death, so too has the Bible played a fundamental role in the Western literary canon. Texts that seemingly could not be further from the Jewish or Christian religious traditions are often filled with Biblical references. Films such as *East of Eden* (1955) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) don't exactly have a holy message, but nonetheless prominently feature Biblical symbols and quotations.

Here Foster introduces an important reading technique: divorcing references to a text from the text itself. Just because a work of literature features Biblical imagery, doesn't mean the text has a religious message. Rather, much like Shakespeare, the Bible is so deeply embedded in our cultural memory that alluding to it is nearly possible to avoid.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) tells the story of Sethe, an escaped slave who is discovered by four white men on horses and kills her daughter rather than let her be taken into slavery. Although not explicitly stated in the text, the arrival of the white men represents the Apocalypse, which, according to the Gospel of St. John, will be announced by the arrival of four horsemen. Reading Morrison's novel in this way helps elucidate how Sethe could be compelled to act as she does.

Foster's reading of "Beloved" reveals how writers use Biblical narratives in metaphorical ways. When the horsemen arrive, this does not signal the apocalypse in the conventional sense of the whole world ending. Rather, it is Sethe's world that comes to a metaphorical end. Similarly, the Day of Judgment is scaled down to the personal decision Sethe makes to kill Beloved.

Meanwhile, James Joyce's short story "Araby" (1914) depicts a young Irish boy who tries (and fails) to buy a gift for the girl he has a crush on from a bazaar. This failure constitutes a humiliating loss of innocence akin to Adam and Eve's fall in the Garden of Eden. In Joyce's story, childhood is the metaphorical garden from which the young boy is expelled and to which he can never return.

Again, it may at first seem tenuous to compare the minor romantic failure of a young Irish boy to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. However, Foster's connection of the two suggests that everyone has experiences that resonate with Biblical or mythical stories, even if they appear far less dramatic.

Writers don't just borrow figures, symbols, and plots from the Bible, but also passages and phrases that might show up as titles, such as in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, Tim Parks' *Tongues of Flame* (1985), Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Go Down Moses* (1942). Often, these titles illuminate subtle Biblical themes found within the text, such as the cycle of life, death, and renewal.

Like Shakespeare, the Bible appears in all kinds of literary and cultural contexts, many of which are far from obvious. By giving their work a Biblical title, authors convey a similar literary "authority" as quoting from Shakespeare. This is not the same as religious authority, but rather results from widespread familiarity with the Bible.

Early English literature is particularly infused with references to the Bible, as writers during this era lived within a culture dominated by religion. However, even later texts—which are likely to be less overtly Christian than works such as *Beowulf* (~700) and *The Canterbury Tales* (1384)—are often steeped in religion. Writers ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Adrienne Rich feature religious allusions and themes within their work. Note that in recent eras, religious references are often ironic or critical. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) is one of the most controversial literary reworkings of a religious text—so controversial that Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwā (Islamic legal opinion) calling for Rushdie's death after the novel's publication.

As Foster shows, the way that literature represents and interacts with religion has varied greatly over different historical periods. For this reason, it is useful to have a basic understanding of the historical and cultural context in which a work of literature was written. However, as the example of "The Satanic Verses" shows, the role of religion at a given time is complex and multifaceted. Even with a particular society at a particular time, attitudes about the relationship between religion and literature can vary in an extreme fashion.

Many characters in works of literature are also named after Biblical figures. This can provide information about a character's personality; on a more complex level, it can also highlight how naming works within the world of the novel. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) the central family names its children by randomly picking words from the Bible, a practice that points to the extreme trust people place on Scripture.

Here Foster encourages the reader to think of names as symbols. Whereas in real life it is impossible to anticipate a newborn's personality and give them an appropriate name in advance, authors often name their characters strategically in order to convey information about them. In "Song of Solomon," meanwhile, the act of naming itself is a symbol.

Foster admits it can be difficult to identify Biblical allusions if one is not a scholar of the Bible. On the other hand, it is possible to track references through connections to older texts, many of which ultimately lead back to the Bible. Although recognizing Biblical references does not always drastically alter the interpretation of a given text, it does serve as a useful reminder that the plots and themes of recent literature are usually as old as the Bible (if not older!). When we pay attention to Biblical allusions, stories that can at first appear specific to their historical moment are often revealed to be timeless and universal.

Although having extensive knowledge of the Bible would help any student of literature, perhaps more useful from a literary perspective would be to have knowledge of the ways that the Bible has been used in literature. Once again, Foster emphasizes that the way to become better at analyzing literature is to read widely.

CHAPTER 7: HANSELDEE AND GRETELDUM

As previous chapters have shown, authors frequently borrow from the existing literary canon in their own work. The canon refers to an elusive and ever-changing list of literary texts that critics feel are essential to understanding the history of English literature as a whole. In the USA, the canon is not an official list, but rather a notionally agreed-upon group of books that is constantly being amended, updated, and fought over. The canon changes as society changes; whereas in previous times, it was exclusively dominated by white male authors from Europe and North America, nowadays it features more female writers, writers of color, and writers from the Global South.

Knowledge of the canon is extremely useful for any student of literature, but it is important to bear in mind that the canon is controversial and that just because a text isn't "canonical" doesn't mean it isn't an important or enjoyable book to read. Although a lot of time is spent arguing over which books should be considered canonical, some scholars have proposed abolishing the canon altogether, arguing that it is an inherently elitist and unproductive way of thinking about literature.

Although it has historically been common for authors to "borrow" from the canon, nowadays many indisputably canonical texts will not be familiar to the average reader (most Americans, for example, have not read Homer's *Iliad*). If an author references a text like the *Iliad*, many readers will fail to notice, and may even feel alienated and frustrated by encountering references that they cannot understand. As a solution to this problem, many authors have chosen to borrow from children's literature—everything from folktales to *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) to *The Cat in the Hat* (1957).

Historically, most people were introduced to the canon through their education (this is particularly true of writers, who tended to be well-educated). However, as time has passed, the idea that all students should read a certain set of texts has fallen out of favor, and literary curricula are thus now more idiosyncratic. At the same time, much of children's literature (including fairy tales) has endured in popularity.

According to Foster, the fairy tale with the most enduring appeal is "Hansel and Gretel." This story centers around the classic theme of lost children who cannot find their way home, and—although it comes in many forms—tends to play on cultural anxieties around this issue. For example, in Robert Coover's "The Gingerbread House" (1969), the witch kills the doves who eat the breadcrumbs (as opposed to killing the children themselves) and is identified only by a flash of black rag at the end of the story. Coover is aware of the fame of "Hansel and Gretel" and thus only needs to hint at the fate of the children in order to induce a shudder in the reader.

Here, Foster makes clear the connection between fairy tales and real life. Although "Hansel and Gretel" might seem fantastical and silly, it is in fact rooted in one of the most fundamental fears of humanity—the fear of losing children and of ourselves becoming lost and vulnerable. Following this parallel, it becomes clear that the witch is an archetype related to figures such as the older seducer, the sexual predator, or even the corrupting influence of society.

Some writers deliberately subvert well-known fairy tales; this is the case with Angela Carter who, in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), revises stories such as "Bluebeard" and "Puss-in-Boots" in order to cast them in a more feminist light. Both Carver and Coover demonstrate that authors do not need to lift everything from a fairy tale, but can pick and choose certain elements. These elements could be as subtle as "the sense of lostness" or the danger of temptation. Like Shakespeare and the Bible, fairy tales are all part of "one big story" and so are *inherently* connected to later works of literature.

It might at first seem trivial to update fairy tales with a feminist twist. After all, aren't they just silly children's stories? However, as Foster's mention of intertextuality shows, fairy tales actually have a profound impact on literature and culture. By highlighting the sexism in fairy tales, Carter suggests that there is sexism at the very heart of the culture of our society.

This might sound ironic, Foster admits—and that's the point. Fairy tales represent an oversimplified, morally straightforward version of the world, and thus their adaptation in the modern era is almost always laced with irony. At the same time, certain fairy tale archetypes seem perfectly suited to the modern world, such as children who've wandered far from home. In both cases, borrowing from fairy tales allows authors to create a mix of strangeness and familiarity within their work, and it is this mix that creates the depth and vibrancy of good literature.

Fairy tales don't just exist to entertain children; their main purpose is arguably to teach children about proper behavior and morality. As our moral views have shifted over time, fairy tales can end up seeming outdated and even disturbing. When more recent authors "borrow" from fairy tales, therefore, they often use irony to highlight the discrepancy between these different moral codes.

CHAPTER 8: IT'S GREEK TO ME

Shakespeare, the Bible, and fairy tales are all types of myth. That doesn't mean they are not true (although, of course, some are not) but that they are stories that aim to "explain ourselves to ourselves." Myths have an important place in a culture's collective memory, and can be used to provide a sense of national identity. This is why Richard Wagner, for example, used Germanic myths as the inspiration for his epic operas, or why Leslie Marmon Silko used Laguna Pueblo myths as the basis for "Yellow Woman" (1974).

The explanatory side of myths can be thought of as a way of answering life's biggest questions, such as "Who am I?" "Why do people exist?" and "How does the world work?" It is possible to argue that all literature speaks to these questions on some level, and that all literature could thus be considered a form of myth. On the other hand, myths answer these questions in a much more explicit way than most other forms of literature, which is what makes them unique.

In Western culture, we are particularly likely to associate the word "myth" with Ancient Greek civilization. Stories such as the myth of Icarus are so embedded in our culture that sometimes people incorrectly assume contemporary literature is based on them. This is true, for example, of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), which contains flying people that are based on the "flying African" myth and not the myth of Icarus. On the other hand, many literary works *can* be traced back to this myth, such as W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1940) and William Carlos Williams' "Landscape with Fall of Icarus" (1966), which are themselves inspired by a 16th century painting of Icarus.

Although Ancient Greek myths are ubiquitous in Western literature, it is important to remember that the West is just one of many cultures, each with their own foundational set of myths. Like literature in general, myths take on lives of their own—as shown by the two poems based on a painting that was in turn based on the myth of Icarus. These examples show how complex and multi-layered the web of intertextuality can become.

Writers often transpose Greek myths into completely new contexts. In "Omeros" (1990), Derek Walcott features characters with names from Greek myth (Hector, Helen, Achille) who live in a Caribbean fishing village. Although the original Greek myths, such as the *Iliad*, were extremely specific to the historical moment in which they were produced, almost as soon as this moment passed new writers were taking the themes of Greek myth—such as the ideal of a hero—and using them in new ways. These themes, rather than being tied to Ancient Greek culture, are thought to be universal.

The concept of the Greek hero is a classic example of archetype. The original archetype had very particular qualities, such as masculine beauty and skill in battle; however, later writers have adapted the archetype in new and ironic or playful ways. This in turn raises the question of what constitutes a hero in a more general sense—what qualities does a person need to have in order to qualify as heroic?

As with reworkings of the Bible and fairy tales, Greek myths are often updated in an ironic way. Both James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and the Coen Brothers film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) are modeled on *The Odyssey*, but refuse to portray their "heroes" as noble or heroic in the traditional sense. Likewise, Greek myths can appear in unlikely settings, such as the *Indiana Jones* films or the young adult novel series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, which center around a teenage boy who finds out he is the son of the Greek sea-god, Poseidon.

The fact that the young adult "Percy Jackson" novels center around Greek myths might highlight the myths' enduring power. Although the Ancient Greeks might seem distant from us, in reality the content of their myths—sex, adventure, debauchery, friendship—is startlingly similar to what you might find in the average contemporary novel or Hollywood movie.

CHAPTER 9: IT'S MORE THAN JUST RAIN OR SNOW

Foster asks: why has it become a cliché to begin a story with the phrase "It was a dark and stormy night?" The answer, according to Foster, is that "weather is never just weather." Types of weather often have significant symbolic meaning; rain, for example, invokes the Biblical story of Noah, and with it the fear of drowning and the promise of beginning anew.

As the Biblical story of Noah suggests, the reason why weather has so much symbolic power is because it is a natural force that for many years was mysterious and inexplicable. Humans were unable to predict when a storm or drought would strike, and thus ascribed moral and religious reasons for variations in the weather.

Weather can also be a useful plot device, as it forces characters into acts and situations they might not have willingly chosen themselves. In Thomas Hardy's short story "The Three Strangers" (1883), a hangman and escaped prisoner on death row are forced by rain to seek shelter in the same house. Note that, as this story proves, weather is an equalizing force, affecting the most and least powerful in society and sometimes forcing them to interact with one another.

Authors rely on plot devices like the weather because—although they are in control of their narratives—too much unlikely coincidence will seem unrealistic. Hardy needs an excuse (such as rain) to drive three characters together in an unlikely meeting. This is particularly true as Hardy was writing in the realist tradition.

Rain is often depicted as having a cleansing or restorative effect on characters. It can "wash away" illusions, as happens to Hagar in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Sometimes, writers toy with the conflicting meanings of rain—on one level it is associated with cold, illness, and suffering, and on another with spring, birth, and renewal. In "The Dead," James Joyce exposes this tension through the story of a young boy so in love that he stood in the rain for a week and later got sick and died. Indeed, modernist writers are particularly likely to invoke the associations of rain with spring and hope on an ironic level. (Think of the famous first line of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922): "April is the cruelest month.")

Here Foster shows that a single symbol can have several distinct, even contradictory meanings. Although it might at first seem strange that rain is simultaneously known to mean spring/birth and illness/death, this in fact corresponds more accurately to real life than if every symbol had only one set of associations. After all, a single phenomenon like rain does indeed have a variety of contradictory meanings in different contexts in real life. Writers like Joyce are then able to exploit the multifaceted, contrasting feelings associated with rain in creative ways.

Rainbows are another important weather symbol, with close ties to the Biblical story of Noah, in which God signals through a rainbow that He will never again flood the entire world. Fog, meanwhile, is used to symbolize mystery, ambiguity, and danger. Finally, snow is the type of weather with perhaps the greatest range of meanings. Depending on how it is used in a literary work, it could be joyful, cleansing, claustrophobic, or threatening. In Wallace Steven's poem "The Snow Man" (1923), snow is even used to represent nothing—or, more accurately, nothing*ness*, particularly as it is constructed within human thought.

Wallace Steven's "The Snow Man" is an excellent example of the way writers use external spaces (such as a snow-covered landscape) to represent internal consciousness. Sometimes the external landscape coheres with the inner thoughts and feelings of characters in a work of literature, and sometimes it is a marked contrast; both techniques create a strong poetic effect.

CHAPTER 10: NEVER STAND NEXT TO THE HERO

Foster explains that one of his favorite jokes in the classroom comes in the form of pointing out how quickly Hector's charioteers are killed in *The Iliad*. This is the problem of surrogacy, or the fact that characters close to the hero/main character are likely to be killed because the main character won't be. In *The Iliad*, Patroclus is Achilles' best friend since boyhood—they even grew up together like brothers. One day, Patroclus wears Achilles' armor in battle and is literally killed as Achilles' surrogate. Rather than protecting him, Patroclus' proximity and resemblance to Achilles put him in even greater danger.

It's useful to recognize which character is the protagonist (or main character) and which is the surrogate (or sidekick). This may be obvious if, as in the Iliad, *the protagonist is clearly described as the "hero" of the narrative. In other circumstances, this requires the reader to think structurally. How soon is each character introduced? Which character is the reader most encouraged to sympathize with? These questions can help in identifying the protagonist.*

Characters' deaths are important plot devices. Patroclus' death, for example, leads to an important and moving scene during which Achilles mourns his friend through ritual debasement. It also prompts Achilles to receive new armor forged by the gods, an important step in becoming "the greatest hero ever." In fact, the death of the hero's best friend is such a useful plot point that it happens all the time—think of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) or Chingachgook in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826).

Here Foster displays a good example of how archetype, pattern recognition, and intertextuality can improve our understanding of a text. Through comparing different works of literature, Foster finds a pattern: the death of the best friend (archetype) being used in order to advance the plot.

Although this might seem unjust, it is important to remember that "characters are not people." Although they may be based on real, living humans, characters are not real or alive. They are simply figments of the author's and readers' imaginations. While writers etch out an impression of a given character, readers inevitably "shape, or rather reshape, characters in order to make sense of them." This makes us sympathetic to characters and invested in their fate.

The statement "characters are not real people" might seem glaringly obvious. However, Foster emphasizes this point in order to help the reader understand that characters have an instrumental purpose in a role of literature, meaning they exist in order to serve a particular role in the plot, not as an end in themselves.

With this understanding of characters in mind, Foster returns to the surrogacy trope. He examines three 20th century films that explore the idea of the dangers posed by a young, immature, and reckless character: *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), and *Top Gun* (1986). All three movies feature a young man "at war with the world" who is forced to learn a terrible lesson when he accidentally causes the death of someone close to him. It is necessary that it is this proximate person who dies, and not the character himself—otherwise there would be no opportunity for the character to grow.

Again, Foster uses analysis of intertextuality, patterns, and archetype in order to build a deeper understanding of three different, yet interconnected texts (note that movies can also be considered texts). In this example, the main archetype is the "young man at war with the world"; however, a secondary archetype is also at play—the close relation whose death is ultimately caused by the young man.

Secondary characters can be mercilessly killed off because works of literature are not fair—unlike in the real world, some characters' lives matter more than others. The novelist and critic E.M. Forster explains that some literary characters are "round," while others are "flat"––meaning some characters are complex, contradictory, and capable of growth, whereas others have a more simplistic, instrumental role to play. In real life, of course, everyone is a "round character," but this is not true of works of literature, because characters are not actual people.

When reading a work of literature in a surface-level way, readers will likely not consciously distinguish between round and flat characters, and may feel sympathy every time something bad happens to a character (unless they are a villain!). However, deeper reading considers distinctions between the level of importance of different characters, seeking to identify why certain characters are made round and others flat.

There are further reasons why not all characters are "round." Firstly, if all characters were round, the reader would not know on whom they should focus their attention. Creating flat characters also saves the author the effort (and space on the page!), as the author does not have to develop a full, detailed back-story for everyone who happens to feature in the work. Furthermore, it would simply not be necessary to include this information for many characters, as the purpose they serve is more akin to a literary device (like rain) than an intricate depiction of a human person.

Foster is speaking in general terms here, and the use of round and flat characters he describes varies widely depending on the work of literature under consideration. Some works, for example, have only one or two characters, and it is likely those characters will be round. Other texts mention hundreds of characters, many of whom are flat. Often, these numerous flat characters are used to create a sense of realism.

Note that although it is possible to speak of a binary between flat and round characters, in reality it is more of a continuum, with some characters being rounder—meaning more detailed, complex, and important—than others. Some authors rebel against the concept of having completely flat characters, and try to make each character at least a little round by including unique, memorable details about them. Other authors have taken minor characters from preexisting literature and put them in the spotlight of new works, such as Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), which borrows its titular characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Although Foster maintains that "characters are not people" and should not be considered by the same standards as we consider real humans, in this passage it is clear that some authors do think of character construction in an ethical way. There are several reasons for why this might be the case, one of which is that literature is thought to shape people's sense of morality. As Foster points out elsewhere in the text, reading literature is a way of seeing the world from another person's perspective, which is only possible through the use of round characters.

Aristotle argued that "plot is character revealed in action," meaning that plots must be driven by the choices, actions, and development of characters. Nowadays, we tend to equally follow this maxim in the other direction—characters are a function of plot. All characters, flat and round, share the task of providing narrative momentum, moving the story toward its conclusion.

At the chapter's conclusion, Foster returns to the idea that characters have an instrumental use in literature. This is not to say they are less or more important than the plot overall, but that the characters and plot function together in order to create an impact on the reader.

INTERLUDE: DOES HE MEAN THAT?

According to Foster's argument so far, authors seem to be doing a great many things at once: juggling intertextual references, creating multiple layers of symbolic meaning, following preexisting patterns, and so on. Foster acknowledges that it might be hard to believe that one person could be doing all these things at once, and to say conclusively that authors do this would be incorrect, "or at least misleading." The reality is that it is, of course, impossible to know what happens inside an author's head.

Recall that one of the main differences between surface reading and deep reading is that, in the latter category, readers are performing a productive *role; they are creating analysis, rather than simply consuming the text. Some of the layers of meaning Foster mentions in this passage are at least partially created by the reader, but are done so in conjunction with the text, and not independent of it.*

On the other hand, there are groups of writers who we know made conscious choices in the way they including symbolic, intertextual, archetypical, and ironic meaning; these are called the "Intentionalists," and many were part of the modernist movement. Authors like James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf are known to have deliberately construct their texts using the techniques Foster has identified (along with others). These choices were conscious and intentional, emerging from the authors' familiarity with previous eras of literature as well as Greek myth, religion, and psychoanalytic thought.

The Intentionalists were reacting against a period of cultural history known as Romanticism, when people believed that artists should create work organically, according to the natural inspiration of genius. In contrast, the Intentionalists meticulously planned their work, believing that creating powerful art was the result of conscious decisions, not sudden flashes of inspiration.

However, we also have clues that indicate that writers prior to the modernist period also deliberately infused their texts with these many complicated layers of meaning. Before 1900, almost all Western authors would have received extensive education in the classics and the work of poets such as Dante and Shakespeare. Furthermore, writers tend to be "aggressive readers" whose love of literature means they are familiar with a big range of their literary ancestors. Although we can never know exactly how much of what goes into a work is conscious, we should always try to be alert to as many clues as possible. Foster suggests that we probably underestimate how much of what we encounter in a text is the result of deliberate planning on the part of the author.

Foster's advice to "practice" reading in order to familiarize yourself with intertextuality is a doctrine that most writers have followed enthusiastically. In the past, it was widely held that people learned to write by (literally) copying the work of great authors. As Foster argues in the chapters on Shakespeare and the Bible, quoting and referencing major canonical texts is a way of creating a sense of authority. This point of view supports Foster's assertion that authors probably do include intertextual references on purpose much of the time.

CHAPTER 11: ...MORE THAN IT'S GONNA HURT YOU: CONCERNING VIOLENCE

Foster returns to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Although the novel focuses on one act of violence in particular (Sethe's murder of her daughter), this single act is part of a much broader phenomenon: the violence of the transatlantic slave trade. Violence may be interpersonal, but it is almost always related to larger cultural forces. Furthermore, while in real life violence can be meaningless, in literature it often has multiple layers of meaning, whether symbolic, allegorical, religious, political, etc. Even when violence is depicted in order to show the senseless cruelty of the universe (such as in Robert Frost's poem "Out, Out—" (1916)), this still a meaningful message about the world.

One of the reasons why people write and read literature is to make sense of a world that can at times seem senselessly unjust and cruel. This does not mean literature necessarily serves a redemptive function; as the example of Robert Frost's "Out, Out—" shows, sometimes literature simply reinforces the idea that the world is senselessly cruel. On the other hand, even this rather bleak conclusion is perhaps made slightly more hopeful by being placed in a poem, which is arguably a gesture of communication and solidarity.

Violence is a huge topic in literature, and even authors noted for the lack of activity in their work (such as Woolf and Chekhov) frequently kill off characters. Foster identifies two categories of violence in literature: violence that characters enact upon one another, and harmful events that happen to characters in order to advance the plot. Although it might seem strange to think of a character dying of heart disease as "violence," Foster maintains that such plot points are indeed violent.

The distinction Foster draws between character-based and plot-based violence can seem unclear, especially considering characters aren't real and are all actually under the control of the author. One way to understand it is by asking if there is a human perpetrator of the violence depicted within the book; if there is, it is character-based, and if not, plot-based.

Returning to the question of meaningful versus meaningless violence, Foster argues that the only major literary genre in which violence is "meaningless" are mysteries. In these books, the fact that a character has died (sometimes a terribly gruesome death!) is not important in itself, but only as a device that triggers the process of discovering how and why it happened. In the rest of literature, violence tends to carry major symbolic significance. In D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920), for example, the physical fights between Gudrun and Ursula symbolize clashes in the social system of industrial capitalism. In Lawrence's novella *The Fox* (1922), the murder of Banford represents the restoration of the traditional sexual order.

In order to understand the symbolic significance of violent events in literature, it is helpful to consider the fact that every act of violence is a struggle between two (or more) forces. Consider one of these forces—what does it represent, and what might it be struggling against? Through this logic, Foster is able to determine that violent acts between individual characters in a book are symbolic of much larger phenomena, such as social and ideological battles over class and gender.

The work of William Faulkner is enormously violent, reflecting the legacy of tension and turmoil in the Southern US. Faulkner explores the ways that violence can result from the restriction of people's agency and bodily autonomy, such as when Eunice, a slave whose daughter by rape becomes a victim of incest, kills herself in *Go Down, Moses* (1942).

As Foster points out in this passage, characters can also commit acts of violence against themselves. Indeed, acts of self-harm and suicide were sometimes the only way for slaves to protest the unbearably cruel system under which they were forced to live.

Of course, character-on-character acts constitute only one kind of violence—what about Foster's second category, violence chosen by the author as a plot device? Both Fay Weldon's *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1988) and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) feature characters who fall to earth after their airplanes explode. In Weldon's novel, this event symbolizes a fall from innocence, whereas in Rushdie's it constitutes a fall from a state of corruption into a new demonic existence. The difference in the resonance of these parallel violent events illustrates the fact that violent acts never mean the same thing in literature, even while they always mean *something*.

The meaning of violent acts can be contentious, as can all symbols in literature. It is sometimes unclear what a particular act of violence means, especially given the fact that violence in real life is so often totally unjust and meaningless. However, this lack of clarity does not indicate that acts of violence have no meaning at all; rather, it gives an opportunity for scholars, students, and other readers to have interesting and productive debates over their significance.

CHAPTER 12: IS THAT A SYMBOL?

Foster says that if you're wondering whether something in a piece of literature is a symbol, it's pretty safe to say that yes, it is. What's rarely clear is the exact symbolic meaning. In fact, symbols that only have one specific meaning aren't technically symbols at all, but allegories. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) is a good example of an allegory; it's clear that Orwell hopes to convey one specific message about the nature of political power and revolution, a message that message is hidden behind the novel's farmyard setting.

An allegory is a text (or image) that has a hidden meaning beyond the story being told on the surface. Although this is similar to a symbol, the important distinction is that allegories have a single meaning that the reader (or viewer) is supposed to discover. Allegories are not designed to produce multiple interpretations that people will argue over, but rather to lead the reader through clues to find the one "true" meaning.

Symbols, on the other hand, remain open to multiple possible interpretations. In E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), an alleged assault takes place inside a cave. What does the cave symbolize? Early humans lived in caves, and it's possible the cave points to a sense of primitivism. But caves are also dark, and thus the cave could represent the (sometimes frightening) mystery of our inner consciousness. If the cave is empty, it might symbolize the Void, the eerie sense of nothingness that has the tendency to fill people with a sense of existential dread. The cave is also in India, and the woman who thinks she was assaulted within it is white, suggesting that the cave might have racial connotations. Ultimately, whichever reading of the cave most appeals to us is likely the result of the individual background we have as readers.

As Foster argues throughout the book, contrasting interpretations of literature are not a negative thing. Rather, they are productive and stimulating, and can make literature seem richer, more sophisticated, and more challenging. It would be possible to argue that the cave in A Passage to India betrays several of the meanings Foster lists at once; however, generally literary criticism seeks to identify a single interpretation that the critic finds most interesting, resonant, or convincing.

Even when it seems likely that a given symbol will have a fixed, consistent meaning, this is in fact rarely the case. Mark Twain, Hart Crane, and T.S. Eliot are all male Midwestern authors who, despite coming from different generations, were at one point all alive at the same time. All three feature rivers in their writing—and yet in each case, the river takes on a completely different meaning. This is not to say that there is never any overlap or intertextual resonance, but that a river in one work can have a totally distinct and contradictory meaning from the same river in another.

Here Foster identifies one method of deducing meaning from a work of literature—considering historical context and intertextual connections—while showing that this method can be limited. After all, relying on historical connections alone might have us believe that Twain, Crane, and Eliot were interested in exploring the same ideas or themes in their work, when in fact this is not the case.

Foster admits that his favored method of literary analysis tends to emphasize the historical context in which a piece of literature was written—this is called a historicist reading. However, this is only one method, and should not be taken as definitive; indeed, the clashes between contrasting interpretations are a positive quality of literary analysis, and Foster encourages readers to take pleasure in disagreement.

While it may seem logical to always take into account the historical context of a work of literature, there is in fact a strong backlash against this interpretive technique. Most famously, the New Criticism movement argued that texts should be considered simply as they are, independent of any context.

Readers often assume that only objects can be symbols, but actually, so can actions and events. The poet Robert Frost is "probably the champion of symbolic action," centering poems around the symbolism of acts such as mowing a field with a scythe ("Mowing" (1913)). In this instance, the particular act of mowing stands for labor more generally, or solitary action, or perhaps something else entirely.

As the example of Frost's poem "Moving" shows, the symbolic meaning of a symbol doesn't have to be wildly different from its surface-level meaning. Indeed, the act of mowing and concepts such as solitary action or labor are clearly deeply connected.

Foster advises readers to avoid making definitive statements about symbolic meaning, but also to trust their existing knowledge of literature as well as their instincts when it comes to figuring out what a given part of a text might symbolize. Although readers shouldn't invent meaning out of thin air, the act of reading is nonetheless an active, imaginative exercise, and we shouldn't be afraid to be creative in our experiments with interpretation.

In this passage, Foster suggests that engaging in successful literary criticism requires having a certain disposition—confident, but not arrogant. Essentially, readers need to believe that their own interpretation is valid but that other people's are, too.

CHAPTER 13: IT'S ALL POLITICAL

Nowadays we tend to interpret Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) as a festive story with a moral message, but in fact the story was written with a very particular political context in mind. Through the story, Dickens attempts to discredit Thomas Malthus' view that giving more food to the poor would increase poverty, creating an endless spiral. However, Dickens presents this criticism subtly, such that anyone without solid knowledge of Victorian opinions on social welfare would likely not pick up on the political message of *A Christmas Carol* at all.

Here Foster gives an example of when knowledge of historical context can be highly important. Indeed, it is no coincidence that more political schools of literary criticism (such as Marxist or feminist criticism) tend to place particular emphasis on historical context, as this information helps to reveal the ways in which a particular text expresses political opinion.

Foster argues that writing with an explicit, straightforward political agenda tends to be unappealing to everyone except those living in the same time and place as the text was written, and who share the author's views. On the other hand, "political" writing—note the quotation marks—is rich, fascinating, and important. Foster argues that "all writing is political on some level," and that one way to locate political elements in a work of literature is to examine how the lives of the characters fit within the society in which they live. Similarly, if a literary work features characters from the ruling class, an author might convey disdain for the hierarchical class system by presenting these characters in an unflattering light.

Again, historical context is critical here. Some texts depict members of the ruling class in order to criticize the class system, however many texts focus on the ruling class simply because, for centuries, this was dictated by social and cultural convention. Indeed, some authors deliberately deviated from this convention in order to defy the notion that the upper class were more interesting, important, or morally significant than the working class.

Discovering the political angle within a work of literature can be challenging, and it helps to bear in mind the author's background, the historical context in which they lived, and any sociocultural traditions they might be writing *against* (for example Edgar Allen Poe and Washington Irving, while they hardly presented the USA as a utopia, nonetheless wrote in a way that was critical of the European tradition). Some literary scholars, particularly those who are themselves politically-oriented, argue that every work of literature is political because it is "either part of the social problem or part of the solution." Foster doesn't quite agree, but does maintain that almost all works of literature somehow address the political world around them.

The difference between Foster's view here and those of the scholars he identifies as more political is that Foster is primarily interested in the aesthetic dimensions of a work of literature, meaning the creative decisions the writer has made and the impact these have on the reader. More political scholars may read literature less as an end in itself and more as a means through which to discover different historical realities and opinions, or to debate issues such as class-, gender-, or race-based inequality.

For this reason, it is very important to bear in mind the social and political context in which a work of literature was written. This can be especially helpful because historically, many authors—such as women and members of the working-class—would have expected to have their work judged differently based on the social and political climate in which they lived.

Some scholars argue that authors who are not white, male, or upper-class are "marked" as political whether they wish to write political literature or not. These authors are seen as challenging the status quo just by picking up the pen.

CHAPTER 14: YES, SHE'S A CHRIST FIGURE, TOO

Despite religious diversity and the separation of church and state, America is a Christian culture; most cultural artifacts have been influenced by Christianity on some level, and thus it is useful to have some basic knowledge of Christianity if you are studying Western European and American literature. (This would be true of knowing about Islam and Hinduism if, for example, you study Indian literature.) It is particularly useful to be able to recognize attributes linked to Jesus. These include personal qualities such as being forgiving and self-sacrificing, historical details such as the fact that he was a carpenter, and the miracles he is thought to have performed, such as walking on water.

Like Shakespeare's work or literature in general, the figure of Jesus has developed a life of its own. This means that Jesus as a character or archetype has a significant place in literature and culture independent of the particular meaning for Christians. As Foster's description shows, the archetype of Jesus involves both historical facts about the real Jesus and personal qualities that Christians associate with him. Literary characters that possess either of these groups of qualities may qualify as Christ figures.

Reading like a professor requires you to "put aside your belief system" and enter a more analytical mindset. For example, Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) features an old fisherman who is kind and pure of heart, who endures great physical suffering, and who even at one point lies in his bed in the shape of a cross. Regardless of your relationship to Christianity, you should be able to recognize the symbolic connection between this character and Jesus. And although this is a rather obvious example, there are lots of instances when a literary character is more subtly linked to Jesus—including characters who are women.

It might appear that Foster is offering contradictory advice here: he at once suggests that we should use what we know about the Bible in literary interpretation, and that we should "put aside" our beliefs when reading literature. However, this is not really a contradiction at all; Foster emphasizes that we should use our knowledge to aid our reading, but not our feelings and beliefs. The importance of not reading from your own particular perspective is further detailed in Chapter 24.

When searching for Christ figures, it helps not to read too literally. For example, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984) features a character who, on the surface, does not seem to resemble Jesus at all: she is selfish, an alcoholic, a sex worker, and a bad mother. At the same time, she has disciple figures, and after dying in a blizzard, returns as a ghost. Foster admits that this may not be enough to convince all readers of this character's status as a Christ figure, and that the suggestion might alarm the more religious reader. On the other hand, Foster reminds the reader to step back from their personal beliefs (or lack thereof) in order to see the broader ways in which Christ figures operate in literature, which is often as signifiers of sacrifice, redemption, and hope.

As Foster argues throughout, interpreting a book in a literal manner inhibits deeper, more sophisticated understanding. As much as a Christian reader might be offended at Christ being symbolized by an alcoholic sex worker, an atheist might object to the notion that Christ figures always represent redemption and hope. In both cases, the readers' personal views obscure their understanding of what the author may be aiming to convey.

CHAPTER 15: FLIGHTS OF FANCY

Although air travel is a recent invention, humans have fantasized about flying for thousands of years. Returning to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Foster suggests that the "flying African" myth represents the desire for freedom in the midst of captivity. In Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), a woman is ironically trapped by her ability to fly, as due to this skill she is forced to perform with a circus. Although this meaning may seem oppositional to Morrison's, its ironic power rests on the shared assumption that flight usually means freedom.

While some symbols are notoriously complicated and ambiguous, others are far more straightforward. It would be hard to argue against the idea that flight symbolizes freedom, even if that symbolic meaning is then ironically manipulated and subverted, as Angela Carter does in "Nights at the Circus."

Foster again highlights novels by Fay Weldon and Salman Rushdie that feature characters expelled from exploded planes mid-flight. The fact that these characters survive their fall is a miracle defying the laws of science, which in turn invokes themes of rebirth and hope. At the same time, these are rather exceptional events; most characters, like most real people, do not often literally fly through the air. Yet authors allude to themes of flying and freedom in other ways, for example, through the use of bird imagery.

As Foster points out here, many authors—especially those working in the realist tradition—might wish to avoid portraying their characters actually flying through the air. Although it might seem obvious, this is an important point to bear in mind. When symbolism and imagery seems unnecessarily difficult to identify, the reason for this may be because the author is working within the confines of realism.

Another symbolic way in which characters take flight is through the flight of the soul from the body at the point of death. This is originally a mostly Christian image, relying as it does on the journey up to a heaven in the sky (as opposed to the Greek belief in the Underworld below). Once again, flight is associated with freedom—in this instance freedom from the trials of a physical, mortal existence.

Ideas such as the soul rising after death can seem fundamental, when in fact they did not always exist and correspond to a specific tradition (although also to other traditions than Christianity, some of them older). Even the association of flight with freedom is thus contingent (historically specific), and may change in the future.

CHAPTER 16: IT'S ALL ABOUT SEX...

English professors' tendency to find sexual subtext everywhere can be traced back to Sigmund Freud. Although Freud's obsession with subconscious sexual meaning is now somewhat discredited within the field he founded—psychoanalysis—it remains a hugely important part of literary scholarship. Thanks to Freud, pretty much anything can be interpreted as representing sexuality, a fact that fits well with the literary practice of the symbolic imagination.

Psychoanalytic theory can sometimes seem so far-fetched that it reads like fiction; it is no coincidence, therefore, that Freud's ideas have found more enduring resonance within literature than they have within psychiatry. Indeed, Freud is a great example of how reading skills can transfer to real life, and vice versa.

Although Freud's work took off at the beginning of the 20th century, sexual symbolism in literature has existed for as long as literature itself. In Chivalric Romance, for example, knights searched for a Holy Grail, often in order to provoke an increase in fertility in their home kingdom. This Holy Grail was in the form of a chalice, an object connected to female sexuality. If this seems far-fetched, think of the fact that as recently as the 1950s, film directors were forced to rely on the image of curtains closing in order to signal to audiences that two characters were having sex. (Anything more explicit would risk censorship.)

Sex is one of the most important and fundamental aspects of the human experience, and one of the only things people still regularly do today that is in many ways the same as it was thousands of years ago. Although our social, moral, and scientific views about sex have changed over the centuries, the prevalence of sexual symbolism is one of the most enduring components of human culture.

Foster considers a range of images used to symbolize sexual acts—bedrooms and sleeping compartments, a train entering a tunnel, a key being placed in a lock or a bowl. Indeed, it is possible to sort these symbols into two categories: those representing male genitalia (keys, guns, swords) and those representing female genitalia (chalices, bowls).

Of course, there is more to sexuality than male and female genitalia, and readers should also be attentive to instances when other body parts and sexual gestures are represented through symbol. The examples Foster gives provide a framework for the kind of imaginative reading necessary to identify sexual symbolism.

One of the authors most associated with sexuality is D.H. Lawrence, whose novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) was famously banned for obscenity. However, Foster argues that Lawrence's "sexiest scene" does not come from that novel, but is in fact a homoerotic wrestling scene between two men in *Women in Love*. Foster also cites a scene from Lawrence's story "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1932), which he claims features a little boy describing masturbation. Although this reading can provoke suspicion from students, Foster argues that—as a member of the first generation to read Freud—it is not surprising that Lawrence would have written about Oedipal masturbatory desire.

Here Foster provides two key examples of sexual dynamics that were considered taboo in the past: homosexuality and masturbation. Because these were so controversial, their appearance in texts will likely be heavily disguised, and may not have even been a deliberate choice on the part of the author. The word "homoerotic" refers to interactions between people of the same gender that are not obviously or consciously sexual, but nonetheless contain erotic overtones.

Sex scenes are "coded" (represented in indirect, symbolic terms) not only because historically literature featuring explicit sex has been censored, but also because these coded scenes can be even more intense than direct depiction. Rather than shocking the reader with explicit descriptions of sex, authors are able to present the subject matter more subtly, thereby revealing more numerous and complicated layers of meaning.

As the next chapter will show, portraying sex explicitly is difficult, and the result is often not very sexy. Furthermore, depictions of the act of sex itself are often less emotionally charged than the allusions, innuendo, flirtation, and restraint that comprise sexualized interaction but not sex itself.

CHAPTER 17: ...EXCEPT SEX

Scenes that explicitly feature sex are notoriously difficult to write, which is another reason why authors often choose to avoid them. When a work of literature does involve an explicit sex scene, this event almost certainly contains layers of meaning beyond sex (if a sex scene only means sex, then this is likely pornography). Although authors have not been able to write explicitly about sex without getting censored for very long (only a few decades, in fact—and such writing would still, in many contexts, warrant a book being banned), ways of describing sex have quickly become clichéd.

The reason why sex is difficult to depict in literature may be because of our enduring hang-ups about sexuality, which perhaps result in lingering embarrassment and awkwardness. On the other hand, some people argue that sex is one of the human experiences that cannot be articulated—it is beyond words, and any attempt to describe it in literature fails to accurately capture the experience.

There is a famous sex scene in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), in which the narrator describes the sexual act as lasting "precisely ninety seconds" from start to finish. Foster argues that in specifying this length of time, Fowles is neither ridiculing the male character's virility nor suggesting that all Victorians had extremely quick sex. Rather, in the context of the novel, the woman in the scene represents the temptations of a freer, more modern life, unbound from restrictions of Victorian society. It is these layers of meaning that make the man panic and become unable to perform.

Foster's interpretation of this scene is just one of many; other critics will have other arguments for why Fowles describes the sexual encounter as being so short. However, the broader point Foster makes is that authors tend not to judge characters—in a sexual context or otherwise—in the same way that we might judge people in real life. Rather, characters behave in a particular way for a reason—a reason that is usually symbolic.

Two controversial books from the mid-20th century, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958) and Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), center around sexual perversity—"evil" sex. Foster argues that *A Clockwork Orange* is far more concerned with violence than with sex; *Lolita*, although much more focused on the theme of forbidden sexuality, similarly contains few explicit descriptions of sex. There are examples of writers, such as Angela Carter, who depict more detailed and visceral accounts of sex acts in their books. However, sex in Carter's work is always symbolically meaningful, complex, and "wildly disruptive." While it is not always clear what sex scenes mean, it is almost guaranteed that they signify meaning beyond the sex itself.

Foster's argument here is oppositional to what a Freudian would claim. Where followers of Freud tend to declare that everything ultimately has a sexual meaning, in this passage Foster suggests that some supposedly sexual novels are actually primarily about issues other than sex. Although these arguments are oppositional, note that in both cases the critic is concerned with pointing to something beyond the surface-level meaning of the text.

CHAPTER 18: IF SHE COMES UP, IT'S BAPTISM

A lot of literary characters meet their end by drowning—and in fact, so have a lot of authors. However, if a character falls (or otherwise gets drenched) in water before reemerging, this constitutes a kind of rebirth. Not only has the character emerged alive, they are "alive all over again." A symbolic baptism has taken place.

Some aspects of religion have a particularly resonant poetic or psychological power. This is true of baptism, which is why it appears so frequently in literature. Although religious baptism is very specific, symbolic baptism represents rebirth more generally, and is arguably something we all undergo as we grow and develop.

In Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Milkman gets wet three times, an allusion to the form of Christian baptism in which the person is submerged three times in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. He emerges from the experience a better man, a fact that highlights the link between baptism and character development. *Beloved*, meanwhile, is filled with baptism imagery, illustrating the power of water to signify new life and the boundary between good and evil.

In making such frequent use of baptism imagery, Morrison is not necessarily trying to convey a Christian message to her reader (that is, she is not trying to convince the reader of the truth of Christianity). Rather, her use of baptism corresponds to the fact that she is writing from within and about the African-American community, for whom Christianity plays a large cultural and historical role.

Foster is not claiming that every time a character gets wet it is a form of baptism—remember, "always" and "never" are ideas to avoid in literary study—but that readers should look for clues that a symbolic rebirth has taken place. Drowning, meanwhile, has its own set of symbolic implications. In African American literature, drowning is often linked to the Middle Passage—the mysterious, treacherous, and hellish journey across the Atlantic during which many African slaves were thrown overboard either dead or alive. The Middle Passage has itself taken on mythic associations within literature, representing the unknown and the world of the dead.

Here Foster shows that a given symbol can have both universal and particular meanings, and that these can work in tandem. Generally, drowning is associated with suffering, mystery, and death. Drowning during the Middle Passage, while it still represents those things, has further connotations specific to the reality of slavery. These include the extreme sense of the unknown created by the fact that few records exist of the Middle Passage from slaves' perspective.

CHAPTER 19: GEOGRAPHY MATTERS...

Like the destination of a vacation, the destination or setting of a work of literature is hugely significant. Some writers, such as William Faulkner and Thomas Hardy, are tied to a very particular location—in both these cases, a fictional version of the area in which the authors themselves lived. However, most authors include a variety of settings even within a single work, and thus readers should pay attention not only to where the story overall takes place, but also the symbolic significance of the location of particular moments. In other words, they should be aware of "literary geography," which Foster defines as "humans inhabiting spaces, and at the same time spaces inhabiting humans."

Analyzing the geographic location of a work of literature requires many of the same skills as analyzing weather and the seasons. In both cases, there is a reciprocal relationship between the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters and the landscape they inhabit—although of course this relationship may be subverted, complicated, or rendered in an ironic way.

Geography has the power to create particular atmospheres and to shape characters. The idea of "home" can be magnetic, elusive, or suffocating, and many characters travel to either find it or escape it. Geography can even be a character, such as the Vietnamese village in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, which becomes a kind of enemy figure to the American soldiers. Geography also instigates plot momentum; in E.M. Forster's *A Room With a View* (1908) and *A Passage to India* (1924), the disconnect between the characters and the setting they are in creates action that propels the story forward.

Note the way that Foster routinely blurs the distinctions between different literary devices; action can be a symbol, characters can be plot, and geography can be a character. This a typically analytical way of viewing literature. It allows the critic to view a work of literature almost like a machine, with different components functioning together in order to create a single (albeit highly complex) effect.

Often, geography is "a metaphor for psyche," meaning the external landscape of a literary work reflects the internal mind of one or more characters. Frequently, characters travel to a particular location in order to find that their impression of that location was in fact an image of their own hearts or minds. There are also particular tropes of destinations in which certain things can be expected to happen; for example, Foster points out the tradition of sending characters south (to Italy, Greece, Congo, Vietnam, etc.) "so they can run amok."

Some of the examples Foster gives in this passage have occurred so frequently in literature that they are now considered clichés. The journey to an exotic destination that becomes a journey of self-discovery, for example, is so well-known that nowadays many authors would only present this narrative in an ironic way.

Other landscapes have other specific associations within different literary traditions; examples include the prairie within American (and particularly Midwestern) literature, or the bog in Irish literature. During the Romantic era, natural landscapes were celebrated as "sublime," an idea that became clichéd and provoked backlash within later literary movements.

Discovering the symbolic meaning of certain natural landscapes sometimes requires knowledge of the cultural and historical context in which a book was written. Furthermore, landscapes have different meanings to different people—including authors, characters, and readers.

Meanwhile, hills and valleys are also significant, with their own set of symbolic implications. High places can represent purity, isolation, life or death, while low places are often associated with people, crowds, dirtiness, and also life or death. Note that neither place has any fixed meaning, but rather a possible set of meanings that can shift depending on what the location is contrasted against.

Compared to the weather, the symbolic meaning of geographical locations tends to be more ambiguous. Because landscapes are expansive, complex environments within which we live our whole lives, they are often associated with a huge variety of different meanings.

CHAPTER 20: ...SO DOES SEASON

Foster quotes from Shakespeare's sonnet 73, in which a man compares his coming old age to the shift from fall to winter. Although Shakespeare didn't invent the use of seasons as symbolism, he was particularly skilled at it. Henry James uses a similar technique by calling two of his characters Frederic Winterbourne and Daisy Miller, thereby contrasting cold, stiff winter with the beauty and freshness of spring. Unlike other symbolic systems, the seasons have tended to signify more or less the same thing over time, creating parallels even between works of literature written many centuries apart.

Although this is less the case now (particularly for people living in urban regions), historically human life has been deeply affected and rhythmically governed by the seasons. Not only do changes in light and weather affect our behavior, but seasons have their own set of events and customs, such as New Year's Eve in the winter and harvest celebrations in the fall.

As well as creating atmosphere, seasonal events such as blizzards, blossoming, and harvest can also be metaphors for events happening in the lives of characters. For example, just as farmers harvest crops at the end of the summer, so do people "reap whatever it is that we sow."

Seasonal events such as the harvest are particularly meaningful in contexts where people ascribe religious and moral meaning to the seasons. In these contexts, seasonal changes are deeply intertwined with human life.

Because the seasons retain a fairly fixed meaning, writers experiment with representation of the seasons in order to avoid cliché, and some choose to depict the relationship between season and plot in an ironic fashion. Furthermore, different cultures have different particular associations with each season, even though the mood will be essentially the same. The Ancient Greeks, for example, associate fall with comedy. Christianity, meanwhile, has established a link between the spring and Jesus' resurrection.

No matter how close the associations between, for example, fall and the harvest, no symbol ever has a totally predetermined meaning. Indeed, this is what makes literature somewhat unique as a form of representation; although the symbolic imagination and "language of reading" create rules and conventions, all of these are made to be broken.

INTERLUDE: ONE STORY

In this second interlude, Foster returns to the argument that "there is only one story." He imagines the reader asking what this story is about, but admits that it's not *about* anything, at least in the way individual works of literature can be reduced to a subject matter or theme. Rather, it is about everything.

Asking what the "one story" is about is slightly akin to asking about the meaning of life. Because the one story encompasses all the fundamental aspects of human experience, it is impossible to summarize.

While not all writers might think of this "one story" in the way that Foster does, pretty much every author will know that it is impossible to write a completely original work of literature. (Indeed, a piece of literature with which readers had no familiarity at all would probably strike them as strange and off-putting.) On the other hand, writers need to employ a level of willful "amnesia" in order to not simply regurgitate all the literature they have already read when they write.

Critics such as Harold Bloom have pointed out that intertextuality can create anxiety in authors, as they are constantly comparing their work to that of others who have gone before them. Here, Foster suggests that "willful amnesia" is one method through which authors might overcome this anxiety.

For the first time, Foster explicitly introduces the concept of intertextuality. This was an idea invented by the Russian formalist scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, which highlights the way that all works of literature are inherently connected, like a giant network or web. Some writers (such as Mark Twain or Jack Kerouac) downplay the influence of other literature on their work, but the evidence—both within texts and in the lives of authors—tends to expose this as false posturing.

Although at its most basic level intertextuality simply refers to the connection of different texts to one another, as Foster indicates it can prove a surprisingly controversial way of thinking about literature. Authors such as Twain and Kerouac prefer a more organic notion of literature, one that emphasizes texts as the natural expression of one individual.

Foster then introduces another analytical term: archetype. An archetype is an image, gesture, figure, or idea that is repeated and modified and can be identified through pattern recognition. There is no use going back and trying to search for the "original" upon which an archetype is based, as this would be basically impossible (and not particularly useful). Similarly, there is no one story upon which all other stories are based; rather, it is better to think of the one big story as all around us, all the time.

Although Foster only introduces the terms "intertextuality" and "archetype" at this (fairly late) point, he has been discussing examples of them throughout the book. Note that by introducing them together, Foster emphasizes how they are related; after all, archetypes exist as a result of intertextuality.

CHAPTER 21: MARKED FOR GREATNESS

In real life, people's physical differences rarely have much symbolic meaning; if you have a birthmark or a short leg, this just means you have a birthmark or a short leg. Historically, however, physical aberrations have been associated with moral shortcomings. The more beautiful a person was, the closer they were thought to be to God, and vice versa. Although humanity has shifted our understanding about this topic in recent years, in literature physical attributes do still tend to carry symbolic meaning.

Having a physical mark or disability is seen in a very different way today than it has been within different periods in history, and it can sometimes be difficult to reconcile our contemporary perspective with the views of people in the past on this subject. Indeed, there is a whole subset of literary scholars who work on disability studies and grapple with these questions.

When characters have scars, it gives a sense of their history, and therefore scars can be a way for authors to reveal information about their characters' pasts. Sometimes this is more information than the character knows about themselves, as in *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus' lack of knowledge and curiosity about his scars turns out to be his fatal flaw, which will ultimately lead to another physical disability (blindness). When groups of characters all have scars, this can convey a message about how people have suffered within a large-scale event or era, such as the First World War or slavery.

There is a reason why we speak of mental and emotional scars as well as physical ones. In many ways, scars are a real-life symbol, a physical phenomenon with built-in symbolic connotations. Even innocuous scars have a story behind them, and thus scars are an extremely effective method through which authors tell the stories of their characters' pasts.

Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein* (1818) is constructed in a lab out of bits of machinery, highlighting fears about the shifting cultural emphasis from religion to science, and of societal changes brought about by the industrial revolution. However, although the monster Frankenstein creates is grotesque, the real monster is Dr. Frankenstein himself, as it is he who plays God and disrupts the laws of nature. Similarly, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) Dorian looks innocent and beautiful on the outside but is actually corrupt and evil, a modern, ironic subversion of the conventional association between beauty and goodness.

The examples Foster provides are both from the 19th century, but fears about the way technology is changing human existence and the power of humans to manipulate their image has arguably only intensified since then. Indeed, one of the most powerful aspects of literature is its ability to make thematic connections through intertextuality that highlight how similar our own society is to those that came before us.

CHAPTER 22: HE'S BLIND FOR A REASON, YOU KNOW

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC), Oedipus suffers from a tragic lack of self-awareness and foresight, leading him to accidentally fulfill a prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. Throughout the play, Sophocles invokes imagery related to light and sight, but on discovering that he has unknowingly fulfilled the prophecy, he blinds himself in despair. As this narrative shows, when an author includes a blind character, this blindness is never simply a fact—it always has symbolic significance. *Oedipus Rex* is a perfect example of the meaning(s) that blindness can have, and it can demonstrate how "to look for the right questions" when reading literature.

The symbolic trope of blindness plays on the same subversion of expectations as the journey to an exotic place that leads to self-discovery. In each case, characters look to the wrong place for knowledge (or do not look at all). Only an extreme change of circumstances—arrival in a foreign land, or the sudden onset of blindness—allows them to "see" and understand the landscape of their own consciousness.

Foster claims that although only some narratives contain literal blindness, all texts feature metaphoric representations of sight and blindness. We know that a characteristic such as blindness is important when it is introduced early. While there are exceptions to this rule (in *Waiting for Godot*, the blind character does not appear until Act 2), in general authors will draw particular attention to blind characters if they wish blindness to have major symbolic importance within the text.

Once again, Foster determines whether a component in a text is important by viewing the text structurally. Given the fact that almost all literature features issues of sight, self-knowledge, and the lack thereof, a structural interpretation is necessary in order to distinguish the relative weight that these themes are given within a text.

CHAPTER 23: IT'S NEVER JUST HEART DISEASE... AND RARELY JUST ILLNESS

Foster argues that there is "no better, no more lyrical, no more perfectly metaphorical illness than heart disease." Once again, this is of course not true in real life, but it is certainly true of literature. Part of the reason for why heart disease is considered lyrically and symbolically powerful is because, since at least the Ancient Greek era, the heart has been considered the emotional centre of the human body. Endless writers invoke the heart in this context, and the heart is associated with romantic love everywhere from poetry to popular culture. As a result, heart disease symbolizes all kinds of suffering: loneliness, cruelty, cowardice, and so on.

Although science has now confirmed that the heart has nothing to do with human emotion (considering our consciousness lies in the brain), this has done little to decrease the association between the heart and romantic love. Indeed, examples such as Valentine's Day, the concept of being heartbroken, and countless other cultural conventions show that the heart is still the first thing we associate with love. Such is the enduring power of symbol in the human imagination!

Heart trouble doesn't always have to be in the form of disease—in Nathanial Hawthorne's "The Man of Adamant" (1837), a misanthropic man moves into a cave to escape society, and his heart eventually turns to stone. Meanwhile, the overly-emotional and romantic titular character of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900) is killed by being shot in the heart.

As these examples show, characters in literature are punished both for being too loving and not being loving enough. This paradox suggests that part of the role of literature is to teach us to achieve moral and emotional balance in our lives.

Of course, heart disease isn't the only illness featured in literature, and different illnesses tend to have their own particular group of associations. Strange as it may sound, some writers return to the same illnesses throughout different works of literature, such as James Joyce's thematic obsession with paralysis.

Illness is one of the most dramatic parts of life, which makes it ideal fodder for writers. Even painfully slow, drawn-out illnesses have the capacity to drastically alter people's personalities, behavior, and experience of the world, and as a result illness is a perfect way to propel plot momentum.

Bear in mind that prior to the 20th century, disease was very mysterious. People did not have a clear understanding of what caused illness, how it would progress, or how it could be cured. Historical context is also relevant to which diseases are more commonly represented in literature. Tuberculosis (or "consumption") seems to be everywhere in literature, but venereal diseases are almost nowhere to be found. This is partly because of taboos surrounding sexuality, but also because to qualify as a suitably literary illness, a condition should both be "picturesque" and emerge in a mysterious way. Finally, the disease must have strong symbolic potential; this is certainly true of tuberculosis, which causes sufferers to literally "waste away" in front of you.

Like the seasons and weather, illness has historically been difficult for people to comprehend. As a result, writers and artists have developed myths and symbolic explanations to account for the complex, mysterious, and ruthless workings of the human body. As Foster's words suggest, some writers have had a tendency to romanticize illness, turning it into archetypes such as the frail, feminine victim of consumption. Of course, these figures do not accurately represent the grim reality of the disease.

Indeed, the potential of illness to carry symbolic meaning is arguably the most important reason for how and why illness will appear in a text. Although symbolic meaning is never fixed, illnesses do have particular associations that will be better suited to some narratives than others. The bubonic plague, for example, invokes themes such as all-encompassing tragedy and apocalyptic devastation. Meanwhile, hereditary conditions point to intergenerational tensions, unhappy families, and "parental misdeeds."

Some people—most famously Susan Sontag—argue that the symbolic role illness plays in literature has had the negative effect of creating the impression that illness in real life is also filled with symbolic meaning. According to Sontag, this can lead us to subconsciously believe that sufferers did something to deserve their illness, or that it is within their power to cure themselves.

Illnesses play different roles in different eras. Whereas tuberculosis cast a large shadow in Victorian times, the era from the 1980s to the present has been particularly affected by the sudden emergence of AIDS. According to Foster, "AIDS is the mother lode of symbol and metaphor," and, accordingly, much literature has been produced about the disease. Because of the way the AIDS crisis played out, and the fact that minority groups such as gay men, trans women, and black people were disproportionately affected, the literature of AIDS is also inherently political.

Although the abundance of beautiful art and literature produced in response to the AIDS crisis could never make up for the senseless devastation caused by the disease, this is an important example of the way that people process the darker aspects of existence through literature. When emotions like those generated by AIDS cannot be adequately communicated through normal language, sometimes symbolic language provides a way forward.

Frequently, writers simply invent illnesses without clearly defining them, and use this as a way to kill off characters with little explanation. Of course, this has been more difficult to do in the era of modern medicine, when mysterious illnesses (mostly) no longer appear out of nowhere.

This passage demonstrates that the boundaries of realism change as our understanding of the world changes. Whereas it would be completely normal for a character to suddenly die of a mysterious illness in a 19th-century realist novel, this would be less realistic in today's world.

CHAPTER 24: DON'T READ WITH YOUR EYES

The dinner party described in Joyce's "The Dead" may not at first appear remarkable to American eyes, but that's because—like all subjective views—the American perspective is inherently limited. In the context in which the story is set, the meal is *extremely* remarkable, significant on the level of class, religion, geography, and so on. As readers, we all have our "blind spots," which is fine; however, in order to understand a piece of literature well, we need to be able to inhabit it world—at least to some extent. The point is not to read with "*your* eyes," or, in other words, not to read only from your own particular historical, cultural, and individual perspective.

Letting go of one's own particular perspective is not a matter of familiarizing oneself with every possible cultural and historical context. Although that would probably help in understanding literature, it would be impossible and unnecessary. Rather, Foster encourages readers to try to relinquish their own judgments and meet a work of literature at its own level—meaning not trying to transpose the characters and events into the context with which the reader is familiar.

Foster uses the example of James Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" (1957), about an uptight math teacher whose brother is a heroin addict, to demonstrate how influential the reader's point of view can be. The central question of the text is whether or not Sonny can be saved from the perils of addiction. Foster advises that, in order to do the text justice, readers must avoid approaching the story from the lens of contemporary scientific or sociological understandings of addictions. Instead, we must take the story on its own terms.

Another way to interpret Foster's advice in this passage is as a reminder of his previous statement that "characters are not people." Just as we shouldn't remain too attached to our own cultural contexts and judgments, so too should we not react to characters in literature as if they were people we were meeting in real life.

The problem of adjusting perspective based on a given text is exacerbated when the text is very old. The Ancient Greeks, for example, believed it was honorable to slaughter people in battle and completely normal to own slaves. This does not mean that Homer should inspire us to pick up a sword ourselves, but that we shouldn't be too quick to judge a civilization by standards that didn't exist during its time.

If we were to apply our own contemporary moral standards to works of literature written in the past, there would be many works we couldn't read without fuming. On the other hand, some critics argue that the attitude Foster outlines here is taken too far, and that we should be careful not to romanticize civilizations such as Ancient Greece, which were in fact very brutal.

Another example: Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1605) is certainly anti-Semitic from a contemporary perspective, but it was probably considerably less anti-Semitic than was usual within mainstream English culture at the time. On the other hand, Ezra Pound is a more recent and more troublingly anti-Semitic writer, who—to make matters worse—was writing in the lead-up to and during the Holocaust. Although Foster himself (along with many readers) still engages with Pound's work, it is understandable that others choose not to.

As you might imagine, this is one of the most contentious issues in literary scholarship in the current moment. Some people argue that it is simply impractical, as well as unreasonable, to refuse to read the work of an author on the grounds that they were racist, sexist, or otherwise prejudiced. Others argue that this position inherently emerges from the perspective of those who have not had to face discrimination in their own lives.

CHAPTER 25: IT'S MY SYMBOL AND I'LL CRY IF I WANT TO

Foster admits that, up until this point, he has been focusing on symbols that have rather obvious meanings. However, symbols are not always so straightforward. In John Donne's "The Flea," the flea functions as a conceit (or extended metaphor), symbolizing sex. Because this metaphor is repeated throughout the poem, structurally uniting it, the reader is able to eventually figure out what the flea means in symbolic terms.

Foster has already emphasized that reading a wide range of literature can give readers intertextual clues that will help them figure out symbolic meanings. In this passage, he shows that sometimes the clues exist within *a single text. At first the meaning of the flea may be unclear to the reader, but by the end of the poem the reader will likely have picked up on the metaphor.*

Often, English professors and advanced students can get so wrapped up in searching for the secondary meanings of a given text—that which is not conveyed directly on the page—that they will almost forget about the surface-level facts. Although the secondary layer is obviously important, Foster cautions the reader to never become too dismissive of the primary function of a text, no matter how skilled a reader they become.

The difficulty of synthesizing surface-level and deep reading is obvious from the fact that even many professors are not able to do both at the same time. While it might be hard to pull off both reading techniques simultaneously, Foster argues that the reader should at least try not to abandon their "primary" reading of literature.

Foster returns to the problem of texts that use figures and imagery from outside the common pool of symbols. How does one approach a text that uses "private symbols"? The only answer Foster gives is simply to try. Use the sources available to you, including your knowledge of preexisting literature. Some writers do make it difficult, such as W.B. Yeats, who employed "an entire visionary system" of private symbols, much of which consists of complex, abstract imagery. However, although no reader will be able to decipher this system on first glance, with practice and perseverance, patterns—and with them meaning—will begin to appear.

Foster's advice here may not seem particularly helpful. However, there are some elements of literary analysis for which there is no framework. After all, if all aspects of literary interpretation were explainable in advance, this would leave no room for surprise, and would make the study of literature more akin to a science. As Foster argues here, the best formula is to simply have faith in yourself and your instincts.

Modernist literature can be particularly intimidating and impenetrable, and part of the problem is that every modernist text exists in something of a world of its own. As a result, "The only thing that can really prepare you to read *Ulysses* is to read *Ulysses*." This point, however, can be interpreted in an encouraging light; books teach us how to interpret them as we read them, and no one approaches a book like *Ulysses* with the right tools in advance. Furthermore, Foster insists that "you know more than you think you do." Even readers who have not necessarily read much literature will have a bank of movies, TV shows, news items, and songs to draw upon, all of which are relevant and useful for deciphering works of literature.

*Some books—*Ulysses *being the quintessential example—are so complex and multifaceted that scholars can dedicate their entire careers to figuring them out. Although this might seem discouraging, in fact it shows that even those with advanced reading skills and specialized knowledge can still be surprised and moved by new information about a book. This is why collaborative literary interpretation (such as the discussions in an English classroom) is so important, and why every reader has something valuable to say.*

Even the most complex and unusual works of literature are connected in some way to other texts (as well as to the wider world). For this reason, every text—when given "a little time and imagination"—can be analyzed and decoded.

No work of literature was born in a vacuum; every text was produced by a person with experiences that on some level compare to that of the reader. Thus interpretation is always possible.

CHAPTER 26: IS HE SERIOUS? AND OTHER IRONIES

Foster begins this chapter with an emphatic claim: "Irony trumps everything," including all that has been described in the book so far. Samuel Beckett, known as the "poet of stasis," created works of literature in which little happens and which do not seem to contain any message or "point." His most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, takes place in what Northrop Frye calls "the ironic mode," meaning that the characters appear to have less free will than the audience feels they themselves do. The audience also has a better understanding of the situation the characters find themselves in, yet are forced to watch as they remain trapped due to their lack of agency and awareness.

"Irony trumps everything" is a useful phrase to remember, although it is not initially completely clear what it means. In "trumping everything," irony doesn't eliminate other layers of meaning. Rather, irony relies on these other layers of meaning—whether symbolic, archetypical, intertextual, or otherwise—and then subverts them by converting them into the ironic mode.

Irony greatly expands the range of interpretations that can be applied to any symbol. For example, rain—which ordinarily has a fairly predictable set of associated meanings—can take on an entirely different type of significance when employed ironically.

Many people argue that our time is particularly suited to irony, as people in the 20th and 21st centuries have tended to claim that all creative options have already been explored and exhausted. In order to create something new, we must therefore rely on irony.

Writers like Beckett and Hemingway lived at a time dominated by irony, where old belief systems (including belief in science) were crumbling under the weight of war and suffering. One way to understand irony is to think of cases in which a signifier or sign (such as a billboard encouraging people to wear seatbelts) ends up taking on an unexpected significance (like accidentally crushing a driver and killing him) while still retaining its original, fixed meaning. The sign still contains a message of road safety, but this message has been made ironic by the fact that it has accidentally killed someone.

The example of the road safety sign is one of the clearest ways of explaining what irony means. However, irony is not always this simple. It is rare for the ironic object in question to literally be a sign—usually we have to figure out the original significance first, before understanding how that original meaning is changed by the author's use of irony.

Irony mainly consists of "a deflection from expectation." Irony can also work when the reader or audience knows something that a character doesn't, thereby creating multiple layers of (contradictory) meaning around events that take place within the narrative. As these points indicate, irony can be verbal, structural, and/or dramatic, depending on what level of the text (plot arc, speech, event) the ironic point is being made.

When engaged in a surface-level reading, it is hard to see when our expectations are being deflected, because we are likely to "go with the flow" of the story and simply let our expectations be controlled by the author. Deeper reading, however, requires us to step back and analyze how the author anticipates and manipulates the reader's response to the text.

Irony can also be used to undermine the moral value or authority of belief systems, institutions, and individuals, from physicians to Christianity. Irony makes interpretation complicated, as it can lead scholars to argue in a counterintuitive (and sometimes illogical!) way. For example, the main character in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* is a nihilistic, selfish sadist, about as far from Jesus as it's possible to get. On the other hand, he is ultimately subjected to a cruel punishment and robbed of his free will by the government hoping to make an example out of him—the exact fate of Christ. It is thus possible to assert that in this particular sense, Alex is a Christ figure, albeit a highly ironic one.

The character of Alex in A Clockwork Orange makes for an ironic Jesus figure in several ways. Whereas Jesus symbolizes goodness and hope, Alex symbolizes moral perversity and a dark future. The irony here is also structural, as at the beginning of the novel Alex is an evil villain who triumphs over the other characters, yet by the end he suffers and is made vulnerable by his cruel punishment at the hands of the state.

Some writers use irony more than others, which is just as well considering irony does not work in every context. (Salman Rushdie's use of irony in *The Satanic Verses*, for example, almost got him killed!) When it does work, however, irony adds richness to a text, creating new, more complicated and more compelling layers of meaning.

Whether or not irony "works" is largely dependent on the reaction of the reader. Sometimes readers might not pick up on irony; at other times, they might be aware that irony is at play, but refuse to go along with it on moral grounds, as was the case with Rushdie's "Satanic Verses."

CHAPTER 27: A TEST CASE

This chapter consists of the short story "The Garden Party" by Katherine Mansfield. The story opens to a description of gorgeous summer weather, with hundreds of flowers blooming—a "perfect day for a garden party." Four men put up a marquee, helped by the "artistic" Laura, whose mother Meg remains at the breakfast table with her freshly washed hair in a turban.

The presentation of this short story aims to test the reader's ability to interpret literature based on Foster's advice, and indeed, Foster has placed many clues throughout the book that should help the reader figure out the literary devices Mansfield uses. Note that the blooming flowers, for example, signify spring, new life, and excitement.

Laura attempts to speak to the men in an authoritative way, but doesn't quite manage it, and they respond to her in an informal manner, eventually choosing the location of the marquee themselves. One of the workmen pauses, bends down and smells a sprig of lavender, and Laura wishes that the men she knows were more like him. In her mind, she blames "these absurd class distinctions." She feels that the workmen behave more naturally and wishes she herself was free of "stupid conventions."

It is obvious from this passage that Mansfield is exploring class tensions, and perhaps criticizing the secluded, naïve attitude of the upper class toward working people. However, there are also more subtle layers of meaning at work. Note that Laura's attempt to speak authoritatively is not just a class issue, but suggests that she is on the cusp of adulthood.

The telephone rings for Laura, and she runs into the house to get it. Here, she encounters her father and her brother, Laurie, whom she squeezes with excitement over the coming garden party. On the phone, Laura invites her friend Kitty to lunch. After hanging up, she pauses and listens to the noises of the house, which she feels is vibrant and "alive," and feels overwhelmed with affection for it.

Much like the garden, the house is depicted as buzzing with life, almost like an organic landscape filled with wildlife. To the pessimistic reader, the level of excitement and joy signals that something terrible will likely soon take place.

The doorbell rings; it is the florist. Suddenly the house is filled with enormous pink lilies, which seem "almost frighteningly alive." Laura thinks they must have been ordered by mistake, but it turns out it was the doing of her mother, Mrs. Sheridan. On learning this, Laura throws her arms around her mother and gently bites her ear.

The impression that the house is alive is taken to an extreme degree when Laura is alarmed by the vibrancy of the flowers. Recall that flowers are a common symbol for female genitalia, a fact that implies Laura may be frightened by her own developing sexuality.

In the living room, Meg, Jose, and Hans are ordering the servants to move furniture around. The narrator claims that Jose loved being bossy with the servants, and "they loved obeying her." Jose plays a few notes on the piano and sings a song that begins "This life is weary, a tear––a sigh," reveling in the sound of her own voice. Mrs. Sheridan asks Laura to help her copy out the names of the guests, and she asks Jose to "pacify cook," saying that she is "terrified of her this morning."

Clearly, the Sheridan family has deep faith in the rightness of the existing class system, so much so that they project their own feelings of satisfaction onto their servants. Of course, it does not take a particularly deep reader to realize that the notion that the servants "loved obeying" Jose is a naïve fantasy maintained by the Sheridans.

Once these tasks are done, the cream puffs are delivered. The narrator describes Laura and Jose as being "too grown-up to really care about such things," but notes that they are delighted anyway. Despite knowing they shouldn't, both girls eat a cream puff. Suddenly, the man who delivered the cream puffs informs the girls that there was an accident, and a man was killed. It was a local man who was thrown out of his horse-and-cart when the horse was frightened by a steam engine.

This passage makes clear that both Laura and Jose are caught in the ambiguous period between childhood and adulthood, a period that is frequently represented within works of literature. Their childish sides are symbolized by their joyous eating of the cream puffs; however, this moment of innocent pleasure is brought crashing down by the news of the dead man.

Laura, horrified, wonders how they will cancel the garden party, but Jose is shocked by the idea. The narrator describes the "disgusting and sordid" cottages where the dead man lived. Although they are near to the Sheridan's house, the inhabitants are all very poor and the Sheridan girls are forbidden from going there. Still, Laura is horrified to think of how the dead man's mother will feel knowing that a garden party is taking place on the same day her son has died. Although Jose claims to be sympathetic, she is clearly frustrated and tells Laura she's being "sentimental."

Recall Foster's advice that one way to gauge the political orientation of a work of literature is by observing how the main character dissents from the mainstream views held by those around him or her. Here, Mansfield provides a classic example of such political signaling. While the rest of Laura's family are decidedly unsympathetic to the dead man, she is overwhelmed with empathy and sorrow.

Laura goes to tell her mother about the dead man. She hopes that her mother will react differently to Jose, but Mrs. Sheridan also considers it absurd that they would stop the party. She tells Laura that "people like that don't expect sacrifices from us." She gives Laura a hat to wear, and although she still feels uneasy about the accident, Laura decides to put off thinking about it until later and admires herself in the mirror.

Once again, a member of the Sheridan family projects their own delusional views onto members of the working class. Meanwhile, by giving Laura the hat, Mrs. Sheridan distracts Laura and bestows on her a symbolic gift—the gift of adult female beauty.

After lunch, Laura decides to tell her brother Laurie about the accident, hoping he will react differently. Before she does, however, he pays her a compliment on her hat, and Laurie decides not to say anything. Soon the guests arrive and move about the Sheridans' garden "like bright birds." They all compliment Laura on her hat and tell her she looks beautiful.

Mansfield continues to use natural symbols in her description of the house and garden. Once again, Laura is distracted from thinking about the dead man by the positive attention she receives for her hat.

Once the party is over, Laura's father mentions the man who died, and says that he had a wife and six children. Mrs. Sheridan decides to make up a basket of the leftover food to send to the grieving widow, but Laura is unsure if this is a good idea. She instructs Laura to take the basket to the man's cottage, at first including lilies—"people of that class are so impressed by arum lilies"—before deciding against it when Jose points out they would ruin Laura's dress.

Mrs. Sheridan's statements about the working class are comically horrifying, a fact that discourages the reader from sympathizing with her. The threat the lilies pose to Laura's dress, meanwhile, emphasizes the idea that the flowers represent sexuality. The potential stain on Laura's dress is perhaps akin to the blood that sometimes appears when women lose their virginity.

As Laura walks toward the cottages, she feels disconnected from the reality of the man's death; instead, she cannot stop thinking about the wonderful garden party. She walks quickly through the crowds of people and arrives nervously at the house of the dead man. A woman answers the door, and insists that Laura comes in, even as Laura expresses reluctance. Mrs. Scott, the widow, is sitting by the fire, and at one point turns to Laura to reveal a red face distorted and swollen from tears.

There is a clear contrast in this passage between the vibrant, warm afterglow of the garden party and the dark, dirty, miserable landscape of the cottages. Indeed, the man's widow's face is presented in an almost gothic fashion, particularly when she dramatically turns from the fire to reveal her red, distorted face.

Laura tries to leave, but the woman who answered the door—who is Mrs. Scott's sister—insists that she see the dead man's body. Upon seeing it, Laura thinks that he looks serene and happy, far away from earthly activities like garden parties. She lets out a sob and rushes out into the street, where she encounters Laurie. He comforts her, and she tries to express her feelings to him, saying "Isn't life… isn't life—." However, she is unable to say anything more, and the story ends with Laurie saying "Isn't it, darling?"

The ending of the story is simultaneously dramatic and anticlimactic. When Laura is forced to see the dead man's body, we expect it to be as horrifying as the village; the fact that he seems serene and happy is thus an ironic subversion of our expectations. The story ends on a deliberately ambiguous note, leaving the reader to draw their own conclusions.

With the story over, Foster provides some biographical information on Katherine Mansfield. Originally from New Zealand, she married an Englishman and spent her adult life in England, where she was a friend of D.H. Lawrence. She died young of tuberculosis, and published "The Garden Party" the year before her death.

Although it hardly tells us all we need to know about the story, Mansfield's biography does provide some useful clues. Note that she was an outsider in England, that she was attached in some way to the Modernists, and that she died fairly soon after "The Garden Party" was written.

Foster encourages the reader to read carefully, employing the strategies that have been laid out thus far in the book. He then quotes from the reactions of students of his who also read the story. Most began by noticing the class tensions between the rich family throwing the garden party and the poor family who live in the cottages. A history major points out that the central dilemma of the story is whether or not to have the party, and that the way the characters react reveal the "indifference of the dominant class of people to the suffering of others." Laura's feelings are ambivalent; she hopes Laurie will provide her with an answer, but finds that "there are no answers, just shared perceptions of reality."

Observing the class tensions present in the story is certainly a good way to begin. It frames the story in a political context, and points to a symbolic explanation for the struggles and dilemmas that Laura encounters. However, this interpretation remains somewhat surface-level. After all, the class tensions in the story are very apparent; the characters refer to them explicitly several times. An analytic reading, while not denying the importance of class, would likely delve deeper to see what else is going on.

Foster then includes the reaction of another student, who argues that the story is about the way that people "insulate themselves" from others, and explains how this theme is portrayed through different symbols. The prevalence of birds, for example, suggests that the Sheridans perceive themselves as existing on a higher plane, gazing down at the lower classes with an elitist attitude. Laura is like a baby bird being taught to fly by her mother; she is not yet fully mature, but her trip to the cottages symbolizes her first independent "flight" away from home. However, the result is that she learns to inhabit the "loftier perspective" of her family, dismissing her earlier concerns.

This analysis has gone a step deeper than the reading that focused on class tensions. The student has identified the prevalence of bird imagery and linked it to the theme of Laura's initiation into the adult world. They have even managed to connect the symbol of the bird to the "lofty," snooty attitude of the Sheridan family. This is a good example of analyzing one symbol in order to synthesize multiple themes.

Foster explains that although this is not exactly how he would interpret the story, it is an excellent analysis. He argues it is important to note that the responses above focus on the "phenomena" of the story, meaning the things that actually happen. While there is nothing wrong with this, readers also need to pay attention to the "noumenal level of the story, its spiritual or essential level of being."

The fact that this is not the reading Foster himself favors does not make it any less valuable. The decision to focus on the phenomenal versus the noumenal level of the story is, in many ways, a matter of preference. A phenomenal reading requires more analysis of symbol, whereas noumenal will likely rely more on intertextuality.

While the responses thus far have focused on the "party" element of the story's title, Foster prefers to consider the previous word: garden. He points out that the weather is described as perfect, and that the overall impression of the garden is more ethereal than earthly. He also advises the reader to pay close attention to the descriptions of food, and to the hat Laura wears, which is symbolic of her mother's power. Note also the description of Laura's journey to the cottages, which is filled with imagery of darkness and smoke. Foster argues that this represents a descent into hell, and that Laura is a version of the Greek mythic character Persephone.

Foster's attention to the word "garden" is important. The garden party is at the center of the story, so it is easy to forget that the event around which the story revolves could have been anything—a feast, a tea party, a ball. Clearly, there is a significant reason why Mansfield chose to set the party in the garden. Foster's argument that the story is a version of the Greek myth of Persephone may seem like it is coming out of nowhere, but as he explains, this is not necessarily the case.

To support his claim, Foster points out that Persephone's mother is Demeter, the Greek goddess of agriculture and fertility. Mrs. Sheridan's associations with the garden, flowers, and food certainly make her a good Demeter figure. Meanwhile, note the fact that the Persephone myth explores the state of being on the cusp of female adulthood, and the associated knowledge of the realities of the world, including sex and death. The story thus explores this moment of initiation—the departure from childhood innocence into adulthood—in the context of class tensions and familial dynamics.

Although this is certainly not the only correct reading of the story, Foster makes a convincing case for the similarities between the Persephone myth and "The Garden Party." Note that, while this interpretation enriches and deepens our understanding of the story, it is by no means necessary in order to understand the text, and even to analyze it in a scholarly way. As Foster says, it is simply a "bonus."

POSTLUDE: WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

Foster describes receiving an email from a student who asked: "How do I know I'm right?" Foster calls this "the great question of literary analysis." He responds by arguing that if something in a work of literature has captured your attention, it's likely there for a reason, meaning it has some substantial significance. Foster adds that it's usually impossible to know whether writers included signals, clues, and symbols "on purpose," and so we shouldn't worry about whether or not this was a conscious decision. Ultimately, it does not matter much what the writer planned to do, as "a reader's only obligation… is to the text." The text holds the authority, not the author.

As Foster has repeated throughout the book, succeeding at literary criticism is mostly a matter of confidence. It can be difficult for students—who are used to being assessed, corrected, and graded—to rely on their own instincts and let go of the desire to appeal to a higher authority over whether or not their interpretation is "correct." As Foster explains, there is no use relying on the authority of even the author, whose opinion is often impossible to know.

Foster explains that this line of thinking became particularly popular following Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author" (1967). While the essay has been hugely influential, many scholars remain critical of it. However, Foster urges the reader to consider the fact that most authors are already dead; even when they're not, they are not necessarily available for consultation. Meanwhile, writers who choose to publish anonymously seem themselves to want "the death of the author." They want their texts to be read in their own right, without readers being influenced by their impression of the author.

Foster's consideration of the "death of the author" connects this passage back to the very beginning of the book, when Foster described literature taking on "a life of its own." Once authors publish their books, they no longer retain authority over them, meaning they implicitly consent to the books being read and interpreted in ways that are beyond the author's control. In this sense, the author then becomes somewhat irrelevant to critical analysis.

Foster concludes the chapter by encouraging students not to be apologetic about their interpretations of texts. He urges students to "take ownership of your reading." The fact that each reader's analysis is unique is a positive thing, and allows people to learn from one another. It's good to have your interpretations change, but make sure to "trust your instincts" and believe in the value of your own opinion.

It can be difficult to strike a balance between having faith in one's own opinions and being prepared to be persuaded by the arguments of others (if they turn out to be more convincing!). Foster's advice to the reader is to approach the practice of criticism with a mix of confidence and humility.

ENVOI

The word "envoi" is a ritual sending-off of someone or something on a mission. Foster directs his envoy to the reader, thanking them for their attention. He admits that *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* only contains a fraction of the reading techniques that exist in the world, and that what has been included is rather idiosyncratic. However, the book does provide a useful template for exploring other literary devices and reading strategies.

Rather than treating the book like an instruction manual, readers should take inspiration from Foster's guidelines and use them to discover new practices of deep reading. Although this task might seem overwhelming, note that it would be impossible employ all the reading strategies that exist at once; the task of criticism involves selecting only a few at a time.

On the other hand, the good news is that no one needs to have all the literary tricks and patterns in the world explained to them. Once you've mastered some techniques, it becomes easier to pick up new ones, and identify literary devices you haven't seen before.

The more you read, the easier literary analysis will be—and this is especially true for deep reading. Practice makes perfect.

Finally, Foster stresses that reading should be fun. Although he provides a reading list at the end of the book, he advises the reader to choose books that they themselves enjoy. According to Foster, literary analysis should be "a form of play."

As Foster has shown, literary analysis should be experimental and creative. Although the conventions and guidelines of the "language of reading" are useful, remember that these rules are made to be broken.

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