



Core F Summer Reading Assignment

Providence Extension Program
2018-2019

Part 1: Reading Assignment

You've made it to senior year and in just a few short months you'll be finished with high school and on to a new season of life! This year we will focus on continuing our study of rhetoric and deepening our appreciation of good literature! Our goal is that you not only read and understand a piece of literature, but that you can also recognize the artistic and thematic significance beyond mere plot. In order to facilitate this process, the first part of your summer assignment will be reading an excerpt of the book *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* by Thomas C. Foster along with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. As you read these books, complete the following activities. This part of the summer assignment will be due on Monday, August 13th. Email the assignment to Mrs. Clark (Mason) or Mrs. Demski (Milford). Please come to class prepared to show your annotations of both books and take a quiz over PODG on the first day of classes.

1. Annotating: Read and annotate BOTH books. See the attached annotation guide for help with your annotations. *In How to Read Lit Like a Professor*, please read the following chapters (attached): Chapters 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, Interlude, 11, 12, 14, 19, 26)
2. Application/interpretation: After reading both books, use the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to find examples of the elements discussed in each of the assigned chapters of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. First, explain the element discussed in the chapter and then give an example from PODG. See the example below:

Example:

Chapter 1: Every Trip is a Quest (Except When It's Not)

Foster, using a simple trip to the store for bread explains the literary concept of "The Quest."

Quests typical contain the following:

- a quester(s)
- a place to go
- a stated reason for going there
- challenges along the way
- the "real reason" for going there

"The real reason for a quest never involves the stated task...The real reason for a quest is always self-knowledge" (3).

Example: Star Wars is a quest story because Luke Skywalker begins his journey trying to get some robots to Princess Leia, but through a series of challenges (space worms, stormtroopers, jail break, etc.) finds his "self knowledge" by meeting Obi Wan Kenobi, learning the force and becoming a Jedi.

**Note, ALL of your examples should come from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*!!

Part 2: College Essay

Because we want this year to be one of equipping for that next step and for the focus of Core F to be especially geared to prepare you for and help you with that transition, your assignment will be to write a college entrance essay which you will revise in the first week or two of classes. Even if you do not plan to attend college, writing such essays will equip you for the work world as well.

College Essay Assignment Directions:

1. Research 2 or 3 colleges or programs that are of interest to you and find the entrance essay prompts that are required with their application. Some colleges do not require such essays, but there are prompts from others that you can find. These prompts can be found on the institution's website or by doing a search on Google such as: "University of Cincinnati application essay prompt".
2. The assignment is to write a 300-500 word essay for the prompt you choose. In the essay, the objective is to demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself well. Make this your best writing using a strong thesis statement and fully supporting that thesis throughout.
3. Please include the prompt at the beginning of your essay and follow MLA guidelines for writing the essay. Also, reference the link where you found your prompt.
4. Email your essay to Mrs. Clark (Mason) or Mrs. Demski (Milford) by **Wednesday, August 1st**. You will also need to upload a copy to Turnitin.

Example from the Hillsdale College website:

(1) Required Essay Question:

Tell us about yourself and your interests; indicate your strengths and weaknesses; and describe your educational and career goals, the kind of person you wish to become and how Hillsdale College can help you reach these goals.

(2) Select one question from the following choices:

What is good character and why is it important? You may cite examples from literature, the arts, science, politics, history, athletics, business, education or your own personal experiences. What, in your understanding, are the liberal arts, and what is the goal of a liberal arts education? Discuss how an event, novel or experience has significantly influenced you or has changed your life.

Summer - Important Dates

August 1 - College Essay Due

August 13 - *How to Read Literature Like a Professor/PODG* Assignment Due

August 20 - FIRST DAY OF PEP! All Annotations Due

Heather Clark

PEP Mason Tutor

Jenna Demski

PEP Milford Tutor

Annotation Guidelines

Reading a piece of literature is not a passive activity; rather, it's an **active** one. You must think about and evaluate what you read, not simply let the information enter your brain and remain stagnant. A critical objective of the AP literature course is to get you to read a text **closely** and **analytically**. When reading literature this year, you should essentially be constantly in dialogue with it, and most importantly, leaving evidence of that dialogue and your reading experience on the page.

Marginal notes are NOT meant to belabor the reading process. **The BASIC GOALS:**

1. To keep yourself focused while you read.
2. To remember your first reactions when reviewing the work.
3. To be able to find key passages quickly.
4. To begin to do the analysis yourself, concurrent with the reading experience.
5. To increase the enjoyment of the work by participating actively while you read.

IN GENERAL, make note of:

- your reactions/emotional responses (humor, surprise, sadness, anger, frustration, disappointment, tension/suspense, disgust, criticism/disagreement, confusion)
- your questions or lack of understanding or doubts
- your revelations: when things become clear to you; links you make in the text (your "Aha!" moments)
- intertextuality or allusion (Does the work echo other literature? Myths? Biblical stories?)
- simply awesome passages

You should have a **BALANCE** of the following categories:

CONCERNING CHARACTER AND PLOT, make note of:

- introductory facts: character backgrounds, age, setting descriptions character traits/self-appraisals/revelations
- important events/turning points/key scenes contradictions/conflicts
- connections to previous incidents/repeated references
- comparison within text and to outside events/figures; juxtapositions

CONCERNING HISTORY AND CULTURE, make note of:

- historical references to events or individuals; geographical references
- evidence of views characteristic of the characters' and/or author's time period and culture
- depictions of class judgments, racism, gender biases, stereotypes, politics

CONCERNING AUTHORIAL DEVICES, make note of:

- changes in point of view/emphasis
- points where the author seems to speak directly or thematically (direct presentation)
- points where the reader understands anything that the characters do not (dramatic irony)
- crucial vocabulary (ACTUALLY LOOK UP THE WORD!!)
- stylistic techniques: irony, satire, humor, exaggeration, repetition/patterns, possible symbols, significant metaphors, and other notable literary devices; applications of the work's title (modified from lrhsd.org)

(modified from lrhsd.org)

How to Read Literature Like a Professor:

A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines

By THOMAS C. FOSTER

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ENVOI

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Introduction: How'd He Do That?

MR. LINDNER? THAT MILQUETOAST?

Right. Mr. Lindner the milquetoast. So what did you think the devil would look like? If he were red with a tail, horns, and cloven hooves, any fool could say no.

The class and I are discussing Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), one of the great plays of the American theater. The incredulous questions have come, as they often do, in response to my innocent suggestion that Mr. Lindner is the devil. The Youngers, an African American family in Chicago, have made a down payment on a house in an all-white neighborhood. Mr. Lindner, a meekly apologetic little man, has been dispatched from the neighborhood association, check in hand, to buy out the family's claim on the house. At first, Walter Lee Younger, the protagonist, confidently turns down the offer, believing that the family's money (in the form of a life insurance payment after his father's recent death) is secure. Shortly afterward, however, he discovers that two-thirds of that money has been stolen. All of a sudden the previously insulting offer comes to look like his financial salvation.

Bargains with the devil go back a long way in Western culture. In all the versions of the Faust legend, which is the dominant form of this type of story, the hero is offered something he desperately wants – power or knowledge or a fastball that will beat the Yankees – and all he has to give up is his soul. This pattern holds from the Elizabethan Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* through the nineteenth-century Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* to the twentieth century's Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and *Damn Yankees*. In Hansberry's version, when Mr. Lindner makes his offer, he doesn't demand Walter Lee's soul; in fact, he doesn't even know that he's demanding it. He is, though, Walter Lee can be rescued from the monetary crisis he has brought upon the family; all he has to do is admit that he's not the equal of the white residents who don't want him moving in, that his pride and self-respect, his identity, can be bought. If that's not selling your soul, then what is it?

The chief difference between Hansberry's version of the Faustian bargain and others is that Walter Lee ultimately resists the satanic temptation. Previous versions have been either tragic or comic depending on whether the devil successfully collects the soul at the end of the work. Here, the protagonist psychologically makes the deal but then looks at himself and at the true cost and recovers in time to reject the devil's – Mr. Lindner's – offer. The resulting play, for all its tears and anguish, is structurally comic – the tragic downfall threatened but avoided – and Walter Lee grows to heroic stature in wrestling with his own demons as well as the external one, Lindner, and coming through without falling.

A moment occurs in this exchange between professor and student when each of us adopts a look. My look says, "What, you don't get it?" Theirs says, "We don't get it. And we think you're making it up." We're having a communication problem. Basically, we've all read the same story, but we haven't used the same analytical apparatus. If you've ever spent time in a literature classroom as a student or a professor, you know this moment. It may seem at times as if the professor is either inventing interpretations out of thin air or else performing parlor tricks, a sort of analytical sleight of hand.

Actually, neither of these is the case; rather, 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. Every language has a grammar, a set of rules that govern usage and meaning, and literary language is

no different. It's all more or less arbitrary, of course, just like language itself. Take the word "arbitrary" as an example: it doesn't mean anything inherently; rather, at some point in our past we agreed that it would mean what it does, and it does so only in English (those sounds would be so much gibberish in Japanese or Finnish). So too with art: we decided to agree that perspective – the set of tricks artists use to provide the illusion of depth – was a good thing and vital to painting. This occurred during the Renaissance in Europe, but when Western and Oriental art encountered each other in the 1700s, Japanese artists and their audiences were serenely untroubled by the lack of perspective in their painting. No one felt it particularly essential to the experience of pictorial art.

Literature has its grammar, too. You knew that, of course. Even if you didn't know that, you knew from the structure of the preceding paragraph that it was coming. How? The grammar of the essay. You can read, and part of reading is knowing the conventions, recognizing them, and anticipating the results. When someone introduces a topic (the grammar of literature), then digresses to show other topics (language, art, music, dog training – it doesn't matter what examples; as soon as you see a couple of them, you recognize the pattern), you know he's coming back with an application of those examples to the main topic (voilà !). And he did. So now we're all happy, because the convention has been used, observed, noted, anticipated, and fulfilled. What more can you want from a paragraph?

Well, as I was saying before I so rudely digressed, so too in literature. Stories and novels have a very large set of conventions: types of characters, plot rhythms, chapter structures, point-of-view limitations. Poems have a great many of their own, involving form, structure, rhythm, rhyme. Plays, too. And then there are conventions that cross genre lines. Spring is largely universal. So is snow. So is darkness. And sleep. When spring is mentioned in a story, a poem, or a play, a veritable constellation of associations rises in our imaginative sky: youth, promise, new life, young lambs, children skipping...on and on. And if we associate even further, that constellation may lead us to more abstract concepts such as rebirth, fertility, renewal.

Okay, let's say you're right and there is a set of conventions, a key to reading literature. How do I get so I can recognize these?

Same way you get to Carnegie Hall. Practice.

When lay readers encounter a fictive text, they focus, as they should, on the story and the characters: who are these people, what are they doing, and what wonderful or terrible things are happening to them? Such readers respond first of all, and sometimes only, to their reading on an emotional level; the work affects them, producing joy or revulsion, laughter or tears, anxiety or elation. In other words, they are emotionally and instinctively involved in the work. This is the response level that virtually every writer who has ever set pen to paper or fingertip to keyboard has hoped for when sending the novel, along with a prayer, to the publisher. When an English professor reads, on the other hand, he will accept the affective response level of the story (we don't mind a good cry when Little Nell dies), but a lot of his attention will be engaged by other elements of the novel. Where did that effect come from? Whom does this character resemble? Where have I seen this situation before? Didn't Dante (or Chaucer, or Merle Haggard) say that? If you learn to ask these questions, to see literary texts through these glasses, you will read and understand literature in a new light, and it'll become more rewarding and fun.

Memory. Symbol. Pattern. These are the three items that, more than any other, separate the professorial reader from the rest of the crowd. English professors, as a class, are cursed with memory. Whenever I read a new work, I spin the mental Rolodex looking for correspondences and corollaries –

where have I seen his face, don't I know that theme? I can't not do it, although there are plenty of times when that ability is not something I want to exercise. Thirty minutes into Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider* (1985), for instance, I thought, Okay, this is *Shane* (1953), and from there I didn't watch another frame of the movie without seeing Alan Ladd's face. This does not necessarily improve the experience of popular entertainment.

Professors also read, and think, symbolically. Everything is a symbol of something, it seems, until proven otherwise. We ask, Is this a metaphor? Is that an analogy? What does the thing over there signify? The kind of mind that works its way through undergraduate and then graduate classes in literature and criticism has a predisposition to see things as existing in themselves while simultaneously also representing something else. Grendel, the monster in the medieval epic *Beowulf* (eighth century A.D.), is an actual monster, but he can also symbolize(a) the hostility of the universe to human existence (a hostility that medieval Anglo-Saxons would have felt acutely) and (b) a darkness in human nature that only some higher aspect of ourselves (as symbolized by the title hero) can conquer. This predisposition to understand the world in symbolic terms is reinforced, of course, by years of training that encourages and rewards the symbolic imagination.

A related phenomenon in professorial reading is pattern recognition. Most professional students of literature learn to take in the foreground detail while seeing the patterns that the detail reveals. Like the symbolic imagination, this is a function of being able to distance oneself from the story, to look beyond the purely affective level of plot, drama, characters. Experience has proved to them that life and books fall into similar patterns. Nor is this skill exclusive to English professors. Good mechanics, the kind who used to fix cars before computerized diagnostics, use pattern recognition to diagnose engine troubles: if this and this are happening, then check that. Literature is full of patterns, and your reading experience will be much more rewarding when you can step back from the work, even while you're reading it, and look for those patterns. When small children, very small children, begin to tell you a story, they put in every detail and every word they recall, with no sense that some features are more important than others. As they grow, they begin to display a greater sense of the plots of their stories - what elements actually add to the significance and which do not. So too with readers. Beginning students are often swamped with the mass of detail; the chief experience of reading Dr. Zhivago (1957) may be that they can't keep all the names straight. Wily veterans, on the other hand, will absorb those details, or possibly overlook them, to find the patterns, the routines, the archetypes at work in the background.

Let's look at an example of how the symbolic mind, the pattern observer, the powerful memory combine to offer a reading of a nonliterary situation. Let's say that a male subject you are studying exhibits behavior and makes statements that show him to be hostile toward his father but much warmer and more loving toward, even dependent on, his mother. Okay, that's just one guy, so no big deal. But you see it again in another person. And again. And again. You might start to think this is a pattern of behavior, in which case you would say to yourself, "Now where have I seen this before?" Your memory may dredge up something from experience, not your clinical work but a play you read long ago in your youth about a man who murders his father and marries his mother. Even though the current examples have nothing to do with drama, your symbolic imagination will allow you to connect the earlier instance of this pattern with the real-life examples in front of you at the moment. And your talent for nifty naming will come up with something to call this pattern: the Oedipal complex. As I said, not only English professors use these abilities. Sigmund Freud "reads" his patients the way a literary scholar reads texts, bringing the same sort of imaginative interpretation to understanding his cases that we try to bring to interpreting novels and poems and plays. His identification of the Oedipal

complex is one of the great moments in the history of human thought, with as much literary as psychoanalytical significance.

What I hope to do, in the coming pages, is what I do in class: give readers a view of what goes on when professional students of literature do their thing, a broad introduction to the codes and patterns that inform our readings. I want my students not only to agree with me that, indeed, Mr. Lindner is an instance of the demonic tempter offering Walter Lee Younger a Faustian bargain; I want them to be able to reach that conclusion without me. I know they can, with practice, patience, and a bit of instruction. And so can you.

1 - Every Trip Is a Quest (Except When It's Not)

OKAY, SO HERE'S THE DEAL: let's say, purely hypothetically, you're reading a book about an average sixteen-year-old kid in the summer of 1968. The kid - let's call him Kip - who hopes his acne clears up before he gets drafted, is on his way to the A&P. His bike is a one-speed with a coaster brake and therefore deeply humiliating, and riding it to run an errand for his mother makes it even worse. Along the way he has a couple of disturbing experiences, including a minorly unpleasant encounter with a German shepherd, topped off in the supermarket parking lot where he sees the girl of his dreams, Karen, laughing and horsing around in Tony Vauxhall's brand-new Barracuda. Now Kip hates Tony already because he has a name like Vauxhall and not like Smith, which Kip thinks is pretty lame as a name to follow Kip, and because the 'Cuda is bright green and goes approximately the speed of light, and also because Tony has never had to work a day in his life. So Karen, who is laughing and having a great time, turns and sees Kip, who has recently asked her out, and she keeps laughing. (She could stop laughing and it wouldn't matter to us, since we're considering this structurally. In the story we're inventing here, though, she keeps laughing.) Kip goes on into the store to buy the loaf of Wonder Bread that his mother told him to pick up, and as he reaches for the bread, he decides right then and there to lie about his age to the Marine recruiter even though it means going to Vietnam, because nothing will ever happen for him in this one-horse burg where the only thing that matters is how much money your old man has. Either that or Kip has a vision of St. Abillard (any saint will do, but our imaginary author picked a comparatively obscure one), whose face appears on one of the red, yellow, or blue balloons. For our purposes, the nature of the decision doesn't matter anymore than whether Karen keeps laughing or which color balloon manifests the saint.

What just happened here?

If you were an English professor, and not even a particularly weird English professor, you'd know that you'd just watched a knight have a not very suitable encounter with his nemesis.

In other words, a quest just happened.

But it just looked like a trip to the store for some white bread.

True. But consider the quest. Of what does it consist? A knight, a dangerous road, a Holy Grail (whatever one of those may be), at least one dragon, one evil knight, one princess. Sound about right? That's a list I can live with: a knight (named Kip), a dangerous road (nasty German shepherds), a Holy Grail (one form of which is a loaf of Wonder Bread), at least one dragon (trust me, a '68 'Cuda could definitely breathe fire), one evil knight (Tony), one princess (who can either keep laughing or stop).

Seems like a bit of a stretch.

On the surface, sure. But let's think structurally. The quest consists of five things: (a) a quester, (b) a place to go, (c) a stated reason to go there, (d) challenges and trials en route, and (e) a real reason to go there. Item (a) is easy; a quester is just a person who goes on a quest, whether or not he knows it's a quest. In fact, usually he doesn't know. Items (b) and (c) should be considered together: someone tells our protagonist, our hero, who need not look very heroic, to go somewhere and do something. Go in search of the Holy Grail. Go to the store for bread. Go to Vegas and whack a guy. Tasks of varying nobility, to be sure, but structurally all the same. Go there, do that. Note that I said the stated reason for the quest. That's because of item (e).

The real reason for a quest never involves the stated reason. In fact, more often than not, the quester fails at the stated task. So why do they go and why do we care? They go because of the stated task, mistakenly believing that it is their real mission. We know, however, that their quest is educational. They don't know enough about the only subject that really matters: themselves. The real reason for a quest is always self-knowledge. That's why questers are so often young, inexperienced, immature, sheltered. Forty-five-year-old men either have self-knowledge or they're never going to get it, while your average sixteen-to-seventeen-year-old kid is likely to have a long way to go in the self-knowledge department.

Let's look at a real example. When I teach the late-twentieth-century novel, I always begin with the greatest quest novel of the last century: Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* (1965). Beginning readers can find the novel mystifying, irritating, and highly peculiar. True enough, there is a good bit of cartoonish strangeness in the novel, which can mask the basic quest structure. On the other hand, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century) and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen* (1596), two of the great quest narratives from early English literature, also have what modern readers must consider cartoonish elements. It's really only a matter of whether we're talking *Classics Illustrated* or *Zap Comics*. So here's the setup in *The Crying of Lot 49*:

- 1) Our quester: a young woman, not very happy in her marriage or her life, not too old to learn, not too assertive where men are concerned.
- 2) A place to go: in order to carry out her duties, she must drive to Southern California from her home near San Francisco. Eventually she will travel back and forth between the two, and between her past (a husband with a disintegrating personality and a fondness for LSD, an insane ex-Nazi psychotherapist) and her future (highly unclear).
- 3) A stated reason to go there: she has been made executor of the will of her former lover, a fabulously wealthy and eccentric businessman and stamp collector.
- 4) Challenges and trials: our heroine meets lots of really strange, scary, and occasionally truly dangerous people. She goes on a nightlong excursion through the world of the outcasts and the dispossessed of San Francisco; enters her therapist's office to talk him out of his psychotic shooting rampage (the dangerous enclosure known in the study of traditional quest romances as "Chapel Perilous"); involves herself in what may be a centuries-old postal conspiracy.
- 5) The real reason to go: did I mention that her name is Oedipa? Oedipa Maas, actually. She's named for the great tragic character from Sophocles' drama *Oedipus the King* (ca. 425 B.C.), whose real calamity is that he doesn't know himself. In Pynchon's novel the heroine's resources, really her crutches - and they all happen to be male - are stripped away one by one, shown to be false or unreliable, until she reaches the point where she either must break down, reduced to a little fetal ball, or stand straight and rely on herself. And to do that, she first must find the self on whom she can rely. Which she does, after considerable struggle. Gives up on men, Tupperware parties, easy answers. Plunges ahead into the great mystery of the ending. Acquires, dare we say, self-knowledge? Of course we dare.

Still...

You don't believe me. Then why does the stated goal fade away? We hear less and less about the will and the estate as the story goes on, and even the surrogate goal, the mystery of the postal conspiracy,

remains unresolved. At the end of the novel, she's about to witness an auction of some rare forged stamps, and the answer to the mystery may appear during the auction. We doubt it, though, given what's gone before. Mostly, we don't even care. Now we know, as she does, that she can carry on, that discovering that men can't be counted on doesn't mean the world ends, that she's a whole person.

So there, in fifty words or more, is why professors of literature typically think *The Crying of Lot 49* is a terrific little book. It does look a bit weird at first glance, experimental and super-hip, but once you get the hang of it, you see that it follows the conventions of a quest tale. So does *Huck Finn*. *The Lord of the Rings*. *North by Northwest*. *Star Wars*. And most other stories of someone going somewhere and doing something, especially if the going and the doing wasn't his idea in the first place.

A word of warning: if I sometimes speak here and in the chapters to come as if a certain statement is always true, a certain condition always obtains, I apologize. "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. If literature seems to be too comfortably patriarchal, a novelist like the late Angela Carter or a poet like the contemporary Eavan Boland will come along and upend things just to remind readers and writers of the falseness of our established assumptions. If readers start to pigeonhole African-American writing, as was beginning to happen in the 1960s and 1970s, a trickster like Ishmael Reed will come along who refuses to fit in any pigeonhole we could create. Let's consider journeys. Sometimes the quest fails or is not taken up by the protagonist. Moreover, is every trip really a quest? It depends. Some days I just drive to work - no adventures, no growth. I'm sure that the same is true in writing. Sometimes plot requires that a writer get a character from home to work and back again. That said, when a character hits the road, we should start to pay attention, just to see if, you know, something's going on there.

Once you figure out quests, the rest is easy.

2 - Nice to Eat with You: Acts of Communion

PERHAPS YOU'VE HEARD THE ANECDOTE about Sigmund Freud. One day one of his students, or assistants, or some such hanger-on, was teasing him about his fondness for cigars, referring to their obvious phallic nature. The great man responded simply that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." I don't really care if the story is true or not. Actually, I think I prefer that it be apocryphal, since made-up anecdotes have their own kind of truth. Still, it is equally true that just as cigars may be just cigars, so sometimes they are not.

Same with meals in life and, of course, in literature. Sometimes a meal is just a meal, and eating with others is simply eating with others. More often than not, though, it's not. Once or twice a semester at least, I will stop discussion of the story or play under consideration to intone (and I invariably intone in bold): whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion. For some reasons, this is often met with a slightly scandalized look, communion having for many readers one and only one meaning. While that meaning is very important, it is not the only one. Nor, for that matter, does Christianity have a lock on the practice. Nearly every religion has some liturgical or social ritual involving the coming together of the faithful to share sustenance. So I have to explain that just as intercourse has meanings other than sexual, or at least did at one time, so not all communions are holy. In fact, literary versions of communion can interpret the word in quite a variety of ways.

Here's the thing to remember about communions of all kinds: in the real world, breaking bread together is an act of sharing and peace, since if you're breaking bread you're not breaking heads. One generally invites one's friends to dinner, unless one is trying to get on the good side of enemies or employers. We're quite particular about those with whom we break bread. We may not, for instance, accept a dinner invitation from someone we don't care for. The act of taking food into our bodies is so personal that we really only want to do it with people we're very comfortable with. As with any convention, this one can be violated. A tribal leader or Mafia don, say, may invite his enemies to lunch and then have them killed. In most areas, however, such behavior is considered very bad form. Generally, eating with another is a way of saying, "I'm with you, I like you, we form a community together." And that is a form of communion.

So too in literature. And in literature, there is another reason: writing a meal scene is so difficult, and so inherently uninteresting, that there really needs to be some compelling reason to include one in the story. And that reason has to do with how characters are getting along. Or not getting along. Come on, food is food. What can you say about fried chicken that you haven't already heard, said, seen, thought? And eating is eating, with some slight variations of table manners. To put characters, then, in this mundane, overused, fairly boring situation, something more has to be happening than simply beef, forks, and goblets.

So what kind of communion? And what kind of result can it achieve? Any kind you can think of.

Let's consider an example that will never be confused with religious communion, the eating scene in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), which, as one of my students once remarked, "sure doesn't look like church." Specifically, Tom and his lady friend, Mrs. Waters, dine at an inn, chomping, gnawing, sucking on bones, licking fingers; a more leering, slurping, groaning, and, in short, sexual meal has never been consumed. While it doesn't feel particularly important thematically and, moreover, it's as far from traditional notions of communion as we can get, it nevertheless constitutes a shared experience. What else is the eating about in that scene except consuming the other's body? Think of it as a consuming desire. Or two of them. And in the case of the movie version of *Tom Jones* starring Albert Finney

(1963), there's another reason. Tony Richardson, the director, couldn't openly show sex as, well, sex. There were still taboos in film in the early sixties. So what he does is show something else as sex. And it's probably dirtier than all but two or three sex scenes ever filmed. When those two finish swilling ale and slurping on drumsticks and sucking fingers and generally wallowing and moaning, the audience wants to lie back and smoke. But what is this expression of desire except a kind of communion, very private, admittedly, and decidedly not holy? I want to be with you, you want to be with me, let us share the experience. And that's the point: communion doesn't need to be holy. Or even decent.

How about a slightly more sedate example? The late Raymond Carver wrote a story, "Cathedral" (1981), about a guy with real hang-ups: included among the many things the narrator is bigoted against are people with disabilities, minorities, those different from himself, and all parts of his wife's past in which he does not share. Now the only reason to give a character a serious hang-up is to give him the chance to get over it. He may fail, but he gets the chance. It's the Code of the West. When our unnamed narrator reveals to us from the first moment that a blind man, a friend of his wife's, is coming to visit, we're not surprised that he doesn't like the prospect at all. We know immediately that our man has to overcome disliking everyone who is different. And by the end he does, when he and the blind man sit together to draw a cathedral so the blind man can get a sense of what one looks like. To do that, they have to touch, hold hands even, and there's no way the narrator would have been able to do that at the start of the story. Carver's problem, then, is how to get from the nasty, prejudiced, narrow-minded person of the opening page to the point where he can actually have a blind man's hand on his own at the ending. The answer is food.

Every coach I ever had would say, when we faced a superior opposing team, that they put on their pants one leg at a time, just like everybody else. What those coaches could have said, in all accuracy, is that those supermen shovel in the pasta just like the rest of us. Or in Carver's story, meat loaf. When the narrator watches the blind man eating - competent, busy, hungry, and, well, normal - he begins to gain a new respect for him. The three of them, husband, wife, and visitor, ravenously consume the meat loaf, potatoes, and vegetables, and in the course of that experience our narrator finds his antipathy toward the blind man beginning to break down. He discovers he has something in common with this stranger - eating as a fundamental element of life - that there is a bond between them.

What about the dope they smoke afterward?

Passing a joint doesn't quite resemble the wafer and the chalice, does it? But thinking symbolically, where's the difference, really? Please note, I am not suggesting that illicit drugs are required to break down social barriers. On the other hand, here is a substance they take into their bodies in a shared, almost ritualistic experience. Once again, the act says, "I'm with you, I share this moment with you, I feel a bond of community with you." It may be a moment of even greater trust. In any case, the alcohol at supper and the marijuana after combine to relax the narrator so he can receive the full force of his insight, so he can share in the drawing of a cathedral (which, incidentally, is a place of communion).

What about when they don't? What if dinner turns ugly or doesn't happen at all?

A different outcome, but the same logic, I think. If a well-run meal or snack portends good things for community and understanding, then the failed meal stands as a bad sign. It happens all the time on television shows. Two people are at dinner and a third comes up, quite unwished for, and one or more of the first two refuse to eat. They place their napkins on their plates, or say something about losing their appetite, or simply get up and walk away. Immediately we know what they think about the

interloper. Think of all those movies where a soldier shares his C rations with a comrade, or a boy his sandwich with a stray dog; from the overwhelming message of loyalty, kinship, and generosity, you get a sense of how strong a value we place on the comradeship of the table. What if we see two people having dinner, then, but one of them is plotting, or bringing about the demise of the other? In that case, our revulsion at the act of murder is reinforced by our sense that a very important propriety, namely that one should not do evil to one's dinner companions, is being violated.

Or consider Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982). The mother tries and tries to have a family dinner, and every time she fails. Someone can't make it, someone gets called away, some minor disaster befalls the table. Not until her death can her children assemble around a table at the restaurant and achieve dinner; at that point, of course, the body and blood they symbolically share are hers. Her life - and her death - become part of their common experience.

For the full effect of dining together, consider James Joyce's story "The Dead" (1914). This wonderful story is centered around a dinner party on the Feast of the Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas. All kinds of disparate drives and desires enact themselves during the dancing and dinner, and hostilities and alliances are revealed. The main character, Gabriel Conroy, must learn that he is not superior to everyone else; during the course of the evening he receives a series of small shocks to his ego that collectively demonstrate that he is very much part of the more general social fabric. The table and dishes of food themselves are lavishly described as Joyce lures us into the atmosphere:

A fat brown goose lay at one end of the table and at the other end, on a bed of creased paper strewn with sprigs of parsley, lay a great ham, stripped of its outer skin and peppered over with crust crumbs, a neat paper frill round its shin and beside this was a round of spiced beef. Between these rival ends ran parallel lines of side-dishes: two little minsters of jelly, red and yellow; a shallow dish full of blocks of blancmange and red jam, a large green leaf-shaped dish with a stalk-shaped handle, on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds, a companion dish on which lay a solid rectangle of Smyrna figs, a dish of custard topped with grated nutmeg, a small bowl full of chocolates and sweets wrapped in gold and silver papers and a glass vase in which stood some tall celery stalks. In the centre of the table there stood, as sentries to a fruit-stand which upheld a pyramid of oranges and American apples, two squat old-fashioned decanters of cut glass, one containing port and the other dark sherry. On the closed square piano a pudding in a huge yellow dish lay in waiting and behind it were three squads of bottles of stout and ale and minerals, drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms, the first two black, with brown and red labels, the third and smallest squad white, with transverse green sashes.

No writer ever took such care about food and drink, so marshaled his forces to create a military effect of armies drawn up as if for battle: ranks, files, "rival ends," sentries, squads, sashes. Such a paragraph would not be created without having some purpose, some ulterior motive. Now, Joyce being Joyce, he has about five different purposes, one not being enough for genius. His main goal, though, is to draw us into that moment, to pull our chairs up to that table so that we are utterly convinced of the reality of the meal. At the same time, he wants to convey the sense of tension and conflict that has been running through the evening - there are a host of us-against-them and you-against-me moments earlier and even during the meal - and this tension will stand at odds with the sharing of this sumptuous and, given the holiday, unifying meal. He does this for a very simple, very profound reason: we need to be part of that communion. It would be easy for us simply to laugh at Freddy Malins, the resident drunkard, and his dotty mother, to shrug off the table talk about operas and singers we've never heard of, merely to snicker at the flirtations among the younger people, to discount the tension Gabriel feels over the speech of gratitude he's obliged to make at meal's end. But we can't maintain our distance because the

elaborate setting of this scene makes us feel as if we're seated at that table. So we notice, a little before Gabriel does, since he's lost in his own reality, that we're all in this together, that in fact we share something.

The thing we share is our death. Everyone in that room, from old and frail Aunt Julia to the youngest music student, will die. Not tonight, but someday. Once you recognize that fact (and we've been given a head start by the title, whereas Gabriel doesn't know his evening has a title), it's smooth sledding. Next to our mortality, which comes to great and small equally, all the differences in our lives are mere surface details. When the snow comes at the end of the story, in a beautiful and moving passage, it covers, equally, "all the living and the dead." Of course it does, we think, the snow is just like death. We're already prepared, having shared in the communion meal Joyce has laid out for us, a communion not of death, but of what comes before. Of life.

5 - Now, Where Have I Seen Her Before?

ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS about being a professor of English is that you get to keep meeting old friends. For beginning readers, though, every story may seem new, and the resulting experience of reading is highly disjointed. Think of reading, on one level, as one of those papers from elementary school where you connect the dots. I could never see the picture in a connect-the-dot drawing until I'd put in virtually every line. Other kids could look at a page full of dots and say, "Oh, that's an elephant," "That's a locomotive." Me, I saw dots. I think it's partly predisposition - some people handle two-dimensional visualization better than others - but largely a matter of practice: the more connect-the-dot drawings you do, the more likely you are to recognize the design early on. Same with literature. Part of pattern recognition is talent, but a whole lot of it is practice: if you read enough and give what you read enough thought, you begin to see patterns, archetypes, recurrences. And as with those pictures among the dots, it's a matter of learning to look. Not just to look but where to look, and how to look. Literature, as the great Canadian critic Northrop Frye observed, grows out of other literature; we should not be surprised to find, then, that it also looks like other literature. As you read, it may pay to remember this: there's no such thing as a wholly original work of literature. Once you know that, you can go looking for old friends and asking the attendant question: "now where have I seen her before?"

One of my favorite novels is Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978). Lay readers and students generally like it, too, which explains why it has become a perennial strong seller. Although the violence of the Vietnam War scenes may turn some readers off, many find themselves totally engrossed by something they initially figured would just be gross. What readers sometimes don't notice in their involvement with the story (and it is a great story) is that virtually everything in there is cribbed from somewhere else. Lest you conclude with dismay that the novel is somehow plagiarized or less than original, let me add that I find the book wildly original, that everything O'Brien borrows makes perfect sense in the context of the story he's telling, even more so once we understand that he has repurposed materials from older sources to accomplish his own ends. The novel divides into three interwoven parts: one, the actual story of the war experience of the main character, Paul Berlin, up to the point where his fellow soldier Cacciato runs away from the war; two, the imagined trip on which the squad follows Cacciato to Paris; and three, the long night watch on a tower near the South China Sea where Berlin manages these two very impressive mental feats of memory on the one hand and invention on the other. The actual war, because it really happened, he can't do much about. Oh, he gets some facts wrong and some events out of order, but mostly, reality has imposed a certain structure on memory. The trip to Paris, though, is another story. Actually, it's all stories, or all those Paul has read in his young lifetime. He creates events and people out of the novels, stories, histories he knows, his own included, all of which is quite unwitting on his part, the pieces just appearing out of his memory. O'Brien provides us with a wonderful glimpse into the creative process, a view of how stories get written, and a big part of that process is that you can't create stories in a vacuum. Instead the mind flashes bits and pieces of childhood experiences, past reading, every movie the writer/creator has ever seen, last week's argument with a phone solicitor - in short, everything that lurks in the recesses of the mind. Some of this may be unconscious, as it is in the case of O'Brien's protagonist. Generally, though, writers use prior texts quite consciously and purposefully, as O'Brien himself does; unlike Paul Berlin, he is aware that he's drawing from Lewis Carroll or Ernest Hemingway. O'Brien signals the difference between novelist and character in the structuring of the two narrative frames.

About halfway through the novel, O'Brien has his characters fall through a hole in the road. Not only that, one of the characters subsequently says that the way to get out is to fall back up. When it's stated this baldly, you automatically think of Lewis Carroll. Falling through a hole is like Alice in Wonderland

(1865). Bingo. It's all we need. And the world the squad discovers below the road, the network of Vietcong tunnels (although nothing like the real ones), complete with an officer condemned to stay there for his crimes, is every bit as much an alternative world as the one Alice encounters in her adventure. Once you've established that a book – a man's book at that, a war book – is borrowing a situation from Lewis Carroll's Alice books, anything is possible. So with that in mind, readers must reconsider characters, situations, events in the novel. This one looks like it's from Hemingway, that one like "Hansel and Gretel," these two from things that happened during Paul Berlin's "real" war, and so on down the line. Once you've played around with these elements for a while, a kind of Trivial Pursuit of source material, go for the big one: what about Sarkin Aung Wan?

Sarkin Aung Wan is Paul Berlin's love interest, his fantasy girl. She is Vietnamese and knows about tunnels but is not Vietcong. She's old enough to be attractive, yet not old enough to make sexual demands on the virginal young soldier. She's not a "real" character, since she comes in after the start of Berlin's fantasy. Careful readers will find her "real" model in a young girl with the same hoop earrings when the soldiers frisk villagers in one remembered war scene. Fair enough, but that's just the physical person, not her character. Then who is she? Where does she come from? Think generically. Lose the personal details, consider her as a type, and try to think where you've seen that type before: a brown-skinned young woman guiding a group of white men (mostly white, anyway), speaking the language they don't know, knowing where to go, where to find food. Taking them west. Right.

No, not Pocahontas. She never led anyone anywhere, whatever the popular culture may suggest. Somehow Pocahontas has received better PR, but we want the other one.

Sacajawea. If I need to be guided across hostile territory, she's the one I want, and she's the one Paul Berlin wants, too. He wants, he needs, a figure who will be sympathetic, understanding, strong in the ways he's not, and most of all successful in bringing him safely to his goal of getting to Paris. O'Brien plays here with the reader's established knowledge of history, culture, and literature. He's hoping that your mind will associate Sarkin Aung Wan consciously or unconsciously with Sacajawea, thereby not only creating her personality and impact but also establishing the nature and depth of Paul Berlin's need. If you require a Sacajawea, you're really lost.

The point isn't really which native woman figures in O'Brien's novel, it's that there is a literary or historical model that found her way into his fiction to give it shape and purpose. He could have used Tolkien rather than Carroll, and while the surface features would have been different, the principle would have remained the same. Although the story would go in different directions with a change of literary model, in either case it gains a kind of resonance from these different levels of narrative that begin to emerge; the story is no longer all on the surface but begins to have depth. What we're trying to do is learn to read this sort of thing like a wily old professor, to learn to spot those familiar images, like being able to see the elephant before we connect the dots.

You say stories grow out of other stories. But Sacajawea was real.

As a matter of fact, she was, but from our point of view, it doesn't really matter. History is story, too. You don't encounter her directly, you've only heard of her through narrative of one sort or another. She is a literary as well as a historical character, as much a piece of the American myth as Huck Finn or Jay Gatsby, and very nearly as unreal. And what all this is about, finally, is myth. Which brings us to the big secret.

Here it is: there's only one story. There, I said it and I can't very well take it back. 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. The Thousand and One Nights. Beloved. "Jack and the Beanstalk." The Epic of Gilgamesh. The Story of O. The Simpsons.

T. S. Eliot said that when a new work is created, it is set among the monuments, adding to and altering the order. That always sounds to me a bit too much like a graveyard. To me, literature is something much more alive. More like a barrel of eels. When a writer creates a new eel, it wriggles its way into the barrel, muscles a path into the great teeming mass from which it came in the first place. It's a new eel, but it shares its eelness with all those other eels that are in the barrel or have ever been in the barrel. Now, if that simile doesn't put you off reading entirely, you know you're serious.

But the point is this: stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems. And they don't have to stick to genre. Poems can learn from plays, songs from novels. Sometimes influence is direct and obvious, as when the twentieth-century American writer T. Coraghessan Boyle writes "The Overcoat II," a postmodern reworking of the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Gogol's classic story "The Overcoat," or when William Trevor updates James Joyce's "Two Gallants" with "Two More Gallants," or when John Gardner reworks the medieval Beowulf into his little postmodern masterpiece Grendel. Other times, it's less direct and more subtle. It may be vague, the shape of a novel generally reminding readers of some earlier novel, or a modern-day miser recalling Scrooge. And of course there's the Bible: among its many other functions, it too is part of the one big story. A female character may remind us of Scarlett O'Hara or Ophelia or even, say, Pocahontas. These similarities - and they may be straight or ironic or comic or tragic - begin to reveal themselves to readers after much practice of reading.

All this resembling other literature is all well and good, but what does it mean for our reading?

Excellent question. If we don't see the reference, it means nothing, right? So the worst thing that occurs is that we're still reading the same story as if the literary precursors weren't there. From there, anything that happens is a bonus. A small part of what transpires is what I call the aha! factor, the delight we feel at recognizing a familiar component from earlier experience. That moment of pleasure, wonderful as it is, is not enough, so that awareness of similarity leads us forward. What typically takes place is that we recognize elements from some prior text and begin drawing comparisons and parallels that may be fantastic, parodic, tragic, anything. Once that happens, our reading of the text changes from the reading governed by what's overtly on the page. Let's go back to Cacciato for a moment. When the squad falls through the hole in the road in language that recalls Alice in Wonderland, we quite reasonably expect that the place they fall into will be a wonderland in its own way. Indeed, right from the beginning, this is true. The oxcart and Sarkin Aung Wan's aunties fall faster than she and the soldiers despite the law of gravity, which decrees that falling bodies all move at thirty-two feet per second squared. The episode allows Paul Berlin to see a Vietcong tunnel, which his inherent terror will never allow him to do in real life, and this fantastic tunnel proves both more elaborate and more harrowing than the real ones. The enemy officer who is condemned to spend the remainder of the war down there accepts his sentence with a weird illogic that would do Lewis Carroll proud. The tunnel even has a periscope through which Berlin can look back at a scene from the real war, his past. Obviously the episode could have these features without invoking Carroll, but the wonderland analogy enriches our understanding of what Berlin has created, furthering our sense of the outlandishness of this portion of his fantasy.

This dialogue between old texts and new is always going on at one level or another. Critics speak of this dialogue as intertextuality, the ongoing interaction between poems or stories. This intertextual dialogue deepens and enriches the reading experience, bringing multiple layers of meaning to the text, some of which readers may not even consciously notice. The more we become aware of the possibility that our text is speaking to other texts, the more similarities and correspondences we begin to notice, and the more alive the text becomes. We'll come back to this discussion later, but for now we'll simply note that newer works are having a dialogue with older ones, and they often indicate the presence of this conversation by invoking the older texts with anything from oblique references to extensive quotations.

Once writers know that we know how this game is played, the rules can get very tricky. The late Angela Carter, in her novel *Wise Children* (1992), gives us a theatrical family whose fame rests on Shakespearean performance. We more or less expect the appearance of elements from Shakespeare's plays, so we're not surprised when a jilted young woman, Tiffany, walks onto a television show set distraught, muttering, bedraggled - in a word, mad - and then disappears shortly after departing, evidently having drowned. Her performance is every bit as heartbreaking as that of Ophelia, Prince Hamlet's love interest who goes mad and drowns in the most famous play in English. Carter's novel is about magic as well as Shakespeare, though, and the apparent drowning is a classic bit of misdirection. The apparently dead Tiffany shows up later, to the discomfort of her faithless lover. Shrewdly, Carter counts on our registering "Tiffany=Ophelia" so that she can use her instead as a different Shakespearean character, Hero, who in *Much Ado About Nothing* allows her friends to stage her death and funeral in order to teach her fiancé a lesson. Carter employs not only materials from earlier texts but also her knowledge of our responses to them in order to double-cross us, to set us up for a certain kind of thinking so that she can play a larger trick in the narrative. No knowledge of Shakespeare is required to believe Tiffany has died or to be astonished at her return, but the more we know of his plays, the more solidly our responses are locked in. Carter's sleight of narrative challenges our expectations and keeps us on our feet, but it also takes what could seem merely a tawdry incident and reminds us, through its Shakespearean parallels, that there is nothing new in young men mistreating the women who love them, and that those without power in relationships have always had to be creative in finding ways to exert some control of their own. Her new novel is telling a very old story, which in turn is part of the one big story.

But what do we do if we don't see all these correspondences?

First of all, don't worry. If a story is no good, being based on Hamlet won't save it. The characters have to work as characters, as themselves. Sarkin Aung Wan needs to be a great character, which she is, before we need to worry about her resemblance to a famous character of our acquaintance. If the story is good and the characters work but you don't catch allusions and references and parallels, then you've done nothing worse than read a good story with memorable characters. If you begin to pick up on some of these other elements, these parallels and analogies, however, you'll find your understanding of the novel deepens and becomes more meaningful, more complex.

But we haven't read everything.

Neither have I. Nor has anyone, not even Harold Bloom. Beginning readers, of course, are at a slight disadvantage, which is why professors are useful in providing a broader context. But you definitely can get there on your own. When I was a kid, I used to go mushroom hunting with my father. I would never see them, but he'd say, "There's a yellow sponge," or "There are a couple of black spikes." And because I knew they were there, my looking would become more focused and less vague. In a few

moments I would begin seeing them myself, not all of them, but some. And once you begin seeing morels, you can't stop. What a literature professor does is very similar: he tells you when you get near mushrooms. Once you know that, though (and you generally are near them), you can hunt for mushrooms on your own.

6 - When in Doubt, It's from Shakespeare...

QUICK QUIZ: What do John Cleese, Cole Porter, Moonlighting, and Death Valley Days have in common? No, they're not part of some Communist plot. All were involved with some version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, by that former glover's apprentice from Stratford-upon-Avon, William Shakespeare. Cleese played Petruchio in the BBC production of the complete Shakespeare plays in the 1970s. Porter wrote the score for *Kiss Me, Kate*, the modern musical-comedy version on Broadway and on film. The *Moonlighting* episode called "Atomic Shakespeare" was one of the funniest and most inventive on a show that was consistently funny and inventive. It was comparatively faithful to the spirit of the original while capturing the essence of the show's regular characters. The truly odd duck here is *Death Valley Days*, which was an anthology show from the 1950s and 1960s sometimes hosted by a future president, Ronald Reagan, and sponsored by Twenty Mule Team Borax. Their retelling was set in the Old West and completely free of Elizabethan English. For a lot of us, that particular show was either our first encounter with the Bard or our first intimation that he could actually be fun, since in public school, you may recall, they only teach his tragedies. These examples represent only the tip of the iceberg for the perennially abused *Shrew*: its plot seems to be permanently available to be moved in time and space, adapted, altered, updated, set to music, reimagined in myriad ways.

If you look at any literary period between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, you'll be amazed by the dominance of the Bard. He's everywhere, in every literary form you can think of. And he's never the same: every age and every writer reinvents its own Shakespeare. All this from a man who we're still not sure actually wrote the plays that bear his name.

Try this. In 1982 Paul Mazursky directed an interesting modern version of *The Tempest*. It had an Ariel figure (Susan Sarandon), a comic but monstrous Caliban (Raul Julia), and a Prospero (famed director John Cassavetes), an island, and magic of a sort. The film's title? *Tempest*. Woody Allen reworked *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as his film *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*. Natch. The BBC series *Masterpiece Theatre* has recast *Othello* as a contemporary story of black police commissioner John Othello, his lovely white wife Dessie, and his friend Ben Jago, deeply resentful at being passed over for promotion. The action will surprise no one familiar with the original. Add that production to a nineteenth-century opera of some note based on the play. *West Side Story* famously reworks *Romeo and Juliet*, which resurfaces again in the 1990s, in a movie featuring contemporary teen culture and automatic pistols. And that's a century or so after Tchaikovsky's ballet based on the same play. *Hamlet* comes out as a new film every couple of years, it seems. Tom Stoppard considers the role and fate of minor characters from *Hamlet* in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. And that bastion of high culture, *Gilligan's Island*, had an episode where Phil Silvers, famous as TV's Sergeant Bilko and therefore adding to the highbrow content, was putting together a musical *Hamlet*, the highlight of which was Polonius's "Neither a borrower nor a lender be" speech set to the tune of "Habanera" from Bizet's *Carmen*. Now that's art.

Nor is the Shakespeare adaptation phenomenon restricted to the stage and screen. Jane Smiley rethinks *King Lear* in her novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991). Different time, different place, same meditation upon greed, gratitude, miscalculation, and love. Titles? William Faulkner liked *The Sound and the Fury*. Aldous Huxley decided on *Brave New World*. Agatha Christie chose *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, which statement Ray Bradbury completed with *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. The all-time champion for Shakespeare references, though, must be Angela Carter's final novel, *Wise Children*. The children of the title are twins, illegitimate daughters of the most famous Shakespearean actor of his age, who is the son of the most famous Shakespearean of his age. While the twins, Dora and Nora Chance, are song-and-dance artists – as opposed to practitioners of "legitimate" theater –

the story Dora tells is full to overflowing with Shakespearean passions and situations. Her grandfather kills his unfaithful wife and himself in a manner strongly reminiscent of Othello. As we saw in the previous chapter, a woman seems to drown like Ophelia, only to turn up in a hugely surprising way very late in the book like Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The novel is full of astonishing disappearances and reappearances, characters in disguise, women dressed as men, and the two most spiteful daughters since Regan and Goneril brought ruin to Lear and his kingdom. Carter envisions a film production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* more disastrously hilarious than anything the "rude mechanicals" of the original could conceive of, the results recalling the real-life all-male film version from the 1930s.

Those are just a few of the uses to which Shakespeare's plots and situations get put, but if that's all he amounted to, he'd only be a little different from any other immortal writer.

But that's not all.

You know what's great about reading old Will? You keep stumbling across lines you've been hearing and reading all your life. Try these:

To thine own self be true
All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players
What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet
What a rogue and peasant slave am I
Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!
Get thee to a nunnery
Who steals my purse steals trash
[Life's] a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, /
Signifying nothing
The better part of valor is discretion
(Exit, pursued by a bear)
A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers
Double, double, toil and trouble; /
Fire burn and cauldron bubble
By the pricking of my thumbs, / Something wicked this way comes
The quality of mercy is not strained, / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
O brave new world, / That has such people in't!

Oh, and lest I forget,

To be, or not to be, that is the question.

Ever heard any of those? This week? Today? I heard one of them in a news broadcast the morning I started composing this chapter. In my copy of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, Shakespeare takes up forty-seven pages. I will admit that not every one of the citations is all that familiar, but enough of them are. In fact, the hardest part of compiling my list of quotations was stopping. I could have gone on all day expanding the list without getting into anything too obscure. My first guess is that you probably have not read most of the plays from which these quotations are taken; my second guess is that you know the phrases anyway. Not where they're from necessarily, but the quotes themselves (or the popular versions of them).

All right, so the Bard is always with us. What does it mean?

He means something to us as readers in part because he means so much to our writers. So let's consider why writers turn to our man.

It makes them sound smarter?

Smarter than what?

Than quoting Rocky and Bullwinkle, for instance.

Careful, I'm a big fan of Moose and Squirrel. Still, I take your point. There are lots of sources that don't sound as good as Shakespeare. Almost all of them, in fact.

Plus, it indicates that you've read him, right? You've come across this wonderful phrase in the course of your reading, so clearly you're an educated person.

Not inevitably. I could have given you Richard III's famous request for a horse from the time I was nine. My father was a great fan of that play and loved to recount the desperation of that scene, so I began hearing it in the early grades. He was a factory worker with a high school education and not particularly interested in impressing anybody with his fancy learning. He was pleased, however, to be able to talk about these great stories, these plays he had read and loved. I think that's a big part of the motivation. We love the plays, the great characters, the fabulous speeches, the witty repartee even in times of duress. I hope never to be mortally stabbed, but if I am, I'd sure like to have the self-possession, when asked if it's bad, to answer, "No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve," as Mercutio does in *Romeo and Juliet*. I mean, to be dying and clever at the same time, how can you not love that? Rather than saying it proves you're well read, I think what happens is that writers quote what they've read or heard, and more of them have Shakespeare stuck in their heads than anything else. Except Bugs Bunny, of course.

And it gives what you're saying a kind of authority.

As a sacred text confers authority? Or as something exquisitely said confers authority? Yes, there is definitely a sacred-text quality at work here. When pioneer families went west in their prairie schooners, space was at a premium, so they generally carried only two books: the Bible and Shakespeare. Name another writer to whom high schoolers are subjected in each of four years. If you live in a medium-sized theater market, there is precisely one writer you can count on being in production somewhere in your area every year, and it is neither August Wilson nor Aristophanes. So there is a ubiquity to Shakespeare's work that makes it rather like a sacred text: at some very deep level he is ingrained in our psyches. But he's there because of the beauty of those lines, those scenes, and those plays. There is a kind of authority lent by something being almost universally known, where one has only to utter certain lines and people nod their heads in recognition.

But here's something you might not have thought of. Shakespeare also provides a figure against whom writers can struggle, a source of texts against which other texts can bounce ideas. Writers find themselves engaged in a relationship with older writers; of course, that relationship plays itself out through the texts, the new one emerging in part through earlier texts that exert influence on the writer in one way or another. This relationship contains considerable potential for struggle, which as we mentioned in the previous chapter is called intertextuality. Naturally, none of this is exclusive to Shakespeare, who just happens to be such a towering figure that a great many writers find themselves influenced by him. On intertextuality, more later. For now, an example. T. S. Eliot, in "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917), has his neurotic, timorous main character say he was never cut out to be Prince Hamlet, that the most he could be is an extra, someone who could come on to fill out the numbers onstage or possibly be sacrificed to plot exigency. By invoking not a generic figure - "I am just not cut out to be a tragic hero," for instance - but the most famous tragic hero, Hamlet, Eliot provides an instantly recognizable situation for his protagonist and adds an element of characterization that says more about his self-image than would a whole page of description. The most poor Prufrock could

aspire to would be Bernardo and Marcellus, the guards who first see the ghost of Hamlet's father, or possibly Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the hapless courtiers used by both sides and ultimately sent unknowing to their own executions. Eliot's poem does more, though, than merely draw from Hamlet. It also opens up a conversation with its famous predecessor. This is not an age of tragic grandeur, Prufrock suggests, but an age of hapless ditherers. Yes, but we recall that Hamlet is himself a hapless ditherer, and it's only circumstance that saves him from his own haplessness and confers on him something noble and tragic. This brief interplay between texts happens in only a couple of lines of verse, yet it illuminates both Eliot's poem and Shakespeare's play in ways that may surprise us, just a little, and that never would have been called into existence had Eliot not caused Prufrock to invoke Hamlet as a way of addressing his own inadequacy.

It's worth remembering that comparatively few writers slavishly copy bits of Shakespeare's work into their own. More commonly there is this kind of dialogue going on in which the new work, while taking bits from the older, is also having its say. The author may be reworking a message, exploring changes (or continuities) in attitudes from one era to another, recalling parts of an earlier work to highlight features of the newly created one, drawing on associations the reader holds in order to fashion something new and, ironically, original. Irony features fairly prominently in the use not only of Shakespeare but of any prior writer. The new writer has his own agenda, her own slant to put on things.

Try this for slant. One of the powerful voices to come out of resistance to apartheid in South Africa is Athol Fugard, best known for his play "Master Harold" ...and the Boys (1982). In creating this play Fugard turns to you-know-who. Your first instinct might be that he would grasp one of the tragedies, Othello, say, where race is already at issue. Instead he turns to the history plays, to Henry IV, Part II, to the story of a young man who must grow up. In Shakespeare, Prince Hal must put his hard-partying ways behind him, stop his carousing with Falstaff, and become Henry, the king who in Henry V is capable of leading an army and inspiring the kind of passion that will allow the English to be victorious at Agincourt. He must learn, in other words, to wear the mantle of adult responsibility. In Fugard's contemporary reworking, Henry is Harold, Hally to the black pals with whom he loafs and plays. Like his famous predecessor, Hally must grow up and become Master Harold, worthy successor to his father in the family business. What does it mean, though, to become a worthy successor in an unworthy enterprise? That is Fugard's question. Harold's mantle is made not only of adult responsibility but of racism and heartless disregard, and he learns to wear it well. As we might expect, Henry IV, Part II provides a means of measuring Harold's growth, which is actually a sort of regression into the most repugnant of human impulses. At the same time, though, "Master Harold" makes us reexamine the assumptions of right - and rights - that we take for granted in watching the Shakespearean original, notions of privilege and noblesse oblige, assumptions about power and inheritance, ideas of accepted behavior and even of adulthood itself. Is it a mark of growing up that one becomes capable, as Harold does, of spitting in the face of a friend? I think not. Fugard reminds us, of course, even if he does not mention it directly, that the grown-up King Henry must, in Henry V, have his old friend Falstaff hanged. Do the values endorsed by Shakespeare lead directly to the horrors of apartheid? For Fugard they do, and his play leads us back to a reconsideration of those values and the play that contains them.

That's what writers can do with Shakespeare. Of course, they can do it with other writers as well, and they do, if somewhat less frequently. Why? You know why. The stories are great, the characters compelling, the language fabulous. And we know him. You can allude to Fulke Greville, but you'd have to provide your own footnotes.

So what's in it for readers? As the Fugard example suggests, when we recognize the interplay between these dramas, we become partners with the new dramatist in creating meaning. Fugard relies on our awareness of the Shakespearean text as he constructs his play, and that reliance allows him to say more with fewer direct statements. I often tell my students that reading is an activity of the imagination, and the imagination in question is not the writer's alone. Moreover, our understanding of both works becomes richer and deeper as we hear this dialogue playing out; we see the implications for the new work, while at the same time we reconfigure our thinking, if only slightly, about the earlier one. And the writer we know better than any other, the one whose language and whose plays we "know" even if we haven't read him, is Shakespeare.

So if you're reading a work and something sounds too good to be true, you know where it's from.

The rest, dear friends, is silence.

7 - ...Or the Bible

CONNECT THESE DOTS: garden, serpent, plagues, flood, parting of waters, loaves, fishes, forty days, betrayal, denial, slavery and escape, fatted calves, milk and honey. Ever read a book with all these things in them?

Guess what? So have your writers. Poets. Playwrights. Screenwriters. Samuel L. Jackson's character in *Pulp Fiction*, in between all the swearwords (or that one swearword all those times) is a Vesuvius of biblical language, one steady burst of apocalyptic rhetoric and imagery. His linguistic behavior suggests that at some time Quentin Tarantino, the writer-director, was in contact with the Good Book, despite all his Bad Language. Why is that James Dean film called *East of Eden*? Because the author of the novel on which the film is based, John Steinbeck, knew his Book of Genesis. To be east of Eden, as we shall see, is to be in a fallen world, which is the only kind we know and certainly the only kind there could be in a James Dean film.

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. That may explain all those gardens, serpents, tongues of flame, and voices from whirlwinds.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), four white men ride up to the house in Ohio where the escaped slave Sethe has been living with her small children. In a fit of determination to "save" her children from slavery, she tries to kill them, succeeding only with her two-year-old daughter, known later as *Beloved*. No one, neither ex-slave nor free white, can believe or understand her action, and that incomprehension saves her life and rescues her remaining children from slavery. Does her violent frenzy make sense? No. It's irrational, excessive, disproportionate. They all agree on that. On the other hand, there's something about it that, to us, makes sense. The characters all see four white men from slave country riding up the road. We see, and Sethe intuits, that what's coming in the front gate is the Apocalypse. When the Four Horsemen come, it's the Last Day, the time for Judgment. Morrison's color scheme isn't quite that of St. John's original - it's hard to come up with a green horse - but we know them, not least because she actually calls them "the four horsemen." Not riders, not men on horses, not equestrians. Horsemen. That's pretty unambiguous. Moreover, one of them stays mounted with a rifle slung across his lap. That looks a lot like the fourth horseman, the one who in Revelation rides the pale (or green) horse and whose name is Death. In *Pale Rider* Clint Eastwood actually has a character speak the relevant passage so we don't miss the point (although the unnamed stranger in an Eastwood western is pretty much always Death), but here Morrison does the same with a three-word phrase and a pose. Unmistakable.

So when the Apocalypse comes riding up your lane, what will you do?

And that is why Sethe reacts as she does.

Morrison is American, of course, and raised in the Protestant tradition, but the Bible is nonsectarian. James Joyce, an Irish Catholic, uses biblical parallels with considerable frequency. I often teach his story "Araby" (1914), a lovely little gem about the loss of innocence. Another way of saying "loss of innocence," of course, is "the Fall." Adam and Eve, the garden, the serpent, the forbidden fruit. Every story about the loss of innocence is really about someone's private reenactment of the fall from grace, since we experience it not collectively but individually and subjectively. Here's the setup: a young boy - eleven, twelve, thirteen years old, right in there - who has previously experienced life as safe, uncomplicated, and limited to attending school and playing cowboys and Indians in the Dublin

streets with his friends, discovers girls. Or specifically, one girl, his friend Mangan's sister. Neither the sister nor our young hero has a name, so his situation is made slightly generic, which is useful. Being in early adolescence, the narrator has no way of dealing with the object of his desire, or even the wherewithal to recognize what he feels as desire. After all, his culture does all it can to keep boys and girls separate and pure, and his reading has described relations between the sexes in only the most general and chaste of terms. He promises to try to buy her something from a bazaar, the Araby of the title, to which she can't go (significantly, because of a religious retreat being put on by her convent school). After many delays and frustrations, he finally arrives at the bazaar just as it's closing. Most of the stalls are closed, but he finally finds one where a young woman and two young men are flirting in ways that are not very appealing to our young swain, and she can scarcely be bothered to ask what he wants. Daunted, he says he wants nothing, then turns away, his eyes blinded by tears of frustration and humiliation. He suddenly sees that his feelings are no loftier than theirs, that he's been a fool, that he's been running this errand on behalf of an ordinary girl who's probably never given him a single thought.

Wait a minute. Innocence maybe. But the Fall?

Sure. Innocence, then its loss. What more do you need?

Something biblical. A serpent, an apple, at least a garden.

Sorry, no garden, no apple. The bazaar takes place inside. But there are two great jars standing by the booth, Joyce says, like Eastern guards. And those guards are as biblical as it gets: "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life." That would be Genesis 3:24 for those of you keeping score. As we all know, there's nothing like a flaming sword to separate you from something, and in this case that something is a former innocence, whether of Eden or of childhood. The thing about loss-of-innocence stories, the reason they hit so hard, is that they're so final. You can never go back. That's why the boy's eyes sting with blinding tears - it's that flaming sword.

Maybe a writer doesn't want enriching motifs, characters, themes, or plots, but just needs a title. The Bible is full of possible titles. I mentioned East of Eden before. Tim Parks has a novel called Tongues of Flame. Faulkner has Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down, Moses. Okay, that last one's from a spiritual, but it's biblical in its basis. Let's suppose you want to write a novel about hopelessness and infertility and the sense that the future no longer exists. You might turn to Ecclesiastes for a passage that reminds us that every night is followed by a new day, that life is an endless cycle of life, death, and renewal, in which one generation succeeds another until the end of time. You might regard that outlook with a certain irony and borrow a phrase from it to express that irony - how the certainty that the earth and humanity will renew themselves, a certainty that has governed human assumptions since earliest times, has just been shredded by four years in which Western civilization tried with some success to destroy itself. You just might if you were a modernist and had lived through the horror that was the Great War. At least that's what Hemingway did, borrowing his title from that biblical passage: *The Sun Also Rises*. Great book, perfect title.

More common than titles are situations and quotations. Poetry is absolutely full of Scripture. Some of that is perfectly obvious. John Milton took most of his subject matter and a great deal of material for his great works from you-know-where: *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes*. Moreover, our early literature in English is frequently about, and nearly always informed by, religion. Those questing knights in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Faerie Queen* are searching on behalf of their religion whether they know it or not (and they generally do know). *Beowulf* is largely about the

coming of Christianity into the old paganism of northern Germanic society – after being about a hero overcoming a villain. Grendel, the monster, is descended from the line of Cain, we're told. Aren't all villains? Even Chaucer's pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* (1384), while neither they nor their tales are inevitably holy, are making an Easter pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral, and much of their talk invokes the Bible and religious teaching. John Donne was an Anglican minister, Jonathan Swift the dean of the Church of Ireland, Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet American Puritans (Taylor a minister). Ralph Waldo Emerson was a Unitarian minister for a spell, while Gerard Manley Hopkins was a Catholic priest. One can barely read Donne or Malory or Hawthorne or Rossetti without running into quotations, plots, characters, whole stories drawn from the Bible. Suffice it to say that every writer prior to sometime in the middle of the twentieth century was solidly instructed in religion.

Even today a great many writers have more than a nodding acquaintance with the faith of their ancestors. In the century just ended, there are modern religious and spiritual poets like T. S. Eliot and Geoffrey Hill or Adrienne Rich and Allen Ginsberg, whose work is shot through with biblical language and imagery. The dive-bomber in Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1942) looks very like a dove, offering salvation from the bomber's fire through the redemption of pentecostal fires. He borrows the figure of Christ joining the disciples on the road to Emmaus in *The Waste Land* (1922), uses the Christmas story in "Journey of the Magi" (1927), offers a fairly idiosyncratic sort of Lenten consciousness in "Ash-Wednesday" (1930). Hill has wrestled with matters of the spirit in the fallen modern world throughout his career, so it is hardly surprising to find biblical themes and images in works such as "The Pentecost Castle" or *Canaan* (1996). Rich, for her part, addresses the earlier poet Robinson Jeffers in "Yom Kippur, 1984," in which she considers the implications of the Day of Atonement, and matters of Judaism appear in her poetry with some frequency. Ginsberg, who never met a religion he didn't like (he sometimes described himself as a "Buddhist Jew"), employs material from Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and virtually every world faith.

Not all uses of religion are straight, of course. Many modern and postmodern texts are essentially ironic, in which the allusions to biblical sources are used not to heighten continuities between the religious tradition and the contemporary moment but to illustrate a disparity or disruption. Needless to say, such uses of irony can cause trouble. When Salman Rushdie wrote *The Satanic Verses* (1988), he caused his characters to parody (in order to show their wickedness, among other things) certain events and persons from the Koran and the life of the Prophet. He knew not everyone would understand his ironic version of a holy text; what he could not imagine was that he could be so far misunderstood as to induce a fatwa, a sentence of death, to be issued against him. In modern literature, many Christ figures (which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 14) are somewhat less than Christlike, a disparity that does not inevitably go down well with religious conservatives. Quite often, though, ironic parallels are lighter, more comic in their outcome and not so likely to offend. In Eudora Welty's masterful story "Why I Live at the P.O." (1941), the narrator is engaged in a sibling rivalry with her younger sister, who has come home after leaving under suspicious if not actually disgraceful circumstances. The narrator, Sister, is outraged at having to cook two chickens to feed five people and a small child just because her "spoiled" sister has come home. What Sister can't see, but we can, is that those two fowl are really a fattened calf. It may not be a grand feast by traditional standards, but it is a feast, as called for upon the return of the Prodigal Son, even if the son turns out to be a daughter. Like the brothers in the parable, Sister is irritated and envious that the child who left, and ostensibly used up her "share" of familial goodwill, is instantly welcomed, her sins so quickly forgiven.

Then there are all those names, those Jacobs and Jonahs and Rebeccas and Josephs and Marys and Stephens and at least one Hagar. The naming of a character is a serious piece of business in a novel or play. A name has to sound right for a character – Oil Can Harry, Jay Gatsby, Beetle Bailey – but it also

has to carry whatever message the writer want to convey about the character or the story. In *Song of Solomon* (1977), Toni Morrison's main family chooses names by allowing the family Bible to fall open, then pointing without looking at the text; whatever proper noun the finger points to, there's the name. That's how you get a girl child in one generation named Pilate and one in the next named First Corinthians. Morrison uses this naming practice to identify features of the family and the community. What else can you possibly use - the atlas? Is there any city or hamlet or river in the world that tells us what we're told by "Pilate" ? In this case, the insight is not into the character so named, for no one could be less like Pontius Pilate than the wise, generous, giving Pilate Dead. Rather, her manner of naming tells us a great deal about the society that would lead a man, Pilate's father, to have absolute faith in the efficacy of a book he cannot read, so much so that he is guided by a principle of blind selection.

Okay, so there are a lot of ways the Bible shows up. But isn't that a problem for anyone who isn't exactly...

A Bible scholar? Well, I'm not. But even I can sometimes recognize a biblical allusion. I use something I think of as the "resonance test." If I hear something going on in a text that seems to be beyond the scope of the story's or poem's immediate dimensions, if it resonates outside itself, I start looking for allusions to older and bigger texts. Here's how it works.

At the end of James Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" (1957), the narrator sends a drink up to the bandstand as a gesture of solidarity and acceptance to his brilliantly talented but wayward brother, Sonny, who takes a sip and, as he launches into the next song, sets the drink on the piano, where it shimmers "like the very cup of trembling." I lived for a good while not knowing where that phrase came from, although to the extent I thought about it, I was pretty sure. The story is so rich and full, the pain and redemption so compelling, the language so wonderful throughout, I didn't need to dwell on the last line for several readings. Still, there was something happening there - a kind of resonance, a sense that there's something meaningful beyond the simple meaning of the words. Peter Frampton says that E major is the great rock chord; all you have to do to set off pandemonium in a concert is to stand onstage alone and strike a big, fat, full E major. Everybody in the arena knows what that chord promises. That sensation happens in reading, too. When I feel that resonance, that "fat chord" that feels heavy yet sparkles with promise or portent, it almost always means the phrase, or whatever, is borrowed from somewhere else and promises special significance. More often than not, particularly if the borrowing feels different in tone and weight from the rest of the prose, that somewhere is the Bible. Then it's a matter of figuring out where and what it means. It helps that I know that Baldwin was a preacher's son, that his most famous novel is called *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952), that the story already displays a strong Cain-and-Abel element when the narrator initially denies his responsibility toward Sonny, so my scriptural hunch was pretty strong. Happily, in the case of "Sonny's Blues," the story is so heavily anthologized that it's almost impossible not to find the answer - the phrase comes from Isaiah 51:17. The passage speaks of the cup of the Lord's fury, and the context has to do with sons who have lost their way, who are afflicted, who may yet succumb to desolation and destruction. The ending of the story is therefore made even more provisional and uncertain by the quote from Isaiah. Sonny may make it or he may not. He may relapse into addiction and trouble with the law. Beyond that, though, there is the broader sense of the residents of Harlem, where the story is set, and by extension of black America, as afflicted, as having drunk from that cup of trembling. There is hope in Baldwin's last paragraph, but it is hope tempered by knowledge of terrible dangers.

Is my reading greatly enhanced by this knowledge? Perhaps not greatly. Something subtle happens there, but no thunder and lightning. The meaning doesn't move in the opposite direction or shift

radically; if it did, that would be self-defeating, since so many readers would not get the allusion. I think it's more that the ending picks up a little greater weight from the association with Isaiah, a greater impact, pathos even. Oh, I think, it isn't just a twentieth-century problem, this business of brothers having trouble with each other and of young men stumbling and falling; it's been going on since forever. Most of the great tribulations to which human beings are subject are detailed in Scripture. No jazz, no heroin, no rehab centers, maybe, but trouble very much of the kind Sonny has: the troubled spirit that lies behind the outward modern manifestations of heroin and prison. The weariness and resentment and guilt of the brother, his sense of failure at having broken the promise to his dying mother to protect Sonny - the Bible knows all about that, too.

This depth is what the biblical dimension adds to the story of Sonny and his brother. We no longer see merely the sad and sordid modern story of a jazz musician and his algebra-teacher brother. Instead the story resonates with the richness of distant antecedents, with the power of accumulated myth. The story ceases to be locked in the middle of the twentieth century and becomes timeless and archetypal, speaking of the tensions and difficulties that exist always and everywhere between brothers, with all their caring and pain and guilt and pride and love. And that story never grows old.

9 - It's Greek to Me

IN THESE LAST THREE CHAPTERS we've talked about three sorts of myth: Shakespearean, biblical, and folk/fairy tale. The connection of religion and myth sometimes causes trouble in class when someone takes myth to mean "untrue" and finds it hard to unite that meaning with deeply held religious beliefs. That's not what I mean by "myth," though. Rather, what I'm suggesting is the shaping and sustaining power of story and symbol. Whether one believes that the story of Adam and Eve is true, literally or figuratively, matters, but not in this context. Here, in this activity of reading and understanding literature, we're chiefly concerned with how that story functions as material for literary creators, the way in which it can inform a story or poem, and how it is perceived by the reader. All three of these mythologies work as sources of material, of correspondences, of depth for the modern writer (and every writer is modern - even John Dryden was not archaic when he was writing), and provided they're recognizable to the reader, they enrich and enhance the reading experience. Of the three, biblical myth probably covers the greatest range of human situations, encompassing all ages of life including the next life, all relationships whether personal or governmental, and all phases of the individual's experience, physical, sexual, psychological, spiritual. Still, both the worlds of Shakespeare and of fairy and folk tales provide fairly complete coverage as well.

What we mean in speaking of "myth" in general is story, the ability of story to explain ourselves to ourselves in ways that physics, philosophy, mathematics, chemistry - all very highly useful and informative in their own right - can't. 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. Let's say it this way: myth is a body of story that matters.

Every community has its own body of story that matters. Nineteenth-century composer Richard Wagner went back to the Germanic myths for the material for his operas, and whether the results are good or bad in either historic or musical terms, the impulse to work with his tribal myths is completely understandable. The late twentieth century witnessed a great surge of Native American writing, much of which went back to tribal myth for material, for imagery, for theme, as in the case of Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman," Louise Erdrich's Kashpaw/Nanapush novels, and Gerald Vizenor's peculiar Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles. When Toni Morrison introduces human flight into Song of Solomon, many readers, white readers especially, take her to be referring to Icarus, whereas what she really has in mind, she has said, is the myth of the flying Africans, a story that matters to her community, her tribe. On one level, there's not much difference between Silko's project and Wagner's; he too is simply going back to the myths of his tribe. We sometimes forget that people in an age of top hats and stiff collars had tribes, but we do so at our peril. In all these cases, what the artist is doing is reaching back for stories that matter to him and his community - for myth.

In European and Euro-American cultures, of course, there's another source of myth. Let me rephrase that: MYTH. When most of us think myth, we mean the northern shores of the Mediterranean between two and three thousand years ago. We mean Greece and Rome. Greek and Roman myth is so much a part of the fabric of our consciousness, of our unconscious really, that we scarcely notice. You doubt me? In the town where I live, the college teams are known as the Spartans. Our high school? The Trojans. In my state we have a Troy (one of whose high schools is Athens - and they say there are no comedians in education), an Ithaca, a Sparta, a Romulus, a Remus, and a Rome. These communities are scattered around the state and date from different periods of settlement. Now if a town in the center of Michigan, a fair distance from anything that can be called Aegean or Ionian (although it's not very far

from the town of Ionia), can be named Ithaca, it suggests that Greek myth has had pretty good staying power.

Let's go back to Toni Morrison for a moment. I'm always slightly amazed that Icarus gets all the ink. It was his father, Daedalus, who crafted the wings, who knew how to get off Crete and safely reach the mainland, and who in fact flew to safety. Icarus, the kid, the daredevil, failed to follow his father's advice and plunged to his death. His fall remains a source of enduring fascination for us and for our literature and art. In it we see so much: the parental attempt to save the child and the grief at having failed, the cure that proves as deadly as the ailment, the youthful exuberance that leads to self-destruction, the clash between sober, adult wisdom and adolescent recklessness, and of course the terror involved in that headlong descent into the sea. Absolutely none of this has anything to do with Morrison and her flying Africans, so it's little wonder that she's a bit mystified by this response of her readers. But it's a story and a pattern that is so deeply burrowed into our consciousness that readers may almost automatically consider it whenever flying or falling is invoked. Clearly it doesn't fit the situation in *Song of Solomon*. But it does apply in other works. In 1558 Pieter Brueghel painted a wonderful picture, *Landscape with Fall of Icarus*. In the foreground we see a plowman and his ox, just beyond him a shepherd and his flock, and at sea a merchant ship sailing placidly along; this is a scene of utter ordinariness and tranquillity. Only in the lower right corner of the painting is there anything even remotely suggestive of trouble: a pair of legs askew as they disappear into the water. That's our boy. He really doesn't have much of a presence in the frame, but his presence makes all the difference. Without the pathos of the doomed boy, we have a picture of farming and merchant shipping with no narrative or thematic power. I teach, with some regularity, two great poems based on that painting, W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1940) and William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with Fall of Icarus" (1962). They're wonderful poems, very different from each other in tone, style, and form, but in essential agreement about how the world goes on even in the face of our private tragedies. Each artist alters what he finds in the painting. Brueghel introduces the plowman and the ship, neither of which appears in the version that comes to us from the Greeks. And Williams and Auden find, in their turn, slightly different elements to emphasize in the painting. Williams's poem stresses the pictorial elements of the painting, trying to capture the scene while sneaking in the thematic elements. Even his arrangement of the poem on the page, narrow and highly vertical, recalls the body plummeting from the sky. Auden's poem, on the other hand, is a meditation on the private nature of suffering and the way in which the larger world takes no interest in our private disasters. It is astonishing and pleasing to discover that the painting can occasion these two very different responses. Beyond them, readers find their own messages in all this. As someone who was a teenager in the sixties, I am reminded by the fate of Icarus of all those kids who bought muscle cars with names like GTO and 442 and Charger and Barracuda. All the driver education and solid parental advice in the world can't overcome the allure of that kind of power, and sadly, in too many cases those young drivers shared the fate of Icarus. My students, somewhat younger than I am, will inevitably draw other parallels. Still, it all goes back to the myth: the boy, the wings, the unscheduled dive.

So that's one way classical myth can work: overt subject matter for poems and paintings and operas and novels. What else can myth do?

Here's a thought. Let's say you wanted to write an epic poem about a community of poor fishermen in the Caribbean. If this was a place you came from, and you knew these people like you know your own family, you'd want to depict the jealousies and resentments and adventure and danger, as well as capturing their dignity and their life in a way that conveys all that has escaped the notice of tourists and white property owners. You could, I suppose, try being really, really earnest, portraying the characters as very serious and sober, making them noble by virtue of their goodness. But I bet that

wouldn't work. What you'd wind up with instead would probably be very stiff and artificial, and artificiality is never noble. Besides, these folks aren't saints. They make a lot of mistakes: they're petty, envious, lustful, occasionally greedy as well as courageous, elegant, powerful, knowledgeable, profound. And you want noble, after all, not Tonto – there's no Lone Ranger here. Alternatively, you might try grafting their story onto some older story of rivalry and violence, a story where even the victor is ultimately doomed, a story where, despite occasional personal shortcomings, the characters have an unmistakable nobility. You could give your characters names like Helen, Philoctetes, Hector, and Achilles. At least that's what Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott does in his *Omeros* (1990). Those names are drawn, of course, from *The Iliad*, although Walcott uses elements – parallels, persons, and situations – of both it and *The Odyssey* in his epic.

The question we will inevitably ask is, Why?

Why should someone in the late twentieth century draw on a story that was passed along orally from the twelfth through the eighth century B.C. and not written down until maybe two or three hundred years later? Why should someone try to compare modern fishermen with these legendary heroes, many of whom were descended from gods? Well for starters, Homer's legendary heroes were farmers and fishermen. Besides, aren't we all descended from gods? Walcott reminds us by this parallel of the potential for greatness that resides in all of us, no matter how humble our worldly circumstances.

That's one answer. The other is that the situations match up more closely than we might expect. The plot of *The Iliad* is not particularly divine or global. Those who have never read it assume mistakenly that it is the story of the Trojan War. It is not. It is the story of a single, rather lengthy action: the wrath of Achilles. Achilles becomes angry with his leader, Agamemnon, withdraws his support from the Greeks, only rejoining the battle when the consequences of his action have destroyed his best friend, Patroclus. At this point he turns his wrath against the Trojans and in particular their greatest hero, Hector, whom he eventually kills. His reason for such anger? Agamemnon has taken his war prize. Trivial? It gets worse. The prize is a woman. Agamemnon, forced by divine order and by public sentiment to return his concubine to her father, retaliates against the person who most publicly sided against him, Achilles, by taking his concubine, Briseis. Is that petty enough? Is that noble? No Helen, no judgment of Paris, no Trojan horse. At its core, it's the story of a man who goes berserk because his stolen war bride is confiscated, acted out against a background of wholesale slaughter, the whole of which is taking place because another man, Menelaus (brother of Agamemnon) has had his wife stolen by Paris, half brother of Hector. That's how Hector winds up having to carry the hopes for salvation of all Troy on his shoulders.

And yet somehow, through the centuries, this story dominated by the theft of two women has come to epitomize ideals of heroism and loyalty, sacrifice and loss. Hector is more stubbornly heroic in his doomed enterprise than anyone you've ever seen. Achilles' grief at the loss of his beloved friend is truly heartbreaking. The big duels – between Hector and Ajax, between Diomedes and Paris, between Hector and Patroclus, between Hector and Achilles – are genuinely exciting and suspenseful, their outcomes sources of grand celebration and dismay. No wonder so many modern writers have often borrowed from and emulated Homer.

And when did that begin?

Almost immediately. Virgil, who died in 19 B.C., patterned his Aeneas on the Homeric heroes. If Achilles did it or Odysseus went there, so does Aeneas. Why? It's what heroes do. Aeneas goes to the underworld. Why? Odysseus went there. He kills a giant from the enemy camp in a final climactic battle. Why? Achilles did. And so on. The whole thing is less derivative than it sounds and not without

humor and irony. Aeneas and his followers are survivors of Troy, so here we have this Trojan hero acting out the patterns set down by his enemies. Moreover, when these Trojans sail past Ithaca, home to Odysseus, they jeer and curse the agent of their destruction. On the whole, though, Virgil has him undertake these actions because Homer had already defined what it means to be a hero.

Back to Walcott. Almost exactly two thousand years after Virgil, Walcott has his heroes perform actions that we can recognize as symbolic reenactments of those in Homer. Sometimes it's a bit of a stretch, since we can't have a lot of battlefield duels out in the fishing boats. Nor can he call his Helen "the face that launched a thousand dinghies." Lacks grandeur, that phrase. What he can do, though, is place them in situations where their nobility and their courage are put to the test, while reminding us that they are acting out some of the most basic, most primal patterns known to humans, exactly as Homer did all those centuries before. The need to protect one's family: Hector. The need to maintain one's dignity: Achilles. The determination to remain faithful and to have faith: Penelope. The struggle to return home: Odysseus. Homer gives us four great struggles of the human being: with nature, with the divine, with other humans, and with ourselves. What is there, after all, against which we need to prove ourselves but those four things?

In our modern world, of course, parallels may be ironized, that is, turned on their head for purposes of irony. How many of us would see the comedy of three escaped convicts as parallel to the wanderings of Odysseus? Still, that's what the brothers Joel and Ethan Coen give us in their 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* It's about trying to get home, isn't it? Or this, the most famous example: a single day in Dublin in 1904, on which a young man decides on his future and an older man wanders the city, eventually returning home to his wife in the small hours of the next morning. The book has only one overt clue that this all might have something to do with Homer, its one-word title: *Ulysses* (1922). As we now know, James Joyce envisioned every one of the eighteen episodes of the novel as a parallel to some incident or situation in *The Odyssey*. There's an episode in a newspaper office, for instance, which parallels Odysseus's visit to Aeolus, the god of the winds, but the parallel may seem pretty tenuous. To be sure, newspapermen are a windy group and there are a lot of rhetorical flourishes in the episode, to say nothing of the fact that a gust of wind does zip through at one point. Still, we can see it as resembling the Homeric original only if we understand that resemblance in terms of a funhouse mirror, full of distortion and goofy correspondences - if we understand it, in other words, as an ironic parallel. The fact that it's ironic makes the parallel - and the Aeolus episode - such fun. Joyce is less interested than Walcott in investing his characters with classical nobility, although finally they do take on something of that quality. After watching poor old Leopold Bloom stroll around Dublin all day and half the night, running into no end of trouble and recalling great heartbreak in his life, we may well come to feel he is noble in his own way. His nobility, however, is not that of Odysseus.

Greek and Roman myth, of course, is more than Homer. The transformations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* show up in all sorts of later works, not least in Franz Kafka's story of a man who wakes up one morning to find he's changed into an enormous beetle. He called it "The Metamorphosis." Indiana Jones may look like pure Hollywood, but the intrepid searcher after fabulous treasure goes back to Apollonius and *The Argonautica*, the story of Jason and the Argonauts. Something a bit homier? Sophocles' plays of Oedipus and his doomed clan show up over and over again in all sorts of variations. There is, in fact, no form of dysfunctional family or no personal disintegration of character for which there is not a Greek or Roman model. Not for nothing do the names of Greek tragic characters figure in Freud's theories. The wronged woman gone violent in her grief and madness? Would you like Aeneas and Dido or Jason and Medea? And as in every good early religion, they had an explanation for natural phenomena, from the change of seasons (Demeter and Persephone and Hades) to why the nightingale sounds the way it does (Philomena and Tereus). Happily for us, most of it got written down, often in

several versions, so that we have access to this wonderful body of story. And because writers and readers share knowledge of a big portion of this body of story, this mythology, when writers use it, we readers recognize it, sometimes to its full extent, sometimes only dimly or only because we know the Looney Tunes version. That recognition makes our experience of literature richer, deeper, more meaningful, so that our own modern stories also matter, also share in the power of myth.

Oh, did I forget to say? That title of Walcott's, *Omeros*? In the local dialect, it means Homer. Naturally.

Interlude - Does He Mean That?

ALONG ABOUT NOW you should be asking a question, something like this: you keep saying that the writer is alluding to this obscure work and using that symbol or following some pattern or other that I never heard of, but does he really intend to do that? Can anyone really have all that going on in his head at one time?

Now that is an excellent question. I only wish I had an excellent answer, something pithy and substantive, maybe with a little alliteration, but instead I have one that's merely short.

Yes.

The chief deficiency of this answer, aside from its lack of pith, is that it is manifestly untrue. Or at least misleading. The real answer, of course, is that no one knows for certain. Oh, for this writer or that one we can be pretty sure, depending on what they themselves tell us, but in general we make guesses.

Let's look at the easy ones - James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and what we could call the "Intentionalists" - writers who attempt to control every facet of their creative output and who intend virtually every effect in their works. Many of them are from the modernist period, essentially the era around the two world wars of the twentieth century. In an essay called "Ulysses, Order, and Myth (1923)," Eliot extols the virtues of Joyce's newly published masterpiece, and proclaims that, whereas writers of previous generations relied on the "narrative method," modern writers can, following Joyce's example, employ the "mythic method." Ulysses, as we know from our earlier discussion, is the very long story of a single day in Dublin, June 16, 1904, its structure modeled on Homer's *Odyssey* (Ulysses being the Latin equivalent of the name of Homer's hero, Odysseus). The structure of the novel utilizes the various episodes of the ancient epic, although ironically - Odysseus's trip to the underworld, for instance, becomes a trip to the cemetery; his encounter with Circe, an enchantress who turns men into swine, becomes a trip to a notorious brothel by the protagonists. Eliot uses his essay on Joyce to defend implicitly his own masterpiece, *The Waste Land*, which also builds around ancient myths, in this case fertility myths associated with the Fisher King. Ezra Pound borrows from Greek, Latin, Chinese, English, Italian, and French poetic traditions in the *Cantos*. D.H. Lawrence writes essays about Egyptian and Mexican myth, Freudian psychoanalysis, issues in the *Book of Revelation*, and the history of the novel in Europe and America. Do we really believe that novels or poems by any of these writers, or their contemporaries Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, will be naive? Doesn't seem likely, does it?

Faulkner, for instance, in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) makes use of a title from the Bible - Absalom is David's rebellious son who hangs himself - and plot and characters from Greek mythology. The novel is Faulkner's version of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (458 B.C.), the tragedy of the returning soldiers from Troy and revenge and destruction on a mythic scale. Their Trojan War is the Civil War, of course, and the murder at the gates is of the illegitimate son by his brother, not of the returning husband (Agamemnon) by his faithless wife (Clytemnestra), although she is invoked in the mulatto slave, Clytie. He gives us Orestes, the avenging son pursued by Furies and ultimately consumed in the flames of the family mansion, in Henry Sutpen, and Electra, the daughter consumed by grief and mourning, in his sister, Judith. Such baroque planning and complex execution don't leave much room for naive, spontaneous composition.

Okay, so much for the modern writers, but what about earlier periods? Prior to 1900, most poets would have received at least rudimentary elements of a classical education - Latin, some Greek, lots of

classical poetry and Dante and Shakespeare – certainly more than your average reader today. They could count on their readers, moreover, having considerable training in the tradition. One of the surest ways to be successful in theater in the nineteenth century was to take a touring Shakespeare company through the American West. If folks in their little houses on the prairie could quote the Bard, is it likely that their writers “accidentally” wrote stories that paralleled his?

Since proof is nearly impossible, discussions of the writer’s intentions are not especially profitable. Instead let’s restrict ourselves to what he did do and, more important, what we readers can discover in his work. What we have to work with is hints and allegations, really, evidence, sometimes only a trace, that points to something lying behind the text. It’s useful to keep in mind that any aspiring writer is probably also a hungry, aggressive reader as well and will have absorbed a tremendous amount of literary history and literary culture. By the time she writes her books, she has access to that tradition in ways that need not be conscious. Nevertheless, whatever parts have infiltrated her consciousness are always available to her. Something else that we should bear in mind has to do with speed of composition. The few pages of this chapter have taken you a few minutes to read; they have taken me, I’m sorry to say, days and days to write. No, I haven’t been sitting at my computer the whole time. First I carried the germ around for a while, mulling over how best to approach it, then I sat down and knocked a few items onto the screen, then I began fleshing out the argument. Then I got stuck, so I made lunch or baked some bread or helped my kid work on his car, but I carried the problem of this chapter around with me the whole time. I sat down at the keyboard again and started in again but got distracted and worked on something else. Eventually I got where we are now. Even assuming equal levels of knowledge about the subject, who probably has had the most ideas – you in five minutes of reading or me in five days of stumbling around? All I’m really saying is that we readers sometimes forget how long literary composition can take and how very much lateral thinking can go on in that amount of time.

And lateral thinking is what we’re really discussing: the way writers can keep their eye on the target, whether it be the plot of the play or the ending of the novel or the argument of the poem, and at the same time bring in a great deal of at least tangentially related material. I used to think it was this great gift “literary geniuses” have, but I’m not so sure anymore. I sometimes teach a creative writing course, and my aspiring fiction writers frequently bring in biblical parallels, classical or Shakespearean allusions, bits of REM songs, fairy tale fragments, anything you can think of. And neither they nor I would claim that anybody in that room is a genius. It’s something that starts happening when a reader/writer and a sheet of paper get locked in a room together. And it’s a great deal of what makes reading the work – of my students, of recent graduates of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, of Keats and Shelley – interesting and fun.

11 - ...More Than It's Gonna Hurt You: Concerning Violence

CONSIDER. Sethe is an escaped slave, and her children were all born in slave-owning Kentucky; their escape to Ohio is like the Israelites' escape from Egypt in Exodus. Except that this time Pharaoh shows up on the doorstep threatening to drag them back across the Red Sea. So Sethe decides to save her children from slavery by killing them, succeeding with only one of them.

Later, when that murdered child, the title character of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, makes her ghostly return, she's more than simply the child lost to violence, sacrificed to the revulsion of the escaped slave toward her former state. Instead she is one of, in the words of the epigraph to the novel, the "sixty million and more" Africans and African-descended slaves who died in captivity and forced marches on the continent or in the middle passage or on the plantations made possible by their captive labor or in attempts to escape a system that should have been unthinkable – as unthinkable as, for instance, a mother seeing no other means of rescuing her child except infanticide. *Beloved* is in fact representative of the horrors to which a whole race was subjected.

Violence is one of the most personal and even intimate acts between human beings, but it can also be cultural and societal in its implications. It can be symbolic, thematic, biblical, Shakespearean, Romantic, allegorical, transcendent. Violence in real life just is. If someone punches you in the nose in a supermarket parking lot, it's simply aggression. It doesn't contain meaning beyond the act itself. Violence in literature, though, while it is literal, is usually also something else. That same punch in the nose may be a metaphor.

Robert Frost has a poem, "Out, Out –" (1916), about a momentary lapse of attention and the terrible act of violence that ensues. A farm boy working with the buzz saw looks up at the call to dinner, and the saw, which has been full of menace as it "snarl[s] and rattle[s]" along, seizes the moment, as if it has a mind of its own, to take off the boy's hand. Now the first thing we have to acknowledge about this masterpiece is that it is absolutely real. Only a person who has been around the ceaseless danger of farm machinery could have written the poem, with all its careful attention to the details of the way death lurks in everyday tasks. If that's all we get from the poem, fine, the poem will in one sense have done its job. Yet Frost is insisting on more in the poem than a cautionary tale of child labor and power tools. The literal violence encodes a broader point about the essentially hostile or at least uncaring relationship we have with the universe. Our lives and deaths – the boy dies of blood loss and shock – are as nothing to the universe, of which the best that can be said is that it is indifferent, though it may be actively interested in our demise. The title of the poem is taken from *Macbeth*, "Out, out, brief candle," suggesting the brevity not merely of a teenager's life but of any human existence, particularly in cosmic terms. The smallness and fragility of our lives is met with the cold indifference not only of the distant stars and planets, which we can rightly think of as virtually eternal in contrast to ourselves, but of the more immediate "outer" world of the farm itself, of the inhumanity of machinery which wounds or kills indiscriminately. This is not John Milton's "Lycidas" (1637), not a classical elegy in which all nature weeps. This nature shows not the slightest ripple of interest. Frost uses the violence here, then, to emphasize our status as orphans: parentless, frightened, and alone as we face our mortality in a cold and silent universe.

Violence is everywhere in literature. Anna Karenina throws herself under the train, Emma Bovary solves her problem with poison, D. H. Lawrence's characters are always engaging in physical violence toward one another, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus is beaten by soldiers, Faulkner's Colonel Sartoris becomes a greater local legend when he guns down two carpetbaggers in the streets of Jefferson, and Wile E. Coyote holds up his little "Yikes" sign before he plunges into the void as his latest gambit to

catch the Road Runner fails. Even writers as noted for the absence of action as Virginia Woolf and Anton Chekhov routinely resort to killing off characters. For all these deaths and maimings to amount to something deeper than the violence of the Road Runner cartoon, the violence has to have some meaning beyond mere mayhem.

Let's think about two categories of violence in literature: the specific injury that authors cause characters to visit on one another or on themselves, and the narrative violence that causes characters harm in general. The first would include the usual range of behavior – shootings, stabbings, garrotings, drownings, poisonings, bludgeonings, bombings, hit-and-run accidents, starvations, you name it. By the second, authorial violence, I mean the death and suffering authors introduce into their work in the interest of plot advancement or thematic development and for which they, not their characters, are responsible. Frost's buzz-saw accident would be such an example, as would Little Nell on her deathbed in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) and the death of Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Is it fair to compare them? I mean, do death by consumption or heart disease really fall into the same universe as a stabbing?

Sure. Different but the same. Different: no guilty party exists in the narrative (unless you count the author, who is present everywhere and nowhere). Same: does it really matter to the dead person? Or this: writers kill off characters for the same set of reasons – make action happen, cause plot complications, end plot complications, put other characters under stress.

And that's not enough reason for violence to exist?

With some exceptions, the most prominent being mystery novels. Figure at least three corpses for a two-hundred-page mystery, sometimes many more. How significant do those deaths feel? Very nearly meaningless. In fact, aside from the necessities of plot, we scarcely notice the deaths in a detective novel; the author goes out of her way, more often than not, to make the victim sufficiently unpleasant that we scarcely regret his passing, and we may even feel a sort of relief. Now the rest of the novel will be devoted to solving this murder, so clearly it is important on some level. But the death lacks gravitas. There's no weight, no resonance, no sense of something larger at work. What mysteries generally have in common is a lack of density. What they offer in terms of emotional satisfaction – the problem solved, the question answered, the guilty punished, the victim avenged – they lack in weightiness. And I say this as a person who generally loves the genre and who has read hundreds of mysteries.

So where does this alleged weight come from?

Not alleged. Felt. We sense greater weight or depth in works when there is something happening beyond the surface. In mysteries, whatever layering there may be elsewhere, the murders live on the narrative surface. It's in the nature of the genre that since the act itself is buried under layers of misdirection and obfuscation, it cannot support layers of meaning or signification. On the other hand, "literary" fiction and drama and poetry are chiefly about those other layers. In that fictive universe, violence is symbolic action. If we only understand *Beloved* on the surface level, Sethe's act of killing her daughter becomes so repugnant that sympathy for her is nearly impossible. If we lived next to her, for instance, one of us would have to move. But her action carries symbolic significance; we understand it not only as the literal action of a single, momentarily deranged woman but as an action that speaks for the experience of a race at a certain horrific moment in history, as a gesture explained by whip scars on her back that take the form of a tree, as the product of the sort of terrible choice that

only characters in our great mythic stories – a Jocasta, a Dido, a Medea – are driven to make. Sethe isn't a mere woman next door but a mythic creature, one of the great tragic heroines.

I suggested earlier that Lawrence's characters manage to commit a phenomenal amount of violence toward each other. Here are just a couple of examples. In *Women in Love* Gudrun Brangwen and Gerald Crich meet after each of them has made separate displays of violent will. In front of the Brangwen sisters, Gerald holds a terrified mare at a grade crossing, spurring her until her flanks bleed. Ursula is outraged and indignant, but Gudrun is so caught up in this display of masculine power (and the language Lawrence uses is very much that of a rape) that she swoons. He later sees her engaging in eurythmics – a pre-“Great War version of disco – in front of some highly dangerous Highland cattle. When Gerald stops her to explain the peril she has created for herself, she slaps him hard. This is, mind, their very first meeting. So he says (more or less), I see you've struck the first blow. Her response? “And I shall strike the last.” Very tender. Their relationship pretty much follows from that initial note, with violent clashes of will and ego, violent sex, needy and pathetic visitations, and eventually hatred and resentment. Technically, I suppose, she's right, since she does strike the last blow. The last time we see them, though, her eyes are bulging out as he strangles her, until suddenly he stops, overcome by revulsion, and skis off to his own death in the highest reaches of the Alps. Too weird? Want the other example? In his exquisite novella “The Fox,” Lawrence creates one of the oddest triangles in literature. Banford and March are two women running a farm, and the only reason their relationship stops short of being openly lesbian must be because of censorship concerns, Lawrence already having had quite enough works banned by that time. Into this curious ménage a young soldier, Henry Grenfel, wanders, and as he works on the farm, a relationship develops between him and March. When the difficulties of a three-way set of competing interests become insurmountable, Henry chops down a tree which twists, falls, and crushes poor, difficult Banford. Problem solved. Of course, the death gives rise to issues which could scuttle the newly freed relationship, but who can worry about such details?

Lawrence, being Lawrence, uses these violent episodes in heavily symbolic ways. His clashes between Gerald and Gudrun, for instance, have as much to do with deficiencies in the capitalist social system and modern values as with personality shortcomings of the participants. Gerald is both an individual and someone corrupted by the values of industry (Lawrence identifies him as a “captain of industry”), while Gudrun loses much of her initial humanism through association with the “corrupt” sort of modern artists. And the murder by tree in “The Fox” isn't about interpersonal hostility, although that antipathy is present in the story. Rather, Banford's demise figures the sexual tensions and gender-role confusion of modern society as Lawrence sees it, a world in which the essential qualities of men and women have been lost in the demands of technology and the excessive emphasis on intellect over instinct. We know that these tensions exist, because while Banford (Jill) and March (Ellen or Nellie) sometimes call each other by their Christian names, the text insists on their surnames without using “Miss,” thereby emphasizing their masculine tendencies, while Henry is simply Henry or the young man. Only by radically changing the interpersonal sexual dynamic can something like Lawrentian order be restored. There is also the mythic dimension of this violence. Gerald in *Women in Love* is repeatedly described as a young god, tall and fair and beautiful, while Gudrun is named for a minor Norse goddess. Their clash, then, automatically follows mythic patterns. Similarly, the young soldier comes striding onto the makeshift farm as a fertility god, fairly screaming virility. Lawrence shared with many of his contemporaries a fascination with ancient myths, particularly those of the wasteland and various fertility cults. For fertility to be restored to the little wasteland of the failing farm, the potent male and the fertile female must be paired off, and any blocking element, including any females with competing romantic interests, must be sacrificed.

William Faulkner's violence emanates from a slightly different wellspring, yet the results are not entirely different. I know of creative writing teachers who feel Faulkner is the single greatest danger to budding fiction writers. So alluring is his penchant for violence that the imitation Faulknerian story will have a rape, three cases of incest, a stabbing, two shootings, and a suicide by drowning, all in two thousand words. And indeed, there is a great deal of violence of all sorts in his fictional Yoknapatawpha County. In the story "Barn Burning" (1939), young Sarty Snopes watches as his father, a serial arsonist, hires out to a wealthy plantation owner, Major de Spain, only to attempt to burn the major's barn in a fit of class resentment. When Sarty (whose full name is Colonel Sartoris Snopes) attempts to intercede, Major de Spain rides down Ab, the father, and Sarty's elder brother, and the last we hear of them is a series of shots from the major's pistol, leaving Sarty sobbing in the dust. The arson and the shootings here are, of course, literal and need to be understood in that light before we go looking for any further significance. But with Faulkner, the violence is also historically conditioned. Class warfare, racism and the inheritance of slavery (at one point Ab says that slave sweat must not have made the de Spain mansion white enough and that therefore white sweat - his - is evidently called for), impotent rage at having lost the Civil War, all figure in the violence of a Faulkner story. In *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Ike McCaslin discovers while reading through plantation ledgers that his grandfather had sired a daughter by one of his slaves, Eunice, and then, not scrupling at incest or recognizing the humanity in his slaves that would make his act incest, got that daughter, Tomasina, pregnant. Eunice's response was to kill herself. That act is personal and literal, but it is also a powerful metaphor of the horrors of slavery and the outcomes when people's capacity for self-determination is stripped away utterly. The slave woman has no say in how her body or her daughter's has been used, nor is any avenue open for her to express her outrage; the only escape permitted to her is death. Slavery allows its victims no decision-making power over any aspect of their lives, including the decision to live. The lone exception, the only power they have, is that they may choose to die. And so she does. Even then, old Carothers McCaslin's only comment is to ask whoever heard of a black person drowning herself, clearly astonished that such a response is possible in a slave. That Eunice's suicide takes place in a novel that draws its title from a spiritual, in which Moses is asked to "go down" into Egypt to "set my people free," is no accident. If Moses should fail to appear, it may fall to the captive race to take what actions they can to liberate themselves. Faulknerian violence quite often expresses such historical conditions at the same time that it draws on mythic or biblical parallels. Not for nothing does he call one novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which a rebellious, difficult son repudiates his birthright and destroys himself. *Light in August* (1932) features a character named Joe Christmas who suffers emasculation at the novel's end; while neither his behavior nor his particular wound is very obviously Christlike, his life and death have to do with the possibility of redemption. Of course, things change when irony comes in, but that's another matter.

Thus far we've been speaking of character-on-character violence. So what about violence without agency, where writers simply dispose of their characters? Well, it depends. Accidents do happen in real life, of course. So do illnesses. But when they happen in literature they're not really accidents. They're accidents only on the inside of the novel - on the outside they're planned, plotted, and executed by somebody, with malice aforethought. And we know who that somebody is. I can think of two novels from the 1980s that involve characters floating down to earth after a jetliner explosion. Fay Weldon, in *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1988), and Salman Rushdie, in *The Satanic Verses*, may have slightly different purposes in introducing such massive violence into their story lines and then having some characters survive. We can be fairly sure, however, that they do mean something - several somethings - by the graceful falls to earth that their characters undergo. The little girl in Weldon's novel occupies what amounts to a state of grace in an otherwise corrupt adult world; the easy descent of the airliner's tail section proves a lovely, gentle corollary to this quality in the child. Rushdie's two characters, on the other hand, experience their descent as a fall not from innocence to experience but

from an already corrupt life into an existence as demons. So, too, with illness. We'll talk later about what heart disease means in a story, or tuberculosis or cancer or AIDS. The question always is, what does misfortune really tell us?

It's nearly impossible to generalize about the meanings of violence, except that there are generally more than one, and its range of possibilities is far larger than with something like rain or snow. Authors rarely introduce violence straightforwardly, to perform only its one appointed task, so we ask questions. What does this type of misfortune represent thematically? What famous or mythic death does this one resemble? Why this sort of violence and not some other? The answers may have to do with psychological dilemmas, with spiritual crises, with historical or social or political concerns. Almost never, though, are they cut-and-paste, but they do exist, and if you put your mind to it, you can usually come up with some possibilities. Violence is everywhere in literature. We'd lose most of Shakespeare without it, and Homer and Ovid and Marlowe (both Christopher and Philip), much of Milton, Lawrence, Twain, Dickens, Frost, Tolkien, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Saul Bellow, and on and on. I guess Jane Austen wouldn't be too much affected, but relying on her would leave our reading a little thin. It seems, then, that there's no option for us but to accept it and figure out what it means.

12 - Is That a Symbol?

SURE IT IS.

That's one of the most common questions in class, and that's the answer I generally give. Is that a symbol? Sure, why not. It's the next question where things get hairy: what does it mean, what does it stand for? When someone asks about meaning, I usually come back with something clever, like "Well, what do you think?" Everyone thinks I'm either being a wise guy or ducking responsibility, but neither is the case. Seriously, what do you think it stands for, because that's probably what it does. At least for you.

Here's the problem with symbols: people expect them to mean something. Not just any something, but one something in particular. Exactly. Maximum. You know what? It doesn't work like that. Oh, sure, there are some symbols that work straightforwardly: a white flag means, I give up, don't shoot. Or it means, We come in peace. See? Even in a fairly clear-cut case we can't pin down a single meaning, although they're pretty close. So some symbols do have a relatively limited range of meanings, but in general a symbol can't be reduced to standing for only one thing.

If they can, it's not symbolism, it's allegory. Here's how allegory works: things stand for other things on a one-for-one basis. Back in 1678, John Bunyan wrote an allegory called *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In it, the main character, Christian, is trying to journey to the Celestial City, while along the way he encounters such distractions as the Slough of Despond, the Primrose Path, Vanity Fair, and the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Other characters have names like Faithful, Evangelist, and the Giant Despair. Their names indicate their qualities, and in the case of Despair, his size as well. Allegories have one mission to accomplish – convey a certain message, in this case, the quest of the devout Christian to reach heaven. If there is ambiguity or a lack of clarity regarding that one-to-one correspondence between the emblem – the figurative construct – and the thing it represents, then the allegory fails because the message is blurred. Such simplicity of purpose has its advantages. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) is popular among many readers precisely because it's relatively easy to figure out what it all means. Orwell is desperate for us to get the point, not a point. Revolutions inevitably fail, he tells us, because those who come to power are corrupted by it and reject the values and principles they initially embraced.

Symbols, though, generally don't work so neatly. The thing referred to is likely not reducible to a single statement but will more probably involve a range of possible meanings and interpretations.

Consider the problem of the cave. In his masterful novel *A Passage to India* (1924), E. M. Forster has as his central incident a possible assault in a cave. All through the first half of the work the Marabar Caves hover over the story; they keep being referred to, they're out there, remarkable in some ill-defined way, mysterious. Our independent and progressive heroine, Adela Quested (does that name strike you as symbolic at all?), wishes to see them, so Dr. Aziz, an educated Indian physician, arranges an outing. The caves turn out to be not quite as advertised: isolated in a barren wasteland, unadorned, strange, uncanny. Mrs. Moore, Adela's mother-in-law-to-be, has a very nasty experience in the first of the caves, when she suddenly feels oppressively crowded and physically threatened by the others who have joined her. Adela notices that all sound is reduced to a hollow booming noise, so that a voice or a footfall or the striking of a match results in this booming negation. Mrs. Moore, understandably, has had enough of caves, so Adela does a bit of poking around on her own. In one of the caves she suddenly becomes alarmed, believing that, well, something is going on. When next we see her she has fled the scene, running and falling down the hillside to collapse into the arms of the racist English

community she so vehemently criticized before. Badly bruised and scraped and poked by cactus spines, she is in shock and utterly convinced that she was assaulted in the cave and that Aziz must have been her assailant.

Was that cave symbolic? You bet.

Of what?

That, I fear, is another matter. We want it to mean something, don't we? More than that, we want it 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. The meaning of the cave isn't lying on the surface of the novel. Rather, it waits somewhere deeper, and part of what it requires of us is to bring something of ourselves to the encounter. If we want to figure out what a symbol might mean, we have to use a variety of tools on it: questions, experience, preexisting knowledge. What else is Forster doing with caves? What are other outcomes in the text, or uses of caves in general that we can recall? What else can we bring to bear on this cave that might yield up meaning? So here we go.

Caves in general. First, consider our past. Our earliest ancestors, or those who had weather issues, lived in caves. Some of them left us some pretty nifty drawings, while others left behind piles of bones and spots charred from that great discovery, fire. But the point here might be (no guarantees, of course) that the cave, on some level, suggests a connection to the most basic and primitive elements in our natures. At the far end of the spectrum, we might be reminded of Plato, who in the "Parable of the Cave" section of *The Republic* (fifth century B.C.) gives us an image of the cave as consciousness and perception. Each of these predecessors might provide possible meanings for our situation. The security and shelter suggested by some Neolithic memory of caves probably won't work here, but something along the lines of Plato's cave interior may: perhaps this cave experience has something to do with Adela getting in touch with the deepest levels of her consciousness and perhaps being frightened by what she finds there.

Now, Forster's use of the caves. The locals cannot explain or describe the caves. Aziz, a grand promoter of them, must finally admit he knows nothing of them, having never visited the site, while Professor Godbole, who has seen them, describes their effect only in terms of what does not cause it. To each of the characters' questions - are they picturesque? are they historically significant? - he offers a cryptic "No." To his Western audience, and even to Aziz, this set of responses is not helpful. Godbole's message might be that the caves must be experienced before they can be understood or that every person's caves are different. Such a position might be borne out by the example of Mrs. Moore's unpleasant encounter in a different cave. Throughout the early portions of the novel, she has been impatient with other people and resentful of having them - their views, their assumptions, their physical presence - forced on her. One of the ironies of her Indian experience is that in a landscape so vast, the psychological space is so small; she came all this way and can't get away from life, England, people, death closing in on her. When she gets inside the cave, a crush of people threatens her; the jostling and brushing seem overtly hostile in the dark enclosure. Something unidentified but unpleasant - she can't tell if it belongs to a bat or an infant, but it's organic and not nice - rubs across her mouth. Her heartbeat becomes oppressive and she can't breathe, so she flees the cave as quickly as she can and takes a good while to calm down. In her case, the cave seems to force her into contact with her deepest personal fears and anxieties: other people, ungovernable sensations, children and fecundity. There is also the suggestion that India itself threatens her, since all the people aside from Adele and

herself in the cave are Indians. While she has tried to be Indian, to be comfortable and understanding of the “natives” in ways other members of the ruling British have not been, she can hardly be said to have mastered the Indian experience. So it may be that what she runs into in the darkness is the fraudulence of her attempt to “be Indian.”

On the other hand, maybe she doesn't have an encounter with Something at all. Perhaps what she meets in the cave is instead Nothingness, albeit some years before Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and the existentialists of the 1950s and 1960s articulate the dichotomy between, in Sartre's terms, Being and Nothingness. Could it be that what she finds in the cave isn't death necessarily but the experience of the Void? I think it quite possible, if by no means certain.

So what does Adela's cave stand for? She has, or seems to have, all of the responses that Mrs. Moore does, although hers are different. As a virgin on the edge of spinsterhood who has been shipped halfway around the world to marry a man she doesn't love, she has some very understandable anxieties about matrimony and sex. In fact, her last conversation before entering the cave is with Aziz regarding his own married life, and her questions are probing and even inappropriate. Perhaps this conversation brings on her hallucination, if that is what it is, or perhaps it provokes Aziz or some third party (their guide, for instance) into whatever he does, if anyone does anything.

For Adela, the horror of her cave experience and its booming echo ride roughshod over her soul until she recants her testimony against Aziz during his trial. Once the mayhem dies down and she is safely away from the Indians who have hated her and the English who now hate her, she announces that the echo has stopped. What does this suggest? The cave may bring on or point up a variety of inauthentic experience (another existential concept) – that is, Adela is confronted by the hypocrisy of her life and her reasons for coming to India or agreeing to marry Ronnie, her fiancé, by her failure to take responsibility for her own existence. Or it may represent a breach of the truth (in a more traditional philosophical tradition) or a confrontation with terrors she has denied and can only exorcise by facing them. Or something else. For Aziz, too, the caves speak through their aftermath – of the perfidy of the English, of the falseness of his subservience, of his need to assert responsibility for his own life. It may be that Adela does panic in the face of Nothingness, only recovering herself when she takes responsibility by recanting in the witness box. Perhaps it's all about nothing more than her own self-doubts, her own psychological or spiritual difficulties. Perhaps it is racial in some way.

The only thing we are sure of about the cave as symbol is that it keeps its secrets. That sounds as if I'm punting, but I'm not. What the cave symbolizes will be determined to a large extent by how the individual reader engages the text. Every reader's experience of every work is unique, largely because each person will emphasize various elements to differing degrees, and those differences will cause certain features of the text to become more or less pronounced. We bring an individual history to our reading, a mix of previous readings, to be sure, but also a history that includes, but is not limited to, educational attainment, gender, race, class, faith, social involvement, and philosophical inclination. These factors will inevitably influence what we understand in our reading, and nowhere is this individuality clearer than in the matter of symbolism.

The problem of symbolic meaning is further compounded when we look at a number of writers emphasizing various, distinct elements for a given symbol. As an example, let's consider three rivers. Mark Twain gives us the Mississippi, Hart Crane the Hudson-East-Mississippi/generic-American, and T. S. Eliot the Thames. All three are American writers, all from the Midwest (two from Missouri, no less). Do you suppose there's any chance of their rivers standing for the same thing? In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Twain sends Huck and the escaped slave Jim down the Mississippi on a raft.

The river is a little bit of everything in the novel. At the beginning it floods, killing livestock and people, including Huck's father. Jim is using the river to escape to freedom, but his "escape" is paradoxical since it carries him deeper and deeper into slave territory. The river is both danger and safety, since the relative isolation from land and detection is offset by the perils of river travel on a makeshift conveyance. On a personal level, the river/raft provides the platform on which Huck, a white boy, can get to know Jim not as a slave but as a man. And of course the river is really a road, and the raft trip a quest that results in Huck growing to maturity and understanding. He knows himself well enough at the end that he will never return to childhood and Hannibal and bossy women, so he lights out for the Territories.

Now take Hart Crane's poem sequence *The Bridge* (1930), which plays with rivers and bridges throughout. He begins with the East River, spanned by the Brooklyn Bridge. From there the river grows into the Hudson and on into the Mississippi, which for Crane metonymically represents all American rivers. Interesting things begin happening in the poem. The bridge connects the two pieces of land cut off from one another by the river, while it has the effect of bisecting the stream. The river meanwhile does separate the land on a horizontal axis but connects along a vertical axis, making it possible for people at one end to travel to the other. The Mississippi becomes of central symbolic importance for Crane because of its immense length, bringing the northernmost and southernmost parts of the nation together while making it virtually impossible to move from east to west without some means of traversing the river. His meanings are quite different from those of Twain. Together the river and the bridge constitute an image of total connection.

And Eliot? Eliot uses the River Thames prominently in *The Waste Land*, written in the immediate aftermath of World War I and of a more personal breakdown. His river carries the detritus of a dying civilization and features, among other things, a rat trailing along the bank; the river is slimy, dirty, its famous bridge falling down (in nursery rhyme form), abandoned by its nymphs. The river is shorn of grandeur, grace, and divinity. In the poem's past, Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester carry on their dalliance on the water, but their modern counterparts are merely sordid and seedy. Clearly Eliot's river is symbolic; equally clearly it symbolizes things having to do with the corruption of modern life and collapse of Western civilization which do not come into play with either Twain or Crane. Of course, Eliot's work is heavily ironic, and as we'll discuss later, everything changes when irony climbs aboard.

You will have noticed in these last pages that I assert meaning for these uses of caves and symbols with considerable authority, and indeed I have a pretty strong grasp of what they mean - for me. The authority I bring to these readings is that of my own background and experience. I incline, for instance, toward a reading of *The Waste Land* based on its historical context (a historicist reading, if you will) in which the poem cannot be divorced from the recent war and its aftermath, but not everyone comes at the poem from that angle. Others may approach it chiefly in formal terms or on biographical grounds, as a response to violent personal and marital upheaval. These and many other approaches are not only valid but produce readings of considerable insight; in fact, I have learned a great deal not only about the poem but about my own shortcomings from alternative approaches. One of the pleasures of literary scholarship lies in encountering different and even conflicting interpretations, since the great work allows for a considerable range of possible interpretations. Under no circumstances, in other words, should you take my pronouncements on these works as definitive.

The other problem with symbols is that many readers expect them to be objects and images rather than events or actions. Action can also be symbolic. Robert Frost is probably the champion of the symbolic action, although his uses of it are so sly that resolutely literal readers can miss the symbolic

level entirely. In his poem "Mowing" (1913), for instance, the activity of mowing a field with a scythe (which, mercifully, you and I will never have to do) is first and foremost just what it is, a description of sweeping a field clean of standing hay one stroke at a time. We also notice, though, that mowing carries weight beyond its immediate context, seeming to stand in for labor generally, or for the solitary business of living one's life, or for something else beyond itself. Similarly, the speaker's account of his recent actions in "After Apple Picking" (1914) suggests a point in life as well as a point in the season, and the memory of picking, from the lingering sense of the swaying ladder and the imprint of the rung on his foot soles to the impression of apples on his retinas, suggests the wear and tear of the activity of living on the psyche. Again, the nonsymbolic thinker can see this as a beautiful evocation of an autumnal moment, which it is and pleurably so, but there is more than just that going on. It may be a little more obvious with the moment of decision in his "The Road Not Taken" (1916), which is why it is the universal graduation poem, but symbolic action can also be found in poem after poem, from the terrible accident in "Out, Out - " to climbing in "Birches" (1916).

So, what are you to do? You can't simply say, Well, it's a river, so it means x, or apple picking, so it means y. On the other hand, you can say this could sometimes mean x or y or even z, so let's keep that in mind to see which one, if either, happens here. Any past experience of literary rivers or labor may be helpful as well. Then you start breaking down the work at hand into manageable pieces. Associate freely, brainstorm, take notes. Then you can organize your thoughts, grouping them together under headings, rejecting or accepting different ideas or meanings as they seem to apply. Ask questions of the text: what's the writer doing with this image, this object, this act; what possibilities are suggested by the movement of the narrative or the lyric; and most important, what does it feel like it's doing? Reading literature is a highly intellectual activity, but it also involves affect and instinct to a large degree. Much of what we think about literature, we feel first. Having instincts, though, doesn't automatically mean they work at their highest level. Dogs are instinctual swimmers, but not every pup hits the water understanding what to do with that instinct. Reading is like that, too. 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 that 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. Imagination isn't fantasy. That is to say, we can't simply invent meaning without the writer, or if we can, we ought not to hold her to it. Rather, a reader's imagination is the act of one creative intelligence engaging another.

So engage that other creative intelligence. Listen to your instincts. Pay attention to what you feel about the text. It probably means something.

14 - Yes, She's a Christ Figure, Too

THIS MAY SURPRISE SOME OF YOU, but we live in a Christian culture. What I mean is that since the preponderance of cultural influences has come down to us from European early settlers, and since those early settlers inflicted their values on the “benighted” cultures they encountered (“benighted,” from the Old English, meaning “anyone darker than myself”), those inflicted values have gained ascendancy. This is not to say that all citizens of this great republic are Christians, any more than that they are all great republicans. I once heard a well-known Jewish professor of composition speak about walking into her very first final examination in college only to be confronted with this question: “discuss the Christian imagery in Billy Budd.” It simply never occurred to her professor back in the 1950s that Christian imagery might be alien territory for some students.

Institutions of higher learning can no longer blithely assume that everyone in class is a Christian, and if they do, it's at their own risk. Still, no matter what your religious beliefs, to get the most out of your reading of European and American literatures, knowing something about the Old and New Testaments is essential. Similarly, if you undertake to read literature from an Islamic or a Buddhist or a Hindu culture, you're going to need knowledge of other religious traditions. Culture is so influenced by its dominant religious systems that whether a writer adheres to the beliefs or not, the values and principles of those religions will inevitably inform the literary work. Often those values will not be religious in nature but may show themselves in connection with the individual's role within society, or humankind's relation to nature, or the involvement of women in public life, although, as we have seen, just as often religion shows up in the form of allusions and analogues. When I read an Indian novel, for example, I'm often aware, if only dimly, of how much I'm missing due to my ignorance of the various religious traditions of the subcontinent. Since I'd like to get more out of my reading, I've worked to reduce that ignorance, but I still have a way to go.

Okay, so not everyone is a Christian around these parts, nor do those who would say they are necessarily have more than a nodding familiarity with the New Testament, aside from John 3:16, which is always beside the goalposts at football games. But in all probability they do know one thing: they know why it's called Christianity. Okay, so it's not the most profound insight ever, but it matters. A lot. Northrop Frye, one of the great literary critics, said in the 1950s that biblical typology - the comparative study of types between the Old and New Testaments and, by extension, out into literature - was a dead language, and things haven't improved since then. While we may not be all that well versed in types and archetypes from the Bible, we generally recognize, whatever our religious affiliation, some of the features that make Christ who he is.

Whether you do or not, this list may be helpful:

- 1) crucified, wounds in the hands, feet, side, and head
- 2) in agony
- 3) self-sacrificing
- 4) good with children
- 5) good with loaves, fishes, water, wine
- 6) thirty-three years of age when last seen
- 7) employed as carpenter
- 8) known to use humble modes of transportation, feet or donkeys preferred
- 9) believed to have walked on water

- 10) often portrayed with arms outstretched
- 11) known to have spent time alone in the wilderness
- 12) believed to have had a confrontation with the devil, possibly tempted
- 13) last seen in the company of thieves
- 14) creator of many aphorisms and parables
- 15) buried, but arose on the third day
- 16) had disciples, twelve at first, although not all equally devoted
- 17) very forgiving
- 18) came to redeem an unworthy world

You may not subscribe to this list, may find it too glib, but if you want to read like a literature professor, you need to put aside your belief system, at least for the period during which you read, so you can see what the writer is trying to say. As you're reading that story or poem, religious knowledge is helpful, although religious belief, if too tightly held, can be a problem. We want to be able to identify features in stories and see how they are being used; in other words, we want to be analytical.

Say we're reading a book, a novel. Short novel, say. And let's say this short novel has a man in it, a man no longer young, in fact old, as well as very poor and engaged in a humble profession. Not carpentry, say, but fishing. Jesus had some dealings with fishermen, too, and is often connected symbolically with fish, so that's a point of similarity. And the old fisherman hasn't had much good luck for a long time, so no one believes in him. In general there's a lot of doubt and nonbelief in our story. But one young boy believes in him; sadly, though, the boy isn't allowed to accompany the fisherman anymore, because everyone, the boy's parents included, think the old man is bad luck. There's a second point of similarity: he's good with children. Or at least one child. And he has one disciple. And this old man is very good and pure, so that's another point. Because the world he lives in is rather sullied and unworthy, fallen even.

During his solitary fishing trip, the old man hooks into a big fish that takes him far out beyond his known limits, to where the sea becomes a wilderness. He's all alone, and he's put through great physical suffering, during which even he begins to doubt himself. His hands are ripped up by the struggle, he thinks he's broken something in his side. But he bucks himself up with aphorisms like "A man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated" - inspiring things like that. Somehow he can endure this whole episode, which lasts three days and which finally makes it seem to those on land that he's dead. His great fish is ruined by sharks, but he manages to drag this huge ruined skeleton back to port. His return is like a resurrection. He has to walk up a hill from the water to his shack, and he carries his mast, which looks like a man carrying a cross from a certain point of view. Then he lies on his bed, exhausted by his struggles, his arms thrown out in the position of crucifixion, showing his damaged, raw hands. And the next morning, when people see the great fish, even the doubters begin to believe in him again. He brings a kind of hope, a kind of redemption, to this fallen world, and...yes?

Didn't Hemingway write a book like that?

Yes, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), a nearly perfect literary parable, so clear, with symbols so available, that the Christian imagery is accessible to even beginning readers. But let's give old Hemingway some credit here; the narrative is more subtle than I've just made it sound. And the struggle is so vivid and concrete that one can get a lot out of it - triumph over adversity, the value of

hope and faith, the attainment of grace – without placing undue weight on the old man, Santiago, as a Christ figure.

So must all Christ figures be as unambiguous as this? No, they don't have to hit all the marks. Don't have to be male. Don't have to be Christian. Don't even have to be good. (See the stories of Flannery O'Connor for example after example.) There, however, we're starting to get into irony, and that's a whole different area where I don't want to go just yet. Yet. But if a character is a certain age, exhibits certain behaviors, provides for certain outcomes, or suffers in certain ways, your literary antennae should begin to twitch. How should we know, though? Here's a handy list, not all-inclusive, but a start:

YOU MIGHT BE A CHRIST FIGURE IF YOU ARE... (CHECK ANY THAT APPLY):

- thirty-three years old
- unmarried, preferably celibate
- wounded or marked in the hands, feet, or side (crown of thorns extra credit)
- sacrificing yourself in some way for others (your life is best, and your sacrifice doesn't have to be willing)
- in some sort of wilderness, tempted there, accosted by the devil

Oh, you get the point. Consult previous list.

Are there things you don't have to do? Certainly. Consider Santiago again. Wait, you say, shouldn't he be thirty-three? And the answer is, sometimes that's good. But a Christ figure doesn't need to resemble Christ in every way; otherwise he wouldn't be a Christ figure, he'd be, well, Christ. The literal elements – changing water into wine, unless in some clumsy way such as pouring out someone's water and filling his glass with wine; stretching loaves and fishes to feed five thousand; preaching (although some do); suffering actual crucifixion; literally following in his footsteps – aren't really required. It's the symbolic level we're interested in.

Which brings us to another issue we've touched upon in other chapters. 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." Okay, so the heavy-metal sound isn't in the hymnal. And this character would be very hard pressed to take over Savior duty. No literary Christ figure can ever be as pure, as perfect, as divine as Jesus Christ. Here as elsewhere, one does well to remember that writing literature is an exercise of the imagination. And so is reading it. We have to bring our imaginations to bear on a story if we are to see all its possibilities; otherwise it's just about somebody who did something. Whatever we take away from stories in the way of significance, symbolism, theme, meaning, pretty much anything except character and plot, we discover because our imagination engages with that of the author. Pretty amazing when you consider that the author may have been dead for a thousand years, yet we can still have this kind of exchange, this dialogue, with her. At the same time, this doesn't indicate the story can mean anything we want it to, since that would be a case of our imagination not bothering with that of the author and just inventing whatever it wants to see in the text. That's not reading, that's writing. But that's another matter, and one we'll discuss elsewhere.

On the flip side, if someone in class asks if it's possible that the character under discussion might be a Christ figure, citing three or four similarities, I'll say something like, "Works for me." The bottom line, I

usually tell the class, is that Christ figures are where you find them, and as you find them. If the indicators are there, then there is some basis for drawing the conclusion.

Why, you might ask, are there Christ figures? As with most other cases we've looked at where the work engages some prior text, the short answer is that probably the writer wants to make a certain point. Perhaps the parallel deepens our sense of the character's sacrifice if we see it as somehow similar to the greatest sacrifice we know of. Maybe it has to do with redemption, or hope, or miracle. Or maybe it is all being treated ironically, to make the character look smaller rather than greater. But count on it, the writer is up to something. How do we know what he's up to? That's another job for imagination.

19 - Geography Matters...

LET'S GO ON VACATION. You say okay and then ask your first question, which is...Who's paying? Which month? Can we get time off? No. None of those.

Where?

That's the one. Mountains or beaches, St. Paul or St. Croix, canoeing or sailing, the Mall of America or the National Mall. You know you have to ask because otherwise I might take you to some little trout stream twenty-seven miles from a dirt road when you really want to watch the sun go down from a white sand beach.

Writers have to ask that question, too, so we readers should consider its implications. In a sense, every story or poem is a vacation, and every writer has to ask, every time, Where is this one taking place? For some, it's not that tough. William Faulkner often said he set the majority of his work on his "little postage stamp of ground," his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. After a few novels, he knew that ground so intimately he didn't even have to think about it anymore. Thomas Hardy did the same thing with his mythic Wessex, the southwest corner of England - Devon and Dorset and Wiltshire. And we feel that those novels and stories couldn't be set anywhere but where they are, that those characters couldn't say the things they say if they were uprooted and planted in, say, Minnesota or Scotland. They'd say different things and perform different acts. Most writers, though, are less tied to one place than Faulkner or Hardy, so they have to give it some thought.

And we readers have to give their decisions some thought as well. What does it mean to the novel that its landscape is high or low, steep or shallow, flat or sunken? Why did this character die on a mountaintop, that one on the savanna? Why is this poem on the prairie? Why does Auden like limestone so much? What, in other words, does geography mean to a work of literature?

Would everything be too much?

Okay, not in every work, but frequently. In fact, more often than you think. Just think about the stories that really stay with you: where would they be without geography. The Old Man and the Sea can only take place in the Caribbean, of course, but more particularly in and around Cuba. The place brings with it history, interaction between American and Cuban culture, corruption, poverty, fishing, and of course baseball. Any boy and any older man might, I guess, take a raft trip down a river. It could happen. But a boy, Huck Finn, and an older man, the escaped slave Jim, and their raft could only make the story we know as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by being on that particular river, the Mississippi, traveling through that particular landscape and those particular communities, at a given moment in history. It matters when they reach Cairo and the Ohio empties into the big river; it matters when they reach the Deep South, because Jim is running away in the worst possible direction. The great threat to a slave was that he might be sold down the river, where things got progressively worse the farther south you went, and he's floating straight into the teeth of the monster.

And that's geography?

Sure, what else?

I don't know. Economics? Politics? History?

So what's geography, then?

I usually think of hills, creeks, deserts, beaches, degrees latitude. Stuff like that.

Precisely. Geography: hills, etc. Stuff: economics, politics, history. Why didn't Napoleon conquer Russia? Geography. He ran into two forces he couldn't overcome: a ferocious Russian winter and a people whose toughness and tenacity in defending their homeland matched the merciless elements. And that savagery, like the weather, is a product of the place they come from. It takes a really tough people to overcome not merely one Russian winter but hundreds of them. Anthony Burgess has a novel about the Russian winter defeating the French emperor, *Napoleon Symphony* (1974), in which he brings to life, better than anyone, that geography and that weather: the vastness of it, the emptiness, the hostility to the invading (and then, retreating) troops, the total absence of any possibility of comfort or safety or solace.

So what's geography? Rivers, hills, valleys, buttes, steppes, glaciers, swamps, mountains, prairies, chasms, seas, islands, people. In poetry and fiction, it may be mostly people. Robert Frost routinely objected to being called a nature poet, since by his count he only had three or four poems without a person in them. Literary geography is typically about humans inhabiting spaces, and at the same time the spaces that inhabit humans. Who can say how much of us comes from our physical surroundings? Writers can, at least in their own works, for their own purposes. When Huck meets the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords or sees the duke and the dauphin tarred and feathered by the townspeople, he sees geography in action. Geography is setting, but it's also (or can be) psychology, attitude, finance, industry - anything that place can forge in the people who live there.

Geography in literature can also be more. It can be revelatory of virtually any element in the work. Theme? Sure. Symbol? No problem. Plot? Without a doubt.

In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," the narrator spends the opening pages describing a landscape and a day as bleak as any in literature. We want to get to the titular house, of course, to meet the last, appalling members of the Usher clan, but Poe doesn't want us there before he's prepared us. He treats us to "a singularly dreary tract of country," to "a few rank sedges" and "white trunks of decayed trees," to "the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn," so that we're ready for the "bleak walls" of the house with its "vacant eye-like windows" and its "barely perceptible fissure" zigzagging its way down the wall right down to "the sullen waters of the tarn." Never perhaps have landscape and architecture and weather (it's a particularly dingy afternoon) merged as neatly with mood and tone to set a story in motion. We are nervous and dismayed by this description even before anything has happened, so of course when things do begin happening, when we meet Roderick Usher, one of the creepiest characters to ever grace the pages of a story, he can't give us the creeps because we already have them. But he sure can make them worse, and he does. Actually, the scariest thing Poe could do to us is to put a perfectly normal human specimen in that setting, where no one could remain safe. And that's one thing landscape and place - geography - can do for a story.

Geography can also define or even develop character. Take the case of two contemporary novels. In Barbara Kingsolver's *Bean Trees* (1988), the main character and narrator reaches late adolescence in rural Kentucky and realizes she has no options in that world. That condition is more than social; it grows out of the land. Living is hard in tobacco country, where the soil yields poor crops and hardly anyone makes much of a go of things, where the horizon is always short, blocked by mountains. The narrator feels her figurative horizons are also circumscribed by what seem like local certainties: early pregnancy and an unsatisfactory marriage to a man who will probably die young. She decides to get away, driving a 1955 Volkswagen to Tucson. On her way she changes her name from Marietta (or Missy)

to Taylor Greer. As you know by now, there's rebirth when there's a renaming, right? Out west she meets new people, encounters a completely alien but inviting landscape, becomes the de facto mother of a three-year-old Native American girl she calls Turtle, and finds herself involved in the shelter movement for Central American refugees. She wouldn't have done any of these things in claustrophobic old Pittman, Kentucky. What she discovers in the West are big horizons, clear air, brilliant sunshine, and open possibilities. She goes, in other words, from a closed to an open environment, and she seizes the opportunities for growth and development. Another character in another novel might find the heat oppressive, the sun destructive, and space vacant, but she wouldn't be Taylor Greer. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead grows up without ever learning who he really is until he leaves his Michigan home and travels back to the family home country in eastern Pennsylvania and Virginia. In the hills and hollows (not unlike the ones Taylor Greer must flee to breathe) he finds a sense of roots, a sense of responsibility and justice, a capacity for atonement, and a generosity of spirit he never knew before. He loses nearly everything of his associated with the modern world in the process - Chevrolet, fine clothes, watch, shoes - but they prove to be the currency with which he buys his real worth. At one point direct contact with the earth (he's sitting on the ground and leaning back against a tree) provides him with an intuition that saves his life. He responds just in time to ward off a murderous attack. He could have done none of those things had he stayed in his familiar geography; only by leaving "home" and traveling to his real home can he find his real self.

It's not too much to say, I think, that geography can be character. Take Tim O'Brien's Vietnam masterpiece, *Going After Cacciato*. The main character, Paul Berlin, admits that the American soldiers don't really know the land, don't understand what they're up against. And it's a forbidding place: dry or wet, but always hot, full of microbe-filled water and leeches the size of snakes, rice paddies and mountains and shell craters. And tunnels. The tunnels turn the land itself into the enemy, since the land hides the Vietcong fighters only to deliver them virtually anywhere, producing surprise attacks and sudden death. The resulting terror gives the land a face of menace in the minds of the young Americans. When one of their number is killed by a sniper, they order the destruction of the nearby village, then sit on a hill and watch as shell after shell, alternating high explosives and incendiary white phosphorus, pulverize the village. A cockroach couldn't survive. Why do they do it? It isn't a military target, only a village. Did the bullet come from the village? Not exactly, although the shooter was either a VC villager or a soldier sheltered by the village. Is he still there? No, the place is deserted when they look for revenge. You could make the claim that they go after the community of people who housed the enemy, and certainly there's an element of that. But the real target is the physical village - as place, as center of mystery and threat, as alien environment, as generic home of potential enemies and uncertain friends. The squad pours its fear and anger at the land into this one small, representative piece of it: if they can't overcome the larger geography, they can at least express their rage against the smaller.

Geography can also, and frequently does, play quite a specific plot role in a literary work. In E. M. Forster's early novels, English tourists find ways of making mischief, usually unwittingly and not always comically, when they travel to the Mediterranean. In *A Room with a View* (1908), for instance, Lucy Honeychurch travels to Florence, where she sheds much of her racially inherited stiffness while losing her heart to George Emerson, the freethinking son of an elderly radical. She finds what looks like scandal only to ultimately discover freedom, and a big part of that freedom stems from the passionate, fiery nature of the Italian city. Much of the comedy in the novel grows out of Lucy's battle to reconcile what she "knows" is right with what she feels to be right for her. Nor is she alone in her struggles: most of the other characters stumble into awkwardness of one sort or another. Forster's later masterpiece, *A Passage to India*, focuses on other types of mayhem growing from English misbehavior as the rulers of India and from very confused feelings that beset recent arrivals on the subcontinent. Even our best

intentions, he seems to suggest, can have disastrous consequences in an alien environment. Half a century after Forster's lightweight comedies of folly in Italy, Lawrence Durrell reveals an entire culture of libertines and spies in his beautiful tetralogy, *The Alexandria Quartet*. His northern European characters displaced to Egypt exhibit every sort of kink, sexual and otherwise, from the old sailor with a glass eye and a predilection for young boys to the incestuous Ludwig and Liza Pursewarden to nearly everyone's inability to be faithful to spouse or lover. Darley, the narrator of the first and fourth volumes, tells us that there are at least five genders (although he leaves specifying them to our imaginations) in Alexandria, then shows them to us at full throttle. One might suppose that the heat of an Egyptian summer would induce some lassitude in these already overheated northerners, but there's little evidence of that. Evidently an Englishman released from perpetual rain and fog is nearly unstoppable.

What separates the sexual behavior of Forster's characters from that of Durrell's, aside from time, is D. H. Lawrence. His works, culminating in the overwrought and infamous, if not always successful, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, opened the way for more sexual directness. Like many modern writers, he sent his characters south in search of trouble, but curiously, that trouble was not typically sexual, since he, being quite advanced, could get his people in sexual trouble right in the midst of inhibited Britain. Instead, when his travelers find sunshine in the south, they also encounter curious and sometimes dangerous political and philosophical ideas. *Crypto-fascism in Australia in Kangaroo* (1923). *Psychosexual male bonding in Aaron's Rod* (1922). The return of the old Mexican blood religion in *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). Desire and power in his little novella *The Woman Who Rode Away* (1928). What Lawrence does, really, is employ geography as a metaphor for the psyche - when his characters go south, they are really digging deep into their subconscious, delving into that region of darkest fears and desires. Maybe it takes a kid from a mining town in Nottinghamshire, which Lawrence was, to recognize the allure of the sunny south.

Of course, this is not exclusive to Lawrence. Thomas Mann, a German, sends his elderly writer to Venice to die (in *Death in Venice*, 1912), but not before discovering a nasty streak of pederasty and narcissism in himself. Joseph Conrad, England's greatest Polish writer, sends his characters into hearts of darkness (as he calls one tale of a trip into Africa) to discover the darkness in their own hearts. In *Lord Jim* (1900), the main character has his romantic dreams shattered during his first experience in the Indian Ocean, and is symbolically buried in Southeast Asia until he rises, redeemed through love and belief in himself, only to be killed. In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the narrator, Marlow, travels up the Congo River and observes the near-total disintegration of the European psyche in Kurtz, who has been in-country so long that he has become unrecognizable.

Okay, so here's the general rule: whether it's Italy or Greece or Africa or Malaysia or Vietnam, when writers send characters south, it's so they can run amok. The effects can be tragic or comic, but they generally follow the same pattern. We might add, if we're being generous, that they run amok because they are having direct, raw encounters with the subconscious. Conrad's visionaries, Lawrence's searchers, Hemingway's hunters, Kerouac's hipsters, Paul Bowles's down-and-outers and seekers, Forster's tourists, Durrell's libertines - all head south, in more senses than one. But do they fall under the influence of warmer climes, or do those welcoming latitudes express something that's already been trying to make its way out? The answer to that question is as variable as the writer - and the reader.

Now most of this has had to do with fairly specific places, but types of places also come into play. Theodore Roethke has a wonderful poem, "In Praise of Prairie" (1941), about, well, prairies. Do you know how few poems there are of any quality about prairies? No, his isn't quite the only one. It's not a landscape that's inevitably viewed as "poetic." Yet somehow Roethke, the greatest poet ever to come from Saginaw, Michigan, finds beauty in that perfectly horizontal surface, where horizons run away

from the eye and a drainage ditch is a chasm. Beyond this one poem, though, the experience of being a flatlander informs his work in obvious ways, as in his poems about this uniquely American/Canadian open, flat agricultural space, in the sequence *The Far Field* (1964), for instance, but in less subtle ways as well. His voice has a naive sincerity in it, a quiet, even tone, and his vision is of a vast nature. Flat ground is as important to Roethke's psyche, and therefore to his poetry, as the steep terrain of the English Lake District famously was to William Wordsworth. As readers, we need to consider Roethke's midwesternness as a major element in the making and shaping of his poems..

Seamus Heaney, who in "Bogland" (1969) actually offers a rejoinder to Roethke in which he acknowledges that Northern Ireland has to get by without prairies, probably couldn't be a poet at all without a landscape filled with bogs and turf. His imagination runs through history, digging its way down into the past to unlock clues to political and historical difficulties, in much the same way the turf-cutters carve their way downward through progressively older layers of peat, where they sometimes come upon messages from the past - skeletons of the extinct giant Irish elk, rounds of cheese or butter, Neolithic quern stones, two-thousand-year-old bodies. He makes use of these finds, of course, but he also finds his own truths by digging through the past. If we read Heaney's poetry without understanding the geography of his imagination, we risk misunderstanding what he's all about.

For the last couple of centuries, since Wordsworth and the Romantic poets, the sublime landscape - the dramatic and breathtaking vista - has been idealized, sometimes to the point of cliché. Needless to say, vast and sudden mountains - the geographic features we find most spectacular and dramatic - figure prominently in such views. When, in the middle of the twentieth century, W. H. Auden writes "In Praise of Limestone" (1951), he is directly attacking poetic assumptions of the sublime. But he's also writing about places we can call home: the flat or gently rolling ground of limestone country, with its fertile fields and abundant groundwater, with its occasional subterranean caves, and most important with its non-sublime but also nonthreatening vistas. We can live there, he says. The Matterhorn and Mont Blanc, those emblems of the Romantic sublime, may not be for human habitation, but limestone country is. In this case, geography becomes not only a way by which the poet expresses his psyche but also a conveyor of theme. Auden argues for a humanity-friendly poetry, challenging certain inhuman ideas that have dominated poetic thinking for a goodly period before he came along.

It doesn't matter which prairie, which bog, which mountain range, which chalk down or limestone field we envision. The poets are being fairly generic in these instances.

Hills and valleys have a logic of their own. Why did Jack and Jill go up the hill? Sure, sure, a pail of water, probably orders from a parent. But wasn't the real reason so Jack could break his crown and Jill come tumbling after? That's what it usually is in literature. Who's up and who's down? Just what do up and down mean?

First, think about what there is down low or up high. Low: swamps, crowds, fog, darkness, fields, heat, unpleasantness, people, life, death. High: snow, ice, purity, thin air, clear views, isolation, life, death. Some of these, you will notice, appear on both lists, and you can make either environment work for you if you're a real writer. Like Hemingway. In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936), he contrasts the leopard, dead and preserved in the snow on the peak, with the writer dying of gangrene down on the plain. The leopard's death is clean, cold, pure, while the writer's death is ugly, unpleasant, horrible. The final result may be the same, but one is so much less wholesome than the other.

D. H. Lawrence offers the contrasting view in *Women in Love*. The four main characters, tired of the muck and confusion of life in near-sea-level England, opt for a holiday in the Tyrol. At first the alpine environment seems clean and uncluttered, but as time goes on they - and we - begin to realize that it's

also inhuman. The two with the most humanity, Birkin and Ursula, decide to head back downhill to more hospitable climes, while Gerald and Gudrun stay. Their mutual hostility grows to the point where Gerald attempts to murder Gudrun and, deciding the act isn't worth the effort, skis off higher and higher until, only yards from the very top of the mountains, he collapses and dies of, for want of a better term, a broken soul.

So, high or low, near or far, north or south, east or west, the places of poems and fiction really matter. It isn't just setting, that hoary old English class topic. It's place and space and shape that bring us to ideas and psychology and history and dynamism. It's enough to make you read a map.

26 - Is He Serious? And Other Ironies

NOW HEAR THIS: irony trumps everything.

Consider roads. Journey, quest, self-knowledge. But what if the road doesn't lead anywhere, or, rather, if the traveler chooses not to take the road. We know that roads (and oceans and rivers and paths) exist in literature only so that someone can travel. Chaucer says so, as do John Bunyan, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Robert Frost, Jack Kerouac, Tom Robbins, *Easy Rider*, *Thelma and Louise*. If you show us a thoroughfare, you better put your hero on it. But then there's Samuel Beckett. Known as the poet of stasis, he puts one of his heroes, literally, in an ash can. The great actress Billie Whitelaw, who was in virtually every Beckett play that called for a woman, said his work repeatedly put her in the hospital, sometimes by demanding too much strenuous activity, but just as often by not letting her move at all. In his masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*, he creates two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, and plants them beside a road they never take. Every day they return to the same spot, hoping the unseen Godot will show up, but he never does, they never take the road, and the road never brings anything interesting their way. In some places writing something like that will get you a fifteen-yard penalty for improper use of a symbol. Of course, we catch on pretty fast and soon understand that the road exists for Didi and Gogo to take, and that their inability to do so indicates a colossal failure to engage life. Without our ingrained expectations about roads, however, none of this works: our hapless duo become nothing more than two guys stranded in desolate country. But they're not merely in desolate country but in desolate country beside an avenue of escape they fail to take. And that makes all the difference.

Irony? Yes, on a variety of levels. First, the entire play exists in what the late literary theorist Northrop Frye calls the "ironic mode." That is, we watch characters who possess a lower degree of autonomy, self-determination, or free will than ourselves. Whereas normally in literary works we watch characters who are our equals or even superiors, in an ironic work we watch characters struggle futilely with forces we might be able to overcome. Second, the specific situation of the road offers another level of irony. Here are two men, Didi and Gogo, who wish to find possibilities for change or improvement, yet they can only understand the road they wait beside passively, in terms of what it brings to them. We in the audience can see the implication that eludes them (this is where our expectations concerning roads enter the equation), so much so that we may want to scream at them to walk up the road to a new life. But of course they never do.

Or take rain. Of course, we already know that it has nearly limitless cultural associations, but even those won't cover the literary possibilities once irony kicks in. If you read a scene in which new life was coming into being, the rain outside would almost inevitably lead you (based on your previous reading) to a process of association in which you thought, or felt (since this really works as much at the visceral as at the intellectual level): rain-life-birth-promise-restoration-fertility-continuity. What, you don't always run that cycle when rain and new life are on the table? If you begin to read like an English professor, you will. But then there's Hemingway. At the end of *A Farewell to Arms* his hero, Frederic Henry, having just experienced the death of his lover, Catherine Barkley, and her baby during childbirth, distraught, walks out into the rain. None of those expectations we just listed are going to prevail; in fact, quite the opposite. It might help to know Hemingway's background in World War I, during which the novel is set, or his earlier life experiences, or his psychology and worldview, or the difficulty of writing this passage (he rewrote the last page twenty-six times, he said) in order to make sense of this scene. Most of all, we need to know that it's ironic. Like most of his generation, Hemingway learned irony early, then met it firsthand in the war as he watched youth meet death on a daily basis. His book is ironic from its first words. Literally. His title is taken from a sixteenth-century

poem by George Peele, "A Farewell," about soldiers rallying enthusiastically to the call to war, the first two words of which are "To arms!" By conjoining these two in one seamless phrase, Hemingway makes a title as nearly opposite Peele's rousing meaning as it's possible to get. That ironic stance pervades the novel right up to the end, where mother and child, rather than existing for each other, as experience has taught us to expect, slay each other, the infant strangled by the umbilical cord, the mother dead after a series of hemorrhages. Frederic Henry walks out into rain in a season that is still winter but comes on the heels of a false spring. There's nothing cleansing or rejuvenating about the whole thing. That's irony – take our expectations and upend them, make them work against us.

You can pretty much do this with anything. Spring comes and the wasteland doesn't even notice. Your heroine is murdered at dinner with the villain, during a toast in her honor no less. The Christ figure causes the destruction of others while he survives very nicely. Your character crashes his car into a billboard but is unhurt because his seat belt functions as designed. Then, before he can get it off, the billboard teeters, topples, and crushes him. Its message? Seat belts save lives.

Is the billboard the same as those other instances of irony?

Sure, why not? It's a sign that's used in a way other than the intended one. So are the others. 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 signifier, 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.

Here's an instance. G. K. Chesterton, a mystery writer and contemporary of Arthur Conan Doyle, has a story, "The Arrow of Heaven" (1926), in which a man is killed by an arrow. Of the cause of death there is never a flicker of doubt. That's too bad, since it sets up an insoluble problem: no one could have shot him but God. The victim is in a high tower with higher windows, so there is no way for a straight shot except from heaven. Father Brown, Chesterton's little hero/detective/priest, studies the matter a while, listening to all the stories, including one intended to misdirect him about how those Indian swamis could throw a knife from an impossible distance and kill a man, so maybe they worked their magic in this case with an arrow. This story immediately reveals the solution: no divine bow, but a murderer in the room with the victim. If a knife, which is intended for close use, can be thrown, then an arrow can be used to stab. Everyone except Father Brown makes the error of assuming that the arrow can only mean one thing. Our expectations about the arrow, like those of the characters in the story, point us in one direction, but Chesterton deflects the meaning away from those expectations. Mysteries, like irony, make great use of deflection. The arrow itself is stable; arrows are arrows. The uses to which arrows can be put and the meanings we attach to them, however, are not so stable.

Well, the seat belt billboard is an arrow. So are the deadly dinner, the failed Christ figure, Hemingway's rain and Beckett's road. In each case, the sign carries with it a customary meaning, but that doesn't guarantee it will deliver that received meaning. The signifier is stable. The rain is neither ironic nor not ironic; it's simply rain. That simple rain, however, is placed in a context where its conventional associations are upended. The signified's meaning stands opposed to what we expect. Since one half of the sign is stable and the other is not, the sign itself becomes unstable. It may mean many things, but what it won't mean is the thing we came in expecting that it would. Still, that expected meaning keeps hanging around, and since we experience this phantom meaning as an echo at the same time as the newly created, dominant meaning, all sorts of reverberations can be set off. It's kind of like the way jazz improvisation works. Jazz musicians don't just launch into random sound; rather, the combo begins by laying out a melody which is the basis for everything that will follow. Then, when the trumpeter or the pianist cuts loose, running through the chorus two, three, fifteen times, each one a little different, we

hear each of those improvisations, those changes, against our memory of the original melody. That memory is largely what makes the experience of the solo meaningful: this is where he started and now this is where he's taken us.

What irony chiefly involves, then, is a deflection from expectation. When Oscar Wilde has one character in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) say of another, recently widowed, that "her hair has gone quite gold from grief," the statement works because our expectation is that stress turns people's hair white. Someone becoming blond in widowhood suggests something else entirely, that perhaps her grief has not been so all-consuming as the pronouncement suggests on the surface. Wilde is the master of comic irony in both verbal and dramatic forms, and he succeeds because he pays attention to expectations. Verbal irony forms the basis for what we mean when we say irony. In ancient Greek comedy, there was a character called an eiron who seemed subservient, ignorant, weak, and he played off a pompous, arrogant, clueless figure called the alazon. Northrop Frye describes the alazon as the character who "doesn't know that he doesn't know," and that's just about perfect. What happens, as you can tell, is that the eiron spends most of his time verbally ridiculing, humiliating, undercutting, and generally getting the best of the alazon, who doesn't get it. But we do; irony works because the audience understands something that eludes one or more of the characters. By the time we get to Wilde, we can have verbal irony that needs no alazon but that uses an assumed innocence as the basis against which it plays.

The irony with which we're dealing in this discussion, though, is chiefly structural and dramatic rather than verbal. We know what should happen when we see a journey start, or when the novel cycles through the seasons and ends in spring, or when characters dine together. When what should happen doesn't, then we have Chesterton's arrow.

E. M. Forster only wrote a handful of books early in the twentieth century, but two of them, *A Passage to India* and *Howards End* (1910), are among the truly great novels. The latter deals with the class system and issues of individual worth. One of its important characters is a working-class man, Leonard Bast, who is determined to improve himself. He reads books approved for the purpose, such as John Ruskin on art and culture, he goes to lectures and concerts, always struggling to better himself. His efforts do lead him to meet people of the higher classes, the bourgeois Schlegel sisters and, through them, the aristocratic Wilcox family. We might expect this pattern to hold true and to lead him up and out of his wretched existence; instead he ends up finding greater wretchedness and death where he had hoped for his soul's ascent. Henry Wilcox advises him, through Helen Schlegel, to leave his banking position for a more secure firm, but the advice proves to be completely wrong, as his old bank continues to prosper while his new post is eliminated. Moreover, in his despair he has spent a night with Helen that has left her pregnant, and when Charles Wilcox attempts to exact retribution, Leonard dies of a heart attack. Irony, right? But there's more. We would normally see his love of books as something that is affirming of values, improving, and educational – all of which we know as positive virtues. As Leonard collapses, however, the last thing he sees are the books from the bookcase he has pulled over on himself. We sense the disjunction between what books ought to be and the function assigned to them here by Forster.

It goes on and on. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, her damaged Great War veteran, Septimus Warren Smith, commits suicide because his enemies are coming to get him. His enemies? Two doctors. We customarily associate physicians with healing, but in this novel they are interfering and threatening figures. Characters in Iris Murdoch's *Unicorn* spend a great deal of time trying to identify one of their number as the title creature, which is associated in folk mythology with Christ. Yet their first choice, who also seems to be the princess held captive in the tower, turns out to be selfish, manipulative, and murderous, while the second candidate winds up drowning another character (named Peter, no less).

Hardly the image of Christ one would expect in either case. In each of these novels, the dislocation between our expectations and the reality constitutes a dual awareness, a kind of double-hearing that is the hallmark of irony.

That dual awareness can be tricky to achieve at times. I can bring a discussion of *A Clockwork Orange* to silence by suggesting that we consider Alex, its protagonist, as a Christ figure.

Alex? The rapist and murderer Alex?

No doubt Anthony Burgess's protagonist has some high negatives. He is supremely violent, arrogant, elitist, and worst of all unrepentant. Moreover, his message is not one of love and universal brotherhood. If he's a Christ figure at all, it's not in any conventional sense.

But let's consider a few facts. He leads a small band of followers, one of whom betrays him. He is succeeded by a man named Pete (although this fact is troubling, since this Pete, unlike Peter, is also the betrayer). He is offered a bargain by the devil (he relinquishes his soul, in the form of spiritual autonomy, in exchange for the freedom awarded for undergoing aversion therapy). He wanders in the wilderness after his release from prison, then launches himself from a great height (one of the temptations Christ resists). He seems to be dead but then revivifies. Finally the story of his life carries a profound religious message.

None of these attributes looks right. They look instead like parodies of Christ's attributes. Or, rather, none of the attributes but that last one. This is very tricky business. No, Alex is not like Jesus. Nor is Burgess using Alex to denigrate or mock Jesus. It can look that way, however, if we approach the matter from the wrong angle or consider it carelessly.

It's a help, of course, to know that Burgess himself held deep Christian convictions, that issues of goodness and spiritual healing occupy a major place in his thought and work. More important, though, is the item I place at the end of my list, that the purpose of telling Alex's story is to convey a message of religious and spiritual profundity. The book is really Burgess's entry in the very old debate over the problem of evil, namely, why would a benevolent deity permit evil to exist in his creation? His argument runs like this: there is no goodness without free will. Without the ability to freely choose - or reject - the good, an individual possesses no control over his own soul, and without that control, there is no possibility of attaining grace. In the language of Christianity, a believer cannot be saved unless the choice to follow Christ is freely made, unless the option not to follow him genuinely exists. Compelled belief is no belief at all.

The Gospels offer us a positive model for their argument: Jesus is the embodiment of the behaviors Christian believers should embrace as well as the spiritual goal toward which they strive. *A Clockwork Orange*, on the other hand, provides a negative model. In other words, Burgess reminds us that for goodness to mean anything, not only must evil exist, but so must the option of choosing evil. Alex freely, and joyously, chooses evil (although in the final chapter he has begun to outgrow that choice). When his capacity to choose is taken away, evil is replaced not with goodness but with a hollow simulacrum of goodness. Because he still wants to choose evil, he is in no way reformed. In acquiring the desired behavior through the "Ludovico Technique," as the aversion therapy is called in the novel, society has not only failed to correct Alex but has committed a far worse crime against him by taking away his free will, which for Burgess is the hallmark of the human being.

In this regard, and only in this one, is Alex a modern version of Christ. Those other aspects are a bit of ironic window dressing the author embeds in his text as cues for how to understand Alex's story and the message he unwittingly conveys.

Nearly all writers employ irony sometimes, although the frequency of occurrence varies greatly. With some writers, particularly modern and postmodern writers, irony is a full-time business, so that as we read them more and more, we come to expect that they will inevitably thwart conventional expectations. Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, Angela Carter, and T. Coraghessan Boyle are only a few of those twentieth-century masters of the ironic stance. If we were wise, we would never open a Boyle novel or short story expecting him to do the conventional thing. Some readers find relentless irony difficult to warm to, and some writers find that being ironic carries perils. Salman Rushdie's irony in *The Satanic Verses* did not register with certain Muslim clerics. So there's our second ironic precept: irony doesn't work for everyone. Because of the multivocal nature of irony - we hear those multiple voices simultaneously - readers who are inclined toward univocal utterances simply may not register that multiplicity.

For those who do, though, there are great compensations. Irony - sometimes comic, sometimes tragic, sometimes wry or perplexing - provides additional richness to the literary dish. And it certainly keeps us readers on our toes, inviting us, compelling us, to dig through layers of possible meaning and competing signification. We must remember: irony trumps everything. In other words, every chapter in this book goes out the window when irony comes in the door.

How do you know if it's irony?

Listen.

Envoi

THERE'S A VERY OLD TRADITION in poetry of adding a little stanza, shorter than the rest, at the end of a long narrative poem or sometimes a book of poems. The function differed from poem to poem. Sometimes it was a very brief summation or conclusion. My favorite was the apology to the poem itself: "Well, little book, you're not that much but you're the best I could make you. Now you'll just have to make your way in the world as best you can. Fare thee well." This ritual sending-off was called the envoi (I told you that all the best terms are French - and the worst), meaning, more or less, to send off on a mission.

If I told you that I didn't owe my book an apology, we'd both know it was untrue, and every author wraps up a manuscript with some trepidation as to its future welfare. That trepidation, however, becomes pointless once the manuscript becomes a book, as the old writers understood, which is why they told the poor book that it was now an orphan, that whatever parental protections the writer could offer had ended. On the other hand, I figure my little enterprise can get along without me pretty well, so I'll spare it the send-off.

Instead I would address my envoi to the reader. You've really been very good about all this, very sporting. You've borne my guff and my wisecracks and my annoying mannerisms much better than I have any right to expect. A first-class audience, really. Now that it's time for us to part, I have a few thoughts with which to send you on your way.

First, a confession and a warning. If I have given the impression somehow - by reaching an end point, for instance - that I have exhausted the codes by which literature is written and understood, I must apologize. It simply isn't true. In fact, we've only scratched the surface here. It now strikes me as highly peculiar, for instance, that I could have brought you this far with no mention of fire. It's one of the original four elements, along with water, earth, and air, yet somehow it didn't come up in our discussion. There are dozens of other topics we could have addressed as easily and as profitably as the ones we did. In fact, my original conception was for somewhat fewer chapters, and a slightly different lineup. The chapters that wound up getting included reflect the noisiness and persistence of their topics: some ideas refused to be denied, crowding their way in and sometimes crowding out those that were less ill-mannered. Looking back over the text, it strikes me as highly idiosyncratic. To the extent that my colleagues would agree that this mode of reading is at least a strong part of what we do, they would no doubt squawk over my categories. Quite right, too. Every professor will have a unique set of emphases. I gather my thoughts into groupings that seem inevitable, but different groupings or formulations may seem inevitable to someone else.

What this book represents is not a database of all the cultural codes by which writers create and readers understand the products of that creation, but a template, a pattern, a grammar of sorts from which you can learn to look for those codes on your own. No one could include them all, and no reader would want to plow through the resulting encyclopedia. I'm pretty sure I could have made this book, with not too much effort, twice as long. I'm also pretty sure neither of us wants that.

Second, a felicitation. All those other codes? You don't need them. At least you don't need them all spelled out. There comes a point in anyone's reading where watching for pattern and symbol becomes almost second nature, where words and images start calling out for attention. Consider the way Diane picked up on the birds in "The Garden Party." No one taught her to go looking for birds per se in her reading; rather, what happens is that, based on other reading experiences in a variety of courses and contexts, she learned to watch for distinctive features of a text, for repetitions of a certain kind of

object or activity for resonances. One mention of birds or flight is an occurrence, two may be a coincidence, but three constitutes a definite trend. And trends, as we know, cry out for examination. You can figure out fire. Or horses. Characters in stories have ridden horses – and sometimes bemoaned their absence – for thousands of years. What does it mean to be mounted on a horse, as opposed to being on foot? Consider some examples: Diomedes and Odysseus stealing the Thracian horses in *The Iliad*, the Lone Ranger waving from astride the rearing Silver, Richard III crying out for a horse, Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda roaring down the road on their choppers in *Easy Rider*. Any three or four examples will do. What do we understand about horses and riding them or driving them – or not? See? You can do it just fine.

Third, some suggestions. In the Appendix, I offer some ideas for further reading. There's nothing systematic or even particularly orderly about the suggestions. I'm certainly not weighing in on the culture wars, offering a prescribed reading list to make you...whatever. Mostly, these are works I've mentioned along the way, works I like and admire for a variety of reasons, works I think you might like as well. I hope you'll find them even better now than you would have a number of pages ago. My main suggestion, though, is to read things you like. You're not stuck with my list. Go to your bookstore or library and find novels, poems, plays, stories that engage your imagination and your intelligence. Read "Great Literature," by all means, but read good writing. Much of what I like best in my reading I've found by accident as I poked around bookshelves. And don't wait for writers to be dead to be read; the living ones can use the money. Your reading should be fun. We only call them literary works. Really, though, it's all a form of play. So play, Dear Reader, play.

And fare thee well.

Appendix Reading List

I'VE TOSSED BOOK AND POEM TITLES at you, sometimes at a dizzying pace. I remember that sense of disorientation from my very early undergraduate days (it took me years to figure out “Alain Robbe-Grillet” from the passing references one of my first professors was wont to make). The result can be intoxicating, in which case you go on to study more literature, or infuriating, in which case you blame the authors and works you never heard of for making you feel dumb. Never feel dumb. Not knowing who or what is ignorance, which is no sin; ignorance is simply the measure of what you haven't got to yet. I find more works and writers every day that I haven't got to, haven't even heard of.

What I offer here is a list of items mentioned throughout the book, plus some others I probably should have mentioned, or would have if I had more essays to write. In any event, what all these works have in common is that a reader can learn a lot from them. I have learned a lot from them. As with the rest of this book, there is very little order or method to them. You won't, if you read these, magically acquire culture or education or any of those scary abstractions; nor do I claim for them (in general) that they are better than works I have not chosen, that *The Iliad* is better than *Metamorphoses* or that Charles Dickens is better than George Eliot. In fact, I have strong opinions about literary merit, but that's not what we're about here. All I would claim for these works is that if you read them, you will become more learned. That's the deal. We're in the learning business. I am, and if you've read this far, so are you. Education is mostly about institutions and getting tickets stamped; learning is what we do for ourselves. When we're lucky, they go together. If I had to choose, I'd take learning.

Oh, there's another thing that will happen if you read the works on this list: you will have a good time, mostly. I promise. Hey, I can't guarantee that everyone will like everything or that my taste is your taste. What I can guarantee is that these works are entertaining. Classics aren't classic because they're old, they're classic because they're great stories or great poems, because they're beautiful or entertaining or exciting or funny or all of the above. And the newer works, the ones that aren't classics? They may grow to that status or they may not. But for now they're engaging, thought-provoking, maddening, fun. We speak, as I've said before, of literary works, but in fact literature is chiefly play. If you read novels and plays and stories and poems and you're not having fun, somebody is doing something wrong. If a novel seems like an ordeal, quit; you're not getting paid to read it, are you? And you surely won't get fired if you don't read it. So enjoy.

Primary Works

W. H. Auden, “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1940), “In Praise of Limestone” (1951). The first is a meditation on human suffering, based on a Pieter Brueghel painting. The second is a great poem extolling the virtues of gentle landscapes and those of us who live there. There's a lot more great Auden where those came from.

James Baldwin, “Sonny's Blues” (1957). Heroin and jazz and sibling rivalry and promises to dead parents and grief and guilt and redemption. All in twenty pages.

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1954). What if there's a road but characters don't travel it? Would that mean something?

Beowulf (eighth century A.D.). I happen to like Seamus Heaney's translation, which was published in 2000, but any translation will give you the thrill of this heroic epic.

T. Coraghessan Boyle, *Water Music* (1981), "The Overcoat II" (1985), *World's End* (1987). Savage comedy, scorching satire, astonishing narrative riffs.

Anita Brookner, *Hotel du Lac* (1984). Don't let the French title fool you; it's really in English, a lovely little novel about growing older and heartbreak and painfully bought wisdom.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Carroll may have been a mathematician in real life, but he understood the imagination and the illogic of dreams as well as any writer we've ever had. Brilliant, loopy fun.

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), *Nights at the Circus* (1984), *Wise Children* (1992). Subversiveness in narrative can be a good thing. Carter upends the expectations of patriarchal society.

Raymond Carver, "Cathedral" (1981). One of the most perfectly realized short stories ever, this is the tale of a guy who doesn't get it but learns to. This one has several of our favorite elements: blindness, communion, physical contact. Carver pretty much perfected the minimalist/realist short story, and most of his are worth a look.

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (1384). You'll have to read this one in a modern translation unless you've had training in Middle English, but it's wonderful in any language. Funny, heartbreaking, warm, ironic, everything a diverse group of people traveling together and telling stories are likely to be.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900). No one looked longer or harder into the human soul than Conrad, who found truth in extreme situations and alien landscapes.

Robert Coover, "The Gingerbread House" (1969). A short, ingenious reworking of "Hansel and Gretel."

Hart Crane, *The Bridge* (1930). A great American poem sequence, centered around the Brooklyn Bridge and the great national rivers.

Colin Dexter, *The Remorseful Day* (1999). Really, any of the Morse mysteries is a good choice. Dexter is great at representing loneliness and longing in his detective, and it culminates, naturally, in heart trouble.

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1853), *Great Expectations* (1861). Dickens is the most humane writer you'll ever read. He believes in people, even with all their faults, and he slings a great story, with the most memorable characters you'll meet anywhere.

E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (1975). Race relations and the clash of historical forces, all in a deceptively simple, almost cartoonish narrative.

Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (Justine, Balthazar, Mountolive, Clea) (1957-60). A brilliant realization of passion, intrigue, friendship, espionage, comedy, and pathos, in some of the most seductive prose in modern fiction. What happens when Europeans go to Egypt.

T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917), *The Waste Land* (1922). Eliot more than any other person changed the face of modern poetry. Formal experimentation, spiritual searching, social commentary.

Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (1986). The first of a number of novels set on a North Dakota Chippewa reservation, told as a series of linked short stories. Passion, pain, despair, hope, and courage run through all her books.

William Faulkner, *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Difficult but rewarding books that mix social history, modern psychology, and classical myths in narrative styles that can come from no one else.

Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1999). A comic tale of modern womanhood, replete with dieting, dating, angst, and self-help - and an intertextual companion to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (1741). The original Fielding/Jones comic novel. Any book about growing up that can still be funny after more than 250 years is doing something right.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), "Babylon Revisited" (1931). If modern American literature consisted of only one novel, and if that novel were *Gatsby*, it might be enough. What does the green light mean? What does *Gatsby's* dream represent? And what about the ash heaps and the eyes on the billboard?

Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (1915). The greatest novel about heart trouble ever written.

E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), *A Passage to India* (1924). Questions of geography, north and south, west and east, the caves of consciousness.

John Fowles, *The Magus* (1966), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Literature can be play, a game, and in Fowles it often is. In the first of these, a young egoist seems to be the audience for a series of private performances aimed at improving him. In the second, a man must choose between two women, but really between two ways of living his life. That's Fowles: always multiple levels going on. He also writes the most wonderful, evocative, seductive prose anywhere.

Robert Frost, "After Apple Picking," "The Woodpile," "Out, Out - " "Mowing" (1913)"16). Read all of him. I can't imagine poetry without him.

William H. Gass, "The Pedersen Kid," "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" (both 1968). These stories make clever use of landscape and weather and are wildly inventive - have you ever thought of high school basketball as a religious experience?

Henry Green, *Blindness* (1926), *Living* (1929), *Party Going* (1939), *Loving* (1945). The first of these really does deal with blindness in its metaphorical as well as literal meanings, and *Party Going* has travelers stranded in fog, so that's kind of like blindness. *Loving* is a kind of reworked fairy tale, beginning with "Once upon" and ending with "ever after"; who could resist. *Living*, aside from being a fabulous novel about all the classes involved with a British factory, is the only book I know in which "a," "an," and "the" hardly ever appear. It's a bizarre and wonderful stylistic experiment. Almost no one has read or even heard of Green, and that's too bad.

Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (1929). The first truly mythic American detective novel. And don't miss the film version.

Thomas Hardy, "The Three Strangers" (1883), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). You'll believe landscape and weather are characters after reading Hardy. You'll certainly believe that the universe is not indifferent to our suffering but takes an active hand in it.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), "The Man of Adamant" (1837), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). Hawthorne is perhaps the best American writer at exploring our symbolic consciousness, at finding the ways we displace suspicion and loneliness and envy. He just happens to use the Puritans to do it, but it's never really about Puritans.

Seamus Heaney, "Bogland" (1969), "Clearances" (1986), *North* (1975). One of our truly great poets, powerful on history and politics.

Ernest Hemingway, the stories from *In Our Time* (1925), especially "Big Two-Hearted River," "Indian Camp," and "The Battler," *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936), *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).

Homer, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* (ca. eighth century B.C.). The second of these is probably more accessible to modern readers, but they're both great. Every time I teach *The Iliad* I have students say, I had no idea this was such a great story.

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Scary, scary. Is it demonic possession or madness, and if the latter, on whose part? In any case, it's about the way humans consume each other, as is, in a very different way, his "Daisy Miller" (1878).

James Joyce, *Dubliners* (1914), *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916). First, the stories in *Dubliners*, of which I've made liberal use of two. "Araby" has so much going on in it in just a few pages: initiation, experience of the Fall, sight and blindness imagery, quest, sexual desire, generational hostility. "The Dead" is just about the most complete experience it's possible to have with a short story. Small wonder Joyce left stories behind after he wrote it: what could he do after that? As for *Portrait*, it's a great story of growth and development. Plus it has a child take a dunk in a cesspool (a "square ditch" in the parlance of the novel) and one of the most harrowing sermons ever committed to paper. Falls, rises, salvation and damnation, Oedipal conflicts, the search for self, all the things that make novels of childhood and adolescence so rewarding.

Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis" (1915), "A Hunger Artist" (1924), *The Trial* (1925). In the strange world of Kafka, characters are subjected to unreal occurrences that come to define and ultimately destroy them. It's much funnier than that sounds, though.

Barbara Kingsolver, *The Bean Trees* (1988), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998). Her novels resonate with the strength of primal patterns. Taylor Greer takes one of the great road trips into a new life in the first of these novels.

D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *Women in Love* (1920), "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" (1922), "The Fox" (1923), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (1930), "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1932). The king of symbolic thinking.

Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur* (late fifteenth century). Very old language, but writers and filmmakers continue to borrow from him. A great story.

Iris Murdoch, *A Severed Head* (1961), *The Unicorn* (1963), *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), *The Green Knight* (1992). Murdoch's novels follow familiar literary patterns, as the title of *The Green Knight* would suggest. Her imagination is symbolic, her logic ruthlessly rational (she was a trained philosopher, after all).

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1958). Yes, that one. No, it isn't a porn novel. But it is about things we might wish didn't exist, and it does have one of literature's creepier main characters. Who thinks he's normal.

Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (1978), *The Things They Carried* (1990). Besides being perhaps the two finest novels to come out of the Vietnam War, O'Brien's books give us lots of fodder for thought. A road trip of some eight thousand statute miles, to Paris no less, site of the peace talks. A beautiful native guide leading our white hero west. Alice in Wonderland parallels. Hemingway parallels. Symbolic implications enough to keep you busy for a month at your in-laws'.

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Mystery of the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), "The Raven" (1845), "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846). Poe gives us one of the first really free plays of the subconscious in fiction. His stories (and poems, for that matter) have the logic of our nightmares, the terror of thoughts we can't suppress or control, half a century and more before Sigmund Freud. He also gives us the first real detective story ("Rue Morgue"), becoming the model for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, and all who came after.

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965). My students sometimes struggle with this short novel, but they're usually too serious. If you go into it knowing it's cartoonish and very much from the sixties, you'll have a great time.

Theodore Roethke, "In Praise of Prairie" (1941), *The Far Field* (1964).

William Shakespeare (1564–1616). Take your pick. Here's mine: *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Henry V*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Tempest*, *A Winter's Tale*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*. And then there are the sonnets. Read all of them you can. Hey, they're only fourteen lines long. I particularly like sonnet 73, but there are lots of wonderful sonnets in there.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818). The monster isn't simply monstrous. He says something about his creator and about the society in which Victor Frankenstein lives.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (late fourteenth century). Not for beginners, I think. At least it wasn't for me when I was a beginner. Still, I learned to really enjoy young Gawain and his adventure. You might, too.

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone* (fifth century B.C.). These plays constitute a trilogy dealing with a doomed family. The first (which is the first really great detective story in Western literature) is about blindness and vision, the second about traveling on the road and the place where all roads end, and the third a meditation on power, loyalty to the state, and personal morality. These plays, now over twenty-four hundred years old, never go out of style.

Sir Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queen* (1596). Spenser may take some work and a fair bit of patience. But you'll come to love the Redcrosse Knight.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889). Stevenson does fascinating things with the possibilities of the divided self (the one with a good and an evil side), which was a subject of fascination in the nineteenth century.

Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897). What, you need a reason?

Dylan Thomas, "Fern Hill" (1946). A beautiful evocation of childhood/summer/life and everything that lives and dies.

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Poor Huck has come under attack in recent decades, and yes, it does have that racist word in it (not surprising in a work depicting a racist society), but Huck Finn also has more sheer humanity than any three books I can think of. And it's one of the great road/buddy stories of all time, even if the road is soggy.

Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982). Tyler has a number of wonderful novels, including *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), but this one really works for my money.

John Updike, "A&P" (1962). I don't really use his story when I create my quest to the grocery, but his is a great little story.

Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (1990). The exploits of a Caribbean fishing community, paralleling events from Homer's two great epics. Fascinating stuff.

Fay Weldon, *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1988). A delightful novel, comic and sad and magical, with just the right lightness of touch.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Explorations of consciousness, family dynamics, and modern life in luminous, subtle prose.

William Butler Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1892), "Easter 1916" (1916), "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1917). Or any of a hundred others. A medievalist professor of mine once said that he believed Yeats was the greatest poet in the English language. If we could only have one, he'd be my choice.

Fairy Tales We Can't Live Without

"Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," "Hansel and Gretel," "Rapunzel," "Rumpelstiltskin." See also later uses of these tales in Angela Carter and Robert Coover.

Movies to Read

Citizen Kane (1941). I'm not sure this is a film to watch, but you sure can read it.

The Gold Rush (1925), *Modern Times* (1936). Charlie Chaplin is the greatest film comedian ever. Accept no substitutes. His little tramp is a great invention.

Notorious (1946), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960). Somebody's always copying Hitchcock. Meet the original.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000) Not only a reworking of The Odyssey but an excellent road/buddy film with a great American sound track.

Pale Rider (1985). Clint Eastwood's fullest treatment of his mythic avenging-angel hero.

Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984), Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (1989). Great quest stories. You know when you're searching for the Lost Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail that you're dealing with quests. Take away Indy's leather jacket, fedora, and whip and give him chain mail, helmet, and lance and see if he doesn't look considerably like Sir Gawain.

Shane (1953). Without which, no Pale Rider.

Stagecoach (1939). Its handling of Native Americans doesn't wear well, but this is a great story of sin and redemption and second chances. And chase scenes.

Star Wars (1977), The Empire Strikes Back (1981), Return of the Jedi (1983). George Lucas is a great student of Joseph Campbell's theories of the hero (in, among other works, The Hero with a Thousand Faces), and the trilogy does a great job of showing us types of heroes and villains. If you know the Arthurian legends, so much the better. Personally I don't care if you learn anything about all that from the films or not; they're so much fun you deserve to see them. Repeatedly.

Tom Jones (1963). The Tony Richardson film starring Albert Finney - accept no substitutes. This has the one and only eating scene I've ever seen that can make me blush. The film, and Henry Fielding's eighteenth-century novel, have much to recommend them beyond that one scene. The story of the Rake's Progress - the growth and development of the bad boy - is a classic, and this one is very funny.

Secondary Sources

There are a great many books that will help you become a better reader and interpreter of literature. These suggestions are brief, arbitrary, and highly incomplete.

M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (1957). As the name suggests, this is not a book to read but one to refer to. Abrams covers hundreds of literary terms, movements, and concepts, and the book has been a standard for decades.

John Ciardi, How Does a Poem Mean? (1961). Since it first appeared, Ciardi's book has taught tens of thousands of us how to think about the special way poems convey what they have to say. As a poet himself and a translator of Dante, he knew something about the subject.

E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel. Although it was published in 1927, this book remains a great discussion of the novel and its constituent elements by one of its outstanding practitioners.

Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (1957). You've been getting watered-down Frye throughout this book. You might find the original interesting. Frye is one of the first critics to conceive of literature as a single, organically related whole, with an overarching framework by which we can understand it. Even when you don't agree with him, he's a fascinating, humane thinker.

William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970). Another primarily theoretical work, this book discusses how we work on fiction and how it works on us. Gass introduces the term “metafiction” here.

David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (1992). Lodge, an important postmodern British novelist and critic, wrote the essays in this collection in a newspaper column. They’re fascinating, brief, easy to comprehend, and filled with really fine illustrative examples.

Robert Pinsky, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (2000). The former American poet laureate can make you want to fall in love with poetry even if you didn’t know you wanted to. He also provides valuable insights into understanding poetry.

Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. Another important reference book. If you want to know something about poetry, look in here.

Master Class

If you want to put together the total reading experience, here you go. These works will give you a chance to use all your newfound skills and come up with inventive and insightful ways of seeing them. Once you learn what these four novels can teach you, you won’t need more advice. There’s nothing exclusive to these four, by the way. Any of perhaps a hundred novels, long poems, and plays could let you apply the whole panoply of newly acquired skills. I just happen to love these.

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861). Life, death, love, hate, dashed hopes, revenge, bitterness, redemption, suffering, graveyards, fens, scary lawyers, criminals, crazy old women, cadaverous wedding cakes. This book has everything except spontaneous human combustion (that’s in *Bleak House* – really). Now, how can you not read it?

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922). Don’t get me started. First, the obvious: *Ulysses* is not for beginners. When you feel you’ve become a graduate reader, go there. My undergraduates get through it, but they struggle, even with a good deal of help. Hey, it’s difficult. On the other hand, I feel, as do a lot of folks, that it’s the most rewarding read there is.

Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970). This novel should have a label: “Warning: Symbolism spoken here.” One character survives both the firing squad and a suicide attempt, and he fathers forty-seven sons by forty-seven women, all the sons bearing his name and all killed by his enemies on a single night. Do you think that means something?

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977). I’ve said so much throughout this book, there’s really nothing left, except read it.