

How to Read Literature Like a Professor Study Guide

How to Read Literature Like a Professor by Thomas C. Foster

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Summary

“How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines, Second Edition” is a work of nonfiction by Thomas C. Foster aimed at helping people to read more effectively, and to get a better experience out of reading. Foster is, himself, a professor of English at the University of Michigan-Flint, where he encounters various kinds of college students, that are of the regular age, and who are in their thirties and beyond returning for one reason or another. It is for them the book is primarily written, though the book has its fair share of viewers as young as those in high school, which Foster says he appreciates very much.

There are several key concepts and principles that Foster sets up for his guide to literature. Among these is that no work of literature is wholly original, because every work – intentionally or not –borrows from a previous work. But rather than being a negative thing, this is a very positive thing, for it can deepen a work and make it more relatable for the reader, for it speaks to previous experience, both in human nature and in literature. Another key concept to understanding literature is to look for symbols and symbolism in a text. For example, rain may have more to do with a cleansing of the soul than merely being a weather event. More often than not, things that seem like they should be symbols usually are. Foster encourages readers to always consider something a symbol, until it can be understood that it is, or is not.

Foster does state, however, that things are not always symbols. For example, a blind man might not be metaphorical for the inability to see the truth, but he also might just be a blind man walking down the street in passing. Likewise, the presence of symbolism or references to other literature should not detract the reader from understanding the overall plot or story. Even badly-written or formed stories can have symbolism, Foster cautions. But when it comes to reading, reading is a very personal thing, and belongs totally to the reader. It is up to the reader to draw conclusions, make judgments, and interpret in the end. Foster stresses that this process should be enjoyed, not agonized over.



Preface - Chapter 4

Summary

Preface – Thomas C. Foster contends that books should end with question marks instead of periods because writers have no idea what will happen to their books after they are published. He gives the examples of Herman Melville and F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose most famous books (Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" and Melville's "Moby Dick") were panned by readers upon release, though they are revered now. All writers hope for some audience, and Foster explains he is writing for the reader who has decided to return to college in his or her late thirties, or who seeks a better understanding of literature.

He has learned three lessons from the older college students that he teaches. First, never assume anything about their background experience in reading. Second, clear explanations are vital in understanding literature. Third, teach the rules, and then stand aside. Foster makes these things plain in the first edition of his book, and recounts how well-received it was, but that it required a second-edition to fix a few problems, remove unneeded sections (such as one on poetry) and to update examples using more recent publications. He also talks about how other teachers and professors go above and beyond to get their students interested in reading, especially in high school, where he has seen teachers have students make video projects based on the books, for example. He is especially thankful for high school teachers utilizing his book in the process. Foster, though a professor himself, never assigns his own book in class, for nearly all of what he teaches is contained therein. Foster is also grateful for the high school students who read his book, and aspire to keep reading and writing beyond the book.

Introduction – Foster begins with a discussion of Mr. Lindner, the white man who encourages the first black family in the neighborhood, the Youngers, to leave by offering them money in Lorraine Hansberry's play, "A Raisin in the Sun". Foster explains that Lindner represents not only racism, but the Devil in a Faustian bargain: Lindner offers the Youngers money, which they need, but it will compromise their pride and self-respect to stay and fight it out in a neighborhood that doesn't want them. The Youngers refuse the bargain, unlike in other tellings of Faust, from Marlowe's to Stephen Vincent Benet's.

Foster explains that many students often stare in disbelief at the analogies that can be made, but that literary language has rules that govern meaning. Stories and novels have conventions that range from types of characters, to plot rhythms, to chapter structures, and points of view limitations. Poems and plays have these conventions, too, and they often cross genre lines. To learn these languages, all it takes is practice.

What separates professorial readers from everyone else, Foster explains, is a combination of memory, knowing symbols, and knowing patterns. For example, Foster remembers that Clint Eastwood's 1985 film "Pale Rider" has a lot in common with the



1953 film, "Shane". When professorial readers read, they are always looking for things that could be symbols, metaphors, analogies, and so on. For example, the monster Grendel in "Beowulf" isn't just a monster, but can symbolize how the universe seems to work against human existence, or the dark side of human nature which can only be overcome by a better quality within. Pattern also matters. People who read "Dr. Zhivago" are often dragged down by there being so many characters and details, but experienced readers will find patterns and know what to look for. Foster wants his students to not only be able to agree that Lindner is the Devil, but to arrive at that conclusion on their own.

Chapter 1 – Foster speaks about the idea of quests in literature in this chapter. All quests have heroes, princesses, dangers, evil knights, and other such things. Structurally, he explains, there are five things that make up a quest: A person to make the quest, a place to go, a stated reason to get there, challenges on the way, and a real reason to make the quest. The real reason is never the stated reason, Foster contends. The real reason for a quest is always for self-knowledge. The quest is educational, and the quester is usually very young who has something, or a lot, to learn.

Foster uses the example of Thomas Pynchon's 1965 novel of quest, "The Crying of Lot 49". He breaks down the novel structurally. A young woman is the quester; she is going not only to Southern California, but into her memory as well; she is going because she is the executor of the will of her former lover; goes through dangerous neighborhoods, meets dangerous people, and becomes involved in a possible post office conspiracy; and the true reason for her quest is to learn that she does not need to rely on men and gives up on easy answers. The novel, Foster agrees, might be weird, but it is structurally sound –just like "Huckleberry Finn", "Lord of the Rings", and "Star Wars". Not all trips are quests, however, Foster explains. But readers will never know without at least paying attention.

Chapter 2 – Foster speaks about the importance of meals and food in this chapter. He begins the novel with a joke about Sigmund Freud loving cigars, and one of his students making a point about the phallic shape of cigars. Freud responds that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. When it comes to eating meals, more often than not, a meal is not just a meal, Foster says, because whenever people get together to eat or drink, it is communion, an act of peaceful togetherness. It is usually done only with people that are very comfortable with each other, and so creates a sense of community.

Foster brings up the example of Henry Fielding's 1749 novel, "Tom Jones", in which Tom and his lady, Mrs. Waters, eat at an inn. Their meal becomes representative of sex, which cannot be graphically discussed in acceptable literature of the time, or even in the 1963 film version. Foster also includes the example of Raymond Carver's 1981 story "Cathedral", in which a bigoted man moves past his prejudices to allowing a blind man to put a hand on his own, and this is done through a meal. The narrator sees normalcy in the way the blind man eats, and so realizes they have something in common.

Foster also notes that dinners that are interrupted or become the source for evil plotting lead to revulsion on the part of the reader, for an act of communion has been violated by



something not naturally a part of it. He also gives the examples of Anne Tyler's 1982 novel "Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant", in which the only time the children of a mother are all fully assembled for a family dinner is to commemorate the life of the other upon her death; and James Joyce's 1914 short story, "The Dead", during which time the act of communion through eating reminds Gabriel Conroy, the main character, that he is not superior to everyone else. The story ends with snowfall, covering everything, including the dead. The snow, Foster explains, is death, ultimately covering everything in the end, but what matters is what comes before death, which is life.

Chapter 3 – Foster speaks about monsters, horror, and the undead in this chapter. He begins with a discussion about Bram Stoker's 1897 novel "Dracula", in which an older but attractive vampire seduces a young, virginal woman, steals her innocence, and leaves others to deal with the consequences. There is more to Dracula than just horror, it is revealed. The same is true of real literary ghosts, who have purpose and reason for haunting people. For example, the ghost of Hamlet's father isn't out to scare people, but to point out that something is very wrong in the royal house. An ethical lesson forms the reason for Marley's ghost in Charles Dickens's 1843 novel, "A Christmas Carol". Indeed, many Victorian writers use ghosts and horror to mask discussions about sex and other taboo subjects. Indeed, even in the modern day, such as with Stephenie Meyer's 2005 novel "Twilight", the importance of sexual restraint is played out through vampirism and fighting the urge to feed on a non-vampire.

Foster proposes that not all ghosts and vampires are never only about ghosts and vampires – and some ghosts and vampires do not appear in clearly visible forms. For example, in the Henry James 1898 novella, "Turn of the Screw", in which a governess believes an evil spirit is trying to possess the children in her care. Depending on the point of view of the reader, the governess is crazy, or the ghost is real, or both, or neither. It can be suggested the novel criticizes parental neglect, too. A vampire never appears in the 1878 short story "Daisy Miller", but the misuse of a young, innocent American girl by older Europeans of a different generation is clearly vampiric in nature. Foster lists other novels and stories through the 1960s in which similar patterns emerge. He goes on to conclude that there are stories and novels where vampires and ghosts are only cheap thrills, and nothing more, and most of these works have no staying power.

Chapter 4 – Foster explains in this chapter that there is no such thing as a wholly original work of literature. For example, one of Foster's favorite novels, Tim O'Brien's 1978 work "Going After Cacciato" involves the character Paul Berlin falling through a hole in the road on the ground, which summons to mind Lewis Carroll's 1865 novel "Alice in Wonderland". Historic works find their way into newer works to help give them shape and purpose, Foster reveals. References and similarities to other works are very important. When this happens, reading becomes much more than reading, but understanding. When Paul Berlin falls through the hole, the reader understands that there is something important about it, based on the similarity to Alice. This can give multiple meanings to a text, and the text becomes more alive as a result, for there is something of a dialogue occurring between newer and older works. Foster explains that it is alright not to pick up on these references, because at the end of the day, a good



story will still be a good story, and a bad story won't be able to stand, even with references to others. No one has read everything, so it is impossible to know everything and make every possible reference, but it is possible to make many, with effort.

Analysis

Thomas C. Foster, a professor of English at the University of Michigan-Flint, explains that he has written his book for readers who want a deeper and more rewarding reading experience. While the book is primarily aimed towards thirty-somethings and an older audience, a large portion of his readership with the first edition of the book included high school students, and Foster stresses his gratitude and appreciation for all the people who are reading his book. The important point Foster makes early on is that reading is never just reading, just as when writers write, writing is never just writing. There is always something deeper at work, and there is something deeper beneath the surface of what is being read that needs to be understood, and his book will offer a guide of sorts to figuring that out. Two of the most important principles that Foster imparts are that all literature borrows from other literature, intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly.

Foster illustrates this point with his very first example by way of the play "A Raisin in the Sun". On its surface, the play is about a black family living in a white neighborhood that doesn't want them there. This is exemplified by Mr. Lindner, who offers the family money to move away. The family needs the money badly, but they will compromise their own moral integrity by accepting the money to move away because they are black. Foster says there is more at work than first meets the eye. Lindner, it turns out, is a metaphor for the Devil, and the bargain is Faustian, referencing the story of Faust, a staple in the Western canon of literature. The referencing of previous literature is both normal and common in literature the world over. This extends to other art forms as well, from poetry to film.

Foster goes on to explain that all literature has various things in common, from referencing other literature to patterns and the use of symbols. For example, there is always a journey that is undertaken in literature –a quest of some kind, an end goal. A quest doesn't have to be an epic journey to be a quest, but can be something as simple as a trip to the store, or a dinner with friends. Likewise, a trip doesn't have to be a quest, proper. Sometimes a trip to the store is only a trip to the store. Foster then moves into the use of symbols, symbolism, and metaphors, which will form much of the rest of the novel. For example, ghosts are usually never only ghosts or meant for horror, but may have a deeper reason for their haunting, such as in the case of the ghost of Hamlet's father.



Vocabulary

inconceivable, calamity, idiosyncratic, orthography, anomalies, milquetoast, inherently, corollaries, predisposition, simultaneously, apocryphal, liturgical, ravenously, prepositions, incarnations



Chapters 5 - 11

Summary

Chapter 5 – Foster explains how frequently Shakespeare pops up again and again in culture back through the centuries. Even in the modern era, Shakespeare is frequently referenced or reformatted, from the Ronald Reagan-hosted Wild West retelling of “Taming of the Shrew” to the “Romeo and Juliet” retellings in “West Side Story” and the modern day setting in the Leonard DiCaprio version of the 1990s. In the 1991 novel “A Thousand Acres”, Jane Smiley reformats “King Lear”. A lot of lines from Shakespeare’s plays have become common-sense dictums and phrases used in daily conversations and pop culture, such as “To thine own self be true” and “To be, or not to be, that is the question.” Quoting Shakespeare does sound smart, Foster consents, but there is more to it than that. Shakespeare’s works seem to fit in all times and in all places and in all situations. He is universally known, and his writing is beautifully done. For example, Athol Fugard’s 1982 play “Master Harold... and the Boys” draws on Shakespeare to confront apartheid in South Africa. Because of this, understanding of both Fugard and Shakespeare becomes deeper and stronger.

Chapter 6 – Foster explains that, apart from Shakespeare, the Bible is frequently and heavily referenced in literature and other forms of culture. In Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel “Beloved”, four white men on horses ride to where escaped slave Sethe is hiding with her children in Ohio. The reference to Judgment and the End Times is clear. Like Shakespeare, the Bible becomes relevant in all times and in all places and situations. John Milton borrowed heavily from the Bible in writing “Paradise Lost”. Many writers were deeply religious or involved in religion, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was a Unitarian minister, while John Donne was an Anglican minister. T.S. Eliot uses much of the Bible in his poem “Four Quartets”, and in “The Waste Land” references Christ joining the disciples on the journey to Emmaus. Others have written ironically about religion, such as Salman Rushdie’s “The Satanic Verses”. The use of Biblical names in stories, such as Rebecca, Jacob, Joseph, and Mary –all have important meaning, especially based on their lives in the Bible, such as in Toni Morrison’s 1977 novel, “Song of Solomon”. Even brief Biblical allusions have tremendous power and importance, such as the trembling cup at the end of James Baldwin’s 1957 story “Sonny’s Blues”, in which two brothers are reunited. The cup of trembling proves to be uncertain but hopeful, and references Isaiah 51:17, which speaks of sons who have lost their way, and may not recover.

Chapter 7 – Foster discusses how writers often decide on referencing children’s literature for its universality as well. For example, a writer may believe Homer’s “Illiad” is too arcane and unknown to draw upon, but “Alice in Wonderland” or the Narnia novels are not, for they are known of, even if they have not been read. Often, fairy tales are used in irony. Angela Carter uses fairy tales in feminist revision in her 1979 novel “The Bloody Chamber”. In many instances, writers will only borrow parts, or elements, of a fairy tale to use in their own stories. The fairy tale of “Hansel and Gretel” is a perfect



example, for the theme of lost children trying to find their way literally or figuratively is very strong in the present day and age.

Chapter 8 – Foster explains the importance of myth in creating literature in this chapter. He points out that myth can be true or not. Myth, he says, is a body of story that matters, that myth is a story that is used to explain humankind and human nature in ways that other things – such as chemistry and philosophy – cannot. Native American writing in the late 1900s borrows heavily from tribal myth, for example. Wagner borrowed heavily from German tribal myths. Writers throughout history have borrowed from the Greeks and Romans, especially the story of Helen of Troy. Homer's characters all have human struggles: Hector wants to protect his family. Achilles is trying to remain faithful and have faith. Odysseus is struggling to return home. Each of these aspects of the human condition. These are all made apparent, for example, in Rick Riordan's recent "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" series.

Chapter 9 – Foster discusses the use of weather in this chapter. He begins with one of the most famous lines in the English language, "It was a dark and stormy night." Written by Victorian popular novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton to begin a novel, the importance of weather is that it is usually never just weather. Rain, for example, can be a plot device that forces people together or influences events. It can be symbolic as well, being a physical act of being washed clean spiritually, or it can be restorative. It can also be used ironically. In Ernest Hemingway's 1929 novel, "A Farewell to Arms", the main characters heads out into a spring rain following the death of the woman he loves in childbirth. Snow, like rain, can be cleansing or ironic, and Foster notes that just about anything can be done with snow. Fog can also be used to great effect, and often suggests distortion, the inability to think or see clearly, or becomes representative of things that are unclear.

Chapter 10 – Foster discusses heroes and their consequences in this chapter. Heroes aren't the only ones to be affected by the actions of the hero, but friends, family, supporters, allies, and loved ones are also made to bear the burden of the hero's actions. For example, in "The Illiad", Hector names charioteers to serve him, and they always die quickly in his service. The important thing to remember, Foster elaborates, is that all literature ultimately is character-based. "The Illiad", rather than being about the entire ten-year Trojan War, manages to impress upon the reader the enormity of the conflict by examining the lives and actions of a few characters over 53 days. Here, the actions of a few individuals affect the lives of thousands. In many novels, the death of the best friend or closest confidante of the hero leads to revenge.

Foster cautions readers, however, not to become emotionally involved with characters, for they are only characters. Motives for the creation of characters should not be considered. If something isn't in the text, it does not exist, Foster explains. Something not present in the text that forms the author's motive for creation is a concern for scholars; readers should not be concerned with motive, but with meaning in the text. Readers care about characters because they can't help themselves, but need to remember that characters are created from imagination. They are, to some degree, representations of people, but not actually people. They are only given as much



realness as writers need to let them do what they are created for. The reasons for this include the need for focus, limitations on length, and so on. Nevertheless, in recent years, there have been a slew of novels about minor characters in classic works of fiction, such as “Finn” by John Clinch, published in 2007, which is about Huckleberry Finn’s father.

Interlude – In this chapter, Foster explains that yes, writers do have many things going on in their minds when they are writing. Reading takes a few minutes; writing can take days, even years. Writing isn’t just writing, but also thinking and composing. It is a very intentional action.

Chapter 11 – Foster talks about violence in this chapter. He begins once more with Sethe, the escaped slave who decides to kill her children rather than see them enslaved. She only manages to kill one child. In literature, violence can have many meanings, from the symbolic and metaphorical to the allegorical. In real life, violence is violence, whereas in literature, violence usually has a deeper meaning. Robert Frost’s 1916 poem “Out, Out –” deals with death lurking around every corner in everyday farm tasks, and death in the poem reflects the uncaring attitude of the universe to human existence. The title of the story comes from a line in Macbeth (“Out, out, brief candle”) which references the shortness and frailty of human life. Meanwhile, John Milton’s 1637 “Lycidas” shows a nature distraught over death.

Foster explains that there are two kinds of violence in literature. There is specific injury from one character to another, or on themselves, such as shootings, stabbings, poisonings, etc.; and there is narrative violence which causes harm in general, such as violence in the interest of plot advancement. In a murder mystery, there is general harm that befalls the victim to advance the plot in which the detective solves the crime. Of the specific kind, Sethe’s violence toward her child is repulsive on the surface, but has a far deeper meaning that draws on the horrors and living death that is slavery. William Faulkner’s novels are full of violence, from rape to murder to incest. In his 1942 novel “Go Down Moses”, a slave-owner has a daughter with a slave, Eunice, and then impregnates their daughter. Eunice responds by killing herself, an act that is both personal and literal, but symbolic of the horrifying reality of slavery. General harm introduced into a novel by a writer always has a deeper meaning: there is a reason for an accident in the novel, a meaning behind the death of a character.

Analysis

Continuing on with his explanation that all literature references other literature, Foster reveals that the most referenced books and literature consist of Shakespeare, the Bible, children’s fairy tales, and myth (both invented mythology, and the true kind of myth that explains humankind and human nature). Shakespeare and the Bible are often quoted, for example, because they deal with all situations in all times and in all places, because they carry such deep meanings, and because there is a strong level of intelligence in being able to accurately incorporate them into writing. For example, the short story



“Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin takes on a far greater meaning and deeper significance when its Biblical imagery is correctly understood and interpreted.

One such act in literature that is often misunderstood or misinterpreted is that of violence. Foster provides the example of Sethe killing her child rather than allowing her child to become a slave –for that is a fate far worse than death. The same is true of Eunice in the novel “Go Down Moses” by William Faulkner. Each act of violence is a direct response to causes rooted in the horrors of slavery, and prove to be symbolic acts as a result with far-reaching implications for the plot of the stories and the characters involved in them.

Foster moves on to discuss characters and their importance, especially the hero of each story. Readers often forget that events shape the lives not only of heroes, but those associated with them in some form or another. They are hurt, injured, killed, and can suffer right along with the heroes. But no matter how much readers may relate to characters and empathize with them, readers must remember to be objective as well, for characters are not real. The motives behind characters and plots are not concerns for the reader (this is important because it will be dealt with in the final chapters of the book), but the plot itself matters. By not maintaining some level of distance from the work, a reader may not be able to see things objectively or symbolically, which is essential to a deeper reading experience.

Vocabulary

exquisite, ubiquity, rhetoric, antecedents, metonymically, exuberance, arduous, simulacra, pithy



Chapters 12-18

Summary

Chapter 12 – In this chapter, Foster speaks to the importance of symbols and the forms they take. Foster explains that questions on whether or not something is a symbol are the most common kinds of questions he gets in class. Symbols cannot be reduced to meaning only one thing. A white flag, for example, means surrender or coming-in-peace. If a symbol has only one meaning, then it is not a symbol, but allegory. In an allegory, one thing stands for one other thing. For example, “Animal Farm”, George Orwell’s 1945 novel is clear in its representation of Communism. For a symbol, Foster provides the 1924 example of E.M. Forster’s “A Passage to India”, in which caves can mean many things. Plato’s famous philosophical cave has to do with human perception and understanding, while to early man, caves are a source of shelter and safety. Forster’s caves can represent facing down the void, facing down nothingness, a breach of truth, or the caves may be symbolic of secrets, the secret being their true meaning. Rivers, for example, can mean different things to different writers. For Mark Twain, rivers are a symbol of both safety and danger. For Hart Crane, rivers are symbolic of connection between two extremes, or two distant points. For T. S. Eliot, rivers are polluted symbols of the decay of man. Symbols are not always images or objects, but can also be events and actions. For example, Robert Frost’s poem “Mowing” from 1913 is about a field being mown with a scythe –an act which is symbolic of hard work in general, or the solitariness of life.

Chapter 13 – Foster speaks about politics and political meaning in literature in this chapter. He begins with the 1843 Charles Dickens novel “A Christmas Carol”. On the surface, it is about goodwill toward other men and generosity and greed. Dickens critiques the Malthusian political idea that helping the poor, and increasing food production to help them, will only encourage poor people to reproduce faster. Scrooge becomes an embodiment of that point of view, which Dickens dispenses with. Foster explains that politically-based novels usually don’t stay around for long, if at all. He references the leftwing plays of the 1930s, and Ezra Pound’s leftwing poetry as examples of political literature that has no staying power. Foster explains that nearly all writing is political on some level. D. H. Lawrence’s characters are individuals, and stand in contrast to the conventions of their times. Edgar Allan Poe’s work, for all its horror, is decidedly pro-American in nature, often critiquing the Old World and its conventions. Because writers tend to be interested in the world around them, the things that make up that world include politics, and so are referenced in the written word in some way.

Chapter 14 – Foster talks about the influence of Christianity on literature in this chapter. Foster explains that the United States is a Christian culture, and some knowledge of Christianity –even for non-Christians – is essential, including when it comes to literature. Foster provides a list of attributes of Jesus Christ, from being crucified to being very forgiving to His goal of redeeming the world. As such, many characters in literature become Christ-like, or Christ figures, having gone through suffering for a greater reason



or purpose. For example, Hemingway's 1952 novel "The Old Man and the Sea" makes Santiago, the old fisherman, into a Christ-like figure in his journey of suffering and seeking hope. A Christ figure does not need to resemble Christ in every way, however. If there is some similarity between the figure and Christ, there is a basis for drawing the comparison. Usually, the creation of a Christ-like character indicates the writer has some greater point to make, as did Christ through the greatest sacrifice possible.

Chapter 15 – Foster deals with flight in this chapter. Flight has been considered and experimented with since the earliest times, such as in the Greek story of Icarus. Human beings don't fly, but when characters do, it means something. Toni Morrison's novel "Song of Solomon" ends with two individuals leaping at each other in midair, knowing only one will survive –and this references the myth of flying Africans. Flight is usually freedom, at least psychologically if not physically. Sometimes, irony becomes apparent, such as in Angela Carter's 1984 novel "Nights at the Circus". Her heroine, Fevvers, is blessed by the ability of flight for she has wings, but she is also imprisoned in a circus because of them. Metaphorical flight is also important, especially in James Joyce's 1916 novel "Portrait of the Artist as a young Man", in which the main character feels hemmed in by life, but the images and references to flight appear throughout the later part of the novel, including the girl he compares to a bird. Flight for the characters may not be possible, but their need to escape from their lives is.

Chapter 16 – In this chapter, Foster discusses how much of literature is about sex. This is traced to Sigmund Freud's 1900 work "The Interpretation of Dreams" in which he relegates everything to sexuality: tall buildings are subconscious reflections of male sexuality, while rolling landscapes have to do with female sexuality, for example. In literature, actions, events, and objects often stand in for sex and sexual activity. In the 1941 film "The Maltese Falcon" with Humphrey Bogart, shots of billowing curtains in a window and waves crashing ashore are representative of sexual activity that has been undertaken off-camera. In the 1985 short story "Janus" by Ann Beattie, in which the main character, a young married woman, has an affair, the result of which is a gift from the man in the form of a bowl. The woman obsesses over the bowl, and will not allow her husband to put keys in the bowl, which becomes representative of her own sexual autonomy, and her human freedom as well. Using stand-ins for sex is done for various reasons. Charles Dickens did it to make his writing more family-appropriate. Others have done it because the power of suggestion can be greater than the actual act.

Chapter 17 – Foster explains that the actual act of sex in literature is rare. It is rare because the act itself is very limited to what can be done. If a writer does commit to a sex scene, chances are the sex itself is symbolic of something else. When sex is only sex, it is pornography, Foster reveals. The sex scene in the 1969 novel "The French Lieutenant's Woman" is meant to represent any number of things in its Victorian setting –from the unpreparedness of Victorians for sex to making a statement about how brief sex is, and how lasting its consequences are. Another interpretation suggests that the sex scene is emblematic of the future, which may be wanted, but the characters are not quite ready for. Sex can be a very bad thing, as is in the case of rape in the 1962 novel "A Clockwork Orange" by Anthony Burgess, or Vladimir Nabokov's 1958 novel "Lolita".



Other times, the illustration of sex has to do with independence and self-control, as in the case of Angela Carter's last novel, "Wise Children".

Chapter 18 – Foster deals with water and drowning in this chapter. When characters get wet, drown, or don't drown, there are reasons why. For example, a character who falls in the water and is rescued may be an act symbolic of good fortune or indebtedness, while a character who doesn't drown but grabs onto a piece of driftwood may mean good luck and serendipity. In Judith Guest's 1976 novel "Ordinary People", where two brothers have their boat swamped in a storm on Lake Michigan. The stronger of the two dies, while the weaker, Conrad, survives. He is plagued by survivor's guilt, and is essentially a changed man because of surviving the storm. He is reborn in a way. Baptism, religiously and literarily, offers the same symbolism: being reborn. In Toni Morrison's "Beloved", Sethe crosses a river and gets wet, and when she reemerges, she is in Ohio, where slavery, at least, does not exist. She has a new life and is reborn. In some novels, baptism may be both a religious and figurative thing, as the character may seek to become a follower of Christ, but also seeks to start his or her life over again. In other ways, water can be symbolic of middle passage between life and death, such as with the Greek underworld and the River Styx.

Analysis

Foster continues with his explanation of symbols and symbolism, and makes an aside to tackle a very important question he receives, as to whether or not something is, or is not actually, a symbol. He makes an important distinction about symbols, in that they cannot be reduced to one thing only. White flags, for example, mean both surrender and peace. For different authors and in different plots and settings, this is the case. For some, rivers are symbolic of connecting two points, and for others, rivers may come to symbolize decay. This can best be interpreted by what is in the text, what surrounds the symbol. A river full of the refuse of man, and full of ruins, will not be symbolic of cleansing, for example. He also speaks to the influence of Jesus Christ on literature, on how many heroes and characters will become Christ-like in their struggles and the sacrifices that they make –and this can be seen simply by having a very basic knowledge of Christianity.

Foster also contends that a basic knowledge of politics helps, for many novels that might not appear political, have underlying political sentiments or statements. He explains that very few overtly political novels ever do well or stay around for long, for their relevance is often lost. For example, few would ever suspect the political critique Charles Dickens makes of Malthus in "A Christmas Carol", confronting the Malthusian view that helping the poor encourages the poor to reproduce faster.

Additionally, another thing that is rarely shown in novels, directly, is sex. While sex may be hinted at, stated as having happened, or may occur by way of symbolism, actual sex itself is rarely ever portrayed for a variety of reasons. It is a straightforward act and not always easy to put into words, as well as the fact the surrounding circumstances – leading up to, and following sex –are what makes the sex itself matter, not the sex in



and of itself. When sex itself is shown, more than likely, sex is never just about sex – there is a deeper meaning to the act and the description of the act, such as in “The French Lieutenant’s Woman”, which Foster uses to make his point by explaining that there are a variety of interpretations, including the old ways confronting the new, and the old being unable to handle the new.

Two other incredibly important symbols that Foster deals with in these chapters are water and flight. Water tends to symbolize cleansing and rebirth more so than any other way (though it is not the only thing water can symbolize), and Foster provides varied examples to demonstrate his point, from near drownings and beginning one’s life anew to crossing the river to leave an old life behind, and start over again. Flight, the other incredibly important symbol that Foster discusses more often than not symbolizes freedom and flight, such as in the case of Toni Morrison’s novel “Song of Solomon”. In other situations, flight can be ironic, such as in the case of Angela Carter’s “Nights at the Circus”.

Vocabulary

inventiveness, promulgated, destitute, autonomy, inhibiting, inevitability, ruminate, prurient, luridly



Chapters 19-25

Summary

Chapter 19 – In this chapter, Foster talks about the importance of locations and settings. Readers should always consider the implications of a novel's setting, whether real, imagined, or somewhere in between. William Faulkner set the majority of his novels in the state of Mississippi, but in a fictional county called Yoknapatawpha. Geography is essential to plots, and where characters may live, die, meet someone, or do something, factors heavily into things. The Mississippi River proves essential in "Huckleberry Finn" as does Cuba in "The Old Man and the Sea". The 1974 historical novel "Napoleon Symphony" by Anthony Burgess details that Napoleon's failure to conquer Russia had much to do with the inhospitable winter climate. Edgar Allan Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" deals with a bleak and dying landscape, which is representative of the dying family that lives on it. Lawrence Durrell's novel "The Alexandria Quartet" revolves around northern Europeans in Egypt, and how the change in location leads to a dramatic change in their sexual behavior. Even the geography of the landscape itself matters, from mountains to marshes. In the novel "Women in Love" by D. H. Lawrence, four characters, bored of the sea-level landscape of England, go to the mountains, where they find an inhospitable climate. The characters with humanity do not stay long; those with little or none stay longer.

Chapter 20 – Foster deals with seasons in this chapter. Shakespeare relies heavily on seasons, while the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible says that, to everything there is a season. The fictionalized version of King Richard III is as miserable as winter in Shakespeare's "Richard III". Henry James, in his novella "Daisy Miller", uses seasons to great effect, where a younger girl, Daisy Miller (Daisy being a spring flower) tries to win the affections of a much older man, Frederic Winterbourne (being older in the winter of his life). W. H. Auden's 1940 elegy, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", uses the winter to underscore the death of Yeats, and how the life of the world seems to have gone with him. The seasons can also reflect on the plot. For example, summer may be liberating, or the heat may be stifling. The change of seasons can represent rebirth, as a character will make changes in his or her life as the season changes. Christianity traditionally places the birth of Jesus – an event of hope and light – on December 25, during the harshest season, and the Crucifixion and Resurrection in spring, when winter has ended.

Interlude – There is only one story, Foster explains, and all writers always return to it. The one story is about anything and everything. Pure originality is impossible. An Egyptian scroll, dating to 4,500 years ago, complains that there is no such thing as original writing or stories anymore. However, stories that echo other stories may obtain a sense of depth and relevance they might not otherwise have had, Foster reveals. Something completely original would be unfamiliar and unrelatable to readers. Jack Kerouac did heavy reading of quest tales before publishing "On the Road". Everything



owes to archetypes, or patterns, of previous stories, and the originals can never be found. Every story is a variation of a previous story, and there is only one story.

Chapter 21 – Foster discusses the importance of physical attributes of characters in this chapter. Shakespeare’s fictionalized version of King Richard III, for example, is a hunchback. It is the physical manifestation of evil, of being far removed from God, and emphasizes his repugnant nature as a character. Over time, physical attributes and their symbolism have shifted. The king at the end of “Oedipus Rex” by Sophocles blinds himself, which is symbolic of guilt and atonement –and is a physical mark he will bear with him for the rest of his life. The name “Oedipus” means “Wounded Foot”. Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein”, apart from horror, offers a critique of the faith many in her time had in science, and the monster Victor Frankenstein creates is an assemblage from graveyards and science, not faith. In “The Picture of Dorian Gray” by Oscar Wilde, the sins that Dorian Gray commits appear in physical form in his portrait. Sometimes, Foster says, a scar is just a scar, but more often than not, has a reason.

Chapter 22 – Fosters explains the importance of blindness, and blind characters, in works of literature. Often, blind characters, such as Tiresias in “Oedipus Rex”, may not be able to see the world around them, but are able to see a deeper or spiritual truth to things which those who are no blind, cannot see. Oedipus who has been unable to see the truth, is blind to it metaphorically, but when he becomes aware of it, he actually blinds himself physically. He goes on to explain that usually, if writers want the audience to know something important about the characters or the book, to introduce it before it is needed. For example, it becomes apparent early on in the “Indiana Jones” series that Indiana Jones is deathly afraid of snakes. When Oedipus appears next in the play “Oedipus at Colonus”, he is blind, the reasons why are known, and it is discovered that his blindness has earned him the forgiveness of the gods.

Chapter 23 – In this chapter, Foster talks about disease and illnesses. In the 1915 novel “The Good Soldier”, Ford Maddox Ford has his characters – two married couples - spend time at a European spa. The wife of the narrator carries on an affair with the husband of the other couple, and both the cheating wife and the cheating husband are at the spa to treat heart trouble. The symbolism is clear. In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story from 1837, “The Man of Adamant”, the main character, convinced all others are sinners, goes to live in an isolated cave where his heart turns to stone. In “Lolita”, Vladimir Nabokov’s main character, Humbert, is sick in the head and sick in the heart for his pursuit of an underage girl, and he ruins several lives in the process. He dies of heart failure. From the start of James Joyce’s short story “The Sisters”, the narrator explains that there is no hope for his mentor, a priest, who is dying following a stroke and paralysis. Meanwhile, the city in which they live, Dublin, is paralyzed from the influence of the government, social conventions, and the Catholic Church. For example, a girl cannot go of a railing to board a ship to be with her lover. In writing that deals with diseases, Foster explains that there are certain principles employed. First, not all diseases are created equal. Tuberculosis, for example, is more palatable and symbolic than cholera. Second, disease has to be picturesque. Third, its origins should be mysterious. Fourth, it should have strong symbolism and metaphorical value. The fourth condition usually overrides all others. Daisy Miller, in “Daisy Miller”, dies of malaria,



which means “bad air” – a flower dies from bad air. AIDS is the current disease of choice by writers, due to its political and social nature.

Chapter 24 – Foster encourages readers to pay close attention with their eyes, and not just read. For example, the meal for the Feast of Epiphany that is consumed in James Joyce’s “The Dead” seems common to modern people, for it includes American apples and celery. Yet, in that time, American apples were a very expensive commodity, and celery could not be found easily in winter. Therefore, the meal is of tremendous importance. In James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”, readers dismiss the trembling cup as part of the danger of giving alcohol to a recovering alcoholic, but to understand the importance of the trembling cup itself is to understand the deeper, religious significance behind the story. Foster tells readers not to read from the context of the current year, but to value the story for its cultural, historical, and personal context to the writer. For example, a modern reader will find it difficult to sympathize with Achilles, who is angry that his sex slave has been stolen from him, but ancient Greeks would find it very possible to do so. Readers do not have to accept the values and cultural situations of those in older works, but need to understand them.

Chapter 25 – Foster further discusses symbols in this chapter, especially those that are uncommon. He begins by quoting a poem from John Donne, about a flea, which for Donne serves as a symbol of premarital sex, by the mixing of the blood of two within one. Foster cautions readers not to become bogged down in hidden meanings and symbols, and to always keep in mind what the overall story is about. Secondary meanings provide depth to the narrative, but as mentioned earlier in the book, secondary meanings cannot save a bad overall story. Oftentimes, symbols are intensely personal to the writer, such as Yeats, who bought a centuries-old castle-tower which becomes central in many of his works. Sometimes, symbols may be intensely private to a writer, and won’t be apparent on a first reading. But Foster encourages readers, telling them that each work teaches readers as they go along. Each page builds on the previous pages.

Analysis

Having covered several important symbols, and having discussed the importance of characters, heroes, and being objective in interpreting text, Foster moves on to explain that setting – the geographic locations in books – are incredibly important as well, and can themselves not only be important contextually for the novel’s plot, but may indeed be symbolic themselves. For example, the novel “Huckleberry Finn” would not be possible without the Mississippi River serving as the main setting. A novel about Napoleon’s failure to conquer Russia will mean that the landscape of Russia itself will need to be adequately described, for the Russian winter is what ultimately did Napoleon’s campaign in. In D. H. Lawrence’s novel “Women in Love”, mountains symbolize inhospitableness, and only characters with little humanity can bear to handle them.



Foster, as he does from time to time, draws the reader aside to remind them that all literature borrows from other literature. An Egyptian scroll dating to some 4,500 years ago laments that there are no more original stories to tell, and seeking to remain fresh has been a constant desire of writers and storytellers, yet still, all work borrows from other work one way or another. What is important, as Foster reveals later in Chapter 24, is for readers to pay close attention to each individual work and contextualize them in terms of the time the story is written, and the time in which the story takes place. For example, a meal in contemporary America with apples may seem ordinary, but for American apples to be served in James Joyce's "The Dead" is of significance, for American apples at that time were an expensive commodity in other countries.

Continuing on with his earlier chapters about characters, Foster moves into exploring two important assets of characters, namely, the illnesses they contract and the physical attributes they bear. As with all symbolism, nothing is necessarily ever what it seems. For example, Humbert in "Lolita" dies of heart failure, which is emblematic of his being sick (in the absolute worst sense) in the heart for sexually abusing an underage girl. Traditionally, characters that have some sort of abnormal or uncommon physical attribute which sets them apart from all others, both means there is something specific that character is intended to do, and the attribute is somehow symbolic. Oedipus had bad feet, which set him apart from all others, that he would do something different. The fictional Richard III is hunchbacked, not only as symbolism of God's disfavor, but because he will be the one of all others present to usurp the crown.

Vocabulary

culminating, hoary, decorum, interpretive, jargon, incorrigibly, suffice



Chapters 26 - Envoi

Summary

Chapter 26 – Foster discusses irony in this chapter. Foster contends that irony trumps everything. He begins with the use of roads, which are meant to be taken, and are meant for journeys. Ironically, in “Waiting for Godot”, the two characters travel down a road hoping to learn something from, and meet up with Godot, only for Godot to never show up, and the road to have led to nowhere. Hemingway’s novels about World War I, such as “A Farewell to Arms”, employ a tremendous amount of irony, from youth meeting death on the battlefield to the title itself: instead of men rallying “to arms” to fight, they are bidding a farewell “to arms”. In G. K. Chesterton’s “The Arrow of Heaven” a priest in a high tower is killed with an arrow, leading many to believe he has been shot by an arrow from Heaven. Father Brown, the detective-priest, determines that arrows do not need to be fired to be used to kill—an arrow can ironically be used like a knife, though that is not its purpose. Irony, Foster elaborates, chiefly involves a deflection from what is expected. In the novel “Mrs. Dalloway” by Virginia Woolfe, the character of Septimus Warren Smith, a troubled World War I veteran, commits suicide to avoid his enemies. His enemies are two doctors.

Chapter 27 – In this chapter, Foster presents a test case for readers by way of the short story, “The Garden Party” by Katherine Mansfield. Essentially, the story is about an upper class family living on a hill above the valley where the working class toil. The main character feels torn between what is expected of her, and what she feels toward the people in the valley, especially those in mourning for a lost loved one. She brings the leftovers from the party to the woman in mourning as a measure of humanity. The wealthy family does not just live above the valley, but the descriptions of them, which have to do with birds and flight in one way or another, give them a freedom that those down in the valley do not have. However, the lofty position gives the main character the ability to see things more clearly, as well. However, the fact that the party occurs in a garden brings to mind the Biblical reference of Eden, perfection to some extent for the family, and one which the main character is ultimately forced out of. She comes to wear a hat first worn by an older woman, which symbolically represents the assumption of some of the older woman’s ideas or wisdom. The journey she takes grows darker along the way into the valley, and the trip down there is metaphorical for Persephone’s trip to Hades. The story comes to critique the class system, illustrates the initiation of a child into the world of adults, and so on.

Postlude – Some of the questions that Foster receives from students has to do with reading something into the text that isn’t there—a blind man simply being a blind man walking down the street, for example—or whether all writing should be discerned in a meaningful way if the writer hasn’t proven himself or herself to be a good writer yet. Foster explains that things that might be symbols should be taken as symbols until it can be determined they are not. Readers do not always know the intentions of the writer, so the text must stand on its own. Roland Barthes’s 1967 essay “The Death of



the Author” contends the same: the text must stand on its own. Writing itself matters, but the Author, or the authority of the text, will not always be around. As soon as the text leaves the hand of the Author, it is in the hands of readers. The Author is figuratively dead. At some point, the Author is literally, dead, so they cannot be appealed to for meaning. Youth and experience do not necessarily matter: Louise Erdrich’s 1984 first novel “Love Medicine” won that year’s National Book Critics Circle award for fiction. In 2013, a debut mystery novel by Robert Galbraith was published, had good reviews, and barely any sales. When Galbraith was outed as a pseudonym for Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling, sales skyrocketed. The book must stand or fall on its own, regardless of the author. When it comes to reading, Foster challenges his readers to take ownership of the books, of the act of reading, for it is a very personal experience that will never be duplicated by any other person.

Envoi – A tradition in poetry is to add a short stanza at the end of a long poem, or at the end of a collection of poems. Sometimes it is a conclusion or summation. It is called an “envoi”. Foster wishes to impart a few final thoughts in his. His book is not an end to how to read, or a complete guide to how to read, but only a beginning. For example, he explains that fire is a symbol worthy of great discussion, but it wasn’t discussed in the book. Eventually, he continues, reading between the lines becomes second nature, and guides are not needed anymore. Foster goes on to offer a selection of further reading, but tells the reader to read what they enjoy, on the list or not.

Analysis

In his closing chapters, Foster discusses irony, returns to the question of whether or not things are as they seem – whether or not a blind man really is symbolic or not, for example – and then later presents a test case for readers, as a sort of guided reading exercise. While Foster has mentioned irony before, he devotes Chapter 26 to a full-fledged discussion of the topic. He has spent the book establishing commonly accepted symbols and symbolism, such as roads being for journeys to discover things or learn things, and then spends Chapter 26 explaining how these things can be ironic, as is the case with the road in “Waiting for Godot”. People, places, and objects can all be ironic, such as the arrow being used to stab to kill, rather than being shot to kill, in the story “The Arrow of Heaven”.

In the test case, Foster presents a short story revolving around a garden party for a wealthy family living on a mountain, and the coming of age of the narrator, a girl, as she brings food to a mourning woman in a working-class valley town. Symbolism is clear in some places, such as the frequent references to birds and flight, which symbolize the elevated status and freedom of the wealthy over the poor. The garden can represent a sort of Eden, an idealized world from which the girl leaves, never to return to see it in the same way. Yet Foster contends the story is also a reference to the Greek myth of Persephone’s trip into Hades, with the town in the village below standing in as Hades.

In departure, Foster reminds readers that things are not always as they appear, and may not always be more than what they appear in a story – it all depends on the



surrounding circumstances in the story itself. Nevertheless, no two readers will ever approach a novel in exactly the same way as one another, and because reading is such a personal experience, so too will be how they interpret what is being read.

Vocabulary

incongruous, progressively, gratuitously, trepidation, mannerisms, revolting



Important People

William C. Foster

William C. Foster is a professor of English at the University of Michigan-Flint. He is married, has children, and is the author of “How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines”. Foster’s book has two editions, the first being published in 2003, the second, in 2014. Foster’s goal in writing is to engage readers to think more deeply about the things they read in order to have a more rewarding reading experience. Foster does this by way of speaking to the importance of symbols and symbolism, settings, characters, and situations and events described in literature.

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare is an English writer, most famous for his plays, who wrote during the late Sixteenth and early Seventeenth centuries. He is known for works including “Hamlet”, “Romeo and Juliet”, “Richard III”, “Othello”, “Macbeth”, and others. He is noted and included in this book for his use of the English language, symbolism, and versatility and relevance in subject matter. He is often referenced, quoted, alluded to, or reimagined in the works of innumerable subsequent writers.

Authors of the Bible

The writers of the Bible vary between the Old and New Testaments, and all of them are not explicitly known. The Bible is noted for its religious truths, use of language, symbolism, and its versatility and relevance in subject matter. The Bible is frequently referenced, quoted, alluded to, or reimagined in the works of innumerable writers, and is so included in this book.

Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is the central figure and aspect of Christianity, which in turn heavily influences Western literature. Jesus Christ appears in the Bible, as well as various other historical texts, is the Son of God, and is accepted by Christians as Lord and Savior for all mankind. Jesus Christ proves to be not only an historical and religious figure, but has dramatic literary meaning as well, leading to the rise of the Christ-like figure. In the image of Christ, this figure will often have some attributes of Christ, such as being gentle and forgiving, or will experience similar things, such as suffering before all has been accomplished. As such, He is a central figure to literature, and is so included in this book.



Lorraine Hansberry

Lorraine Hansberry is the author of the play “A Raisin in the Sun”, and becomes the first example of literary analysis that Foster uses in his book. Hansberry’s novel bears a similar structure to that of the story of Faust and his bargain, in that a black family recently moved to a white neighborhood; the black family is in desperate need of money and is offered money to leave – but at the expense of their own integrity and courage. She is included in this book to underscore Foster’s point that a deeper reading of literature will yield a more beneficial understanding, and greater enjoyment.

Bram Stoker

Bram Stoker is the author of “Dracula”, published in 1897. The novel’s plot, about men seeking to destroy a vampire, is used by Foster to reveal a deeper meaning beneath the surface. Foster explains that apart from a good horror story, Dracula is about sexual morality and sexual restraint in the Victorian era, and is thus included in the book for this reason.

Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison is a contemporary American writer, whose novels include “Son of Solomon” and “Beloved”. Her novels frequently focus on the horrors of slavery in terms of plot, but her stories are also rich with symbolism and deeper meanings, as Foster points out. For example, in “Beloved”, Morrison’s character Sethe crosses the river into Ohio, which, on the surface, is a normal act, but has a deeper meaning: Sethe is now in Ohio, is free, and the water, like baptism, has washed her clean and she can now begin a new life. Morrison is used by Foster as a perfect example of deep symbolism and Christian references.

James Joyce

James Joyce is the author of various novels and stories, including “The Dead”, which is frequently referenced by Foster for its use of symbolism and deeper meaning. For example, the story ends with snow covering everything, including the dead, and the snow itself becomes symbolic of death, for it comes to all people in the end. Meanwhile, the story is also noted for its contextual information. At the meal served during the story, American apples, among other foods, are present. To the contemporary reader, this is not exceptional. To the characters in the story, and the readers at the time, American apples are an expensive commodity, and indicate the great lengths and expense through which dinner has been prepared, placing special emphasis on the meal and the occasion, the Feast of the Epiphany. Joyce is thus included in the book as a reason for the need not only of understanding symbolism, but context.



Ford Maddox Ford

Ford Maddox Ford is a British writer who authors, among other books, "The Good Soldier" in 1915. Foster uses Ford as an example of how illnesses always appear in novels as more than mere illnesses. For example, in "The Good Soldier", European couples travel to a posh spa. There, they have affairs which destroy some six lives. Two of the characters at the spa have heart conditions -which, on the surface, is illness -but in depth, means their hearts are corrupt through their commissions of affairs. Their hearts are not true; they are false.

The Reader

The reader emerges as an important person in Foster's book. Consistently throughout his work, Foster breaks the fourth-wall by addressing the reader on a personal and direct level, referring to the reader as "reader", "dear reader", and "you". The reason why the reader emerges as an important figure in Foster's book is because the reader is who Foster is trying to encourage to read on a far deeper level than first meets the eye. Reading something deeply can only occur when the reader attempts to do this, and the book itself is a direct communication to the reader to help the reader be able to get more out of their experiences with literature.



Objects/Places

Water

Water is a common element and symbol in literature, and represents many different things. Water can be cleansing and serve as a method for baptism, signaling a new start to life, such as in “Beloved” by Toni Morrison. Water may also serve as representative of the decay of man, such as in “The Wasteland” by T.S. Eliot where the water becomes a dumping ground for the refuse of man.

Food

Food is common element and symbol in literature, and can represent many different things beyond the mere act of eating. Food can be both symbolic, and contextually important. For example, food is what brings families together, such as in the case of “Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant”, or can be used symbolically to mean friendship or understanding, such as in the short story “Cathedral”. In “The Dead”, special attention is paid to what is served during the meal, and the presence of American apples (an expensive commodity at the time) as well as celery (a summer vegetable being eaten in winter) denote the expense and importance of the occasion.

Birds

Birds are a common element and symbol in literature, and most often symbolize freedom. This is true of the wealthy family in “The Garden Party”, where bird-like language is used to describe their elevated status and their physical place of residence, giving them a kind of freedom the working class down in the valley below their mountaintop home do not have. Birds and references to flight and freedom can also be used in an ironic sense, such as in the case of the woman who has wings in “Nights at the Circus”, but is caged and confined to being a circus act instead of being free.

Roads

Roads are common elements and symbols in literature, and are often representative not only of literal journeys, but quests as well, in which the journey is meant to have an end or a point. Roads may also be used ironically, such as in the case of “Waiting for Godot”, in which travels down a road in the hope to meet and learn from Godot, ultimately lead to nowhere and no meeting.



Mountains

Mountains are an important element and symbol in terms of setting and plot in literature, as are settings in general. Foster explains that mountains can be both important in terms of plot and symbolism. For example, a mountain birth may mean that the individual born is meant for great things, or has been born above the rest of mankind. In other situations, such as "Women in Love", mountains signify inhospitableness, and only characters with little or no humanity can survive in the mountains.

Physical attributes

Physical attributes are important elements and symbols when it comes to the characters that populate literature. Physical attributes set characters apart for one reason or another, and often prove to be of importance. Shakespeare's fictional version of Richard III portrays the king with a hunchback, denoting his distance from God and evil nature. In terms of symbolism, the blind Tiresias in "Oedipus", for example, may be literally blind, but he is not blind to the deeper truths and understandings in the play that the other non-blind characters cannot, ironically, see.

Arrow

An arrow is used to kill a priest in the short story "The Arrow of Heaven". The arrow serves to be an example of irony in Foster's chapter on irony, for arrows are intended to kill by being shot, not being used to stab by hand, as is the case in the story.

Illness

Illness is used as an important example of metaphor. In "The Good Soldier" by Ford Maddox Ford, several couples journey to a European spa where most of them carry on affairs. Two of the adulterers suffer from heart conditions and illnesses: their hearts are not true, and are not whole, and are representative of broken love.

Blindness

Blindness is an important element in literature that often has a deeper meaning rather than merely being a malady. Characters afflicted with blindness are often keen to great wisdom and insight that those who can see, are not. For example, only after Oedipus is blinded is he aware of the deeper truth of his situation, of having killed his father, taken his place, and having slept with his mother. While able to see clearly, ironically, Oedipus is not able to see the deeper truth to things.

Holes

Holes in literature are often an important element and symbol that mean transformation, change, and journey. For example, in "Alice in Wonderland", Alice's trip through a hole leads her to a changed world, and begins an important journey for her. The same is true for Paul Berlin in the novel "Going After Cacciato", wherein Berlin enters the tunnels in Vietnam during the Vietnam War.



Themes

Symbols

Symbols, and symbolism, form the core of William C. Foster's book "How to Read Literature Like a Professor". Foster stresses the need for deeper understanding when reading, that there is usually much more to the plot of the story than just the plot. Understanding what is being read at a deeper level will prove a more rewarding experience, and appreciation for what is being read will increase much more. Understanding what may be a symbol, or symbolism, becomes crucial when this occurs.

Foster presents numerous examples of symbols and symbolism throughout his book, that run the gamut from birds and water to sex and violence. He also provides examples of these symbols occurring in literature throughout history. Birds, and by extension, flight, often represent freedom and elevation, such as in the case of the Sheridan family in "The Garden Party". Water often is symbolic of cleansing and rebirth, such as the case with Sethe crossing the river into Ohio in the novel "Beloved". In "The French Lieutenant's Woman", the act of sex is symbolic of the old times meeting the new, and being unable to compensate for them. Violence, too, is often never only about violence, as is the case in "Beloved" when Sethe kills her child, rather than allowing her child to face a fate worth than death, which would be slavery.

Foster also explains throughout his book, and in particular, in Chapter 26, how symbols and symbolism may be used ironically as well as straightforwardly. For example, in the novel "Nights at the Circus", though the main character has wings and the freedom of flight, she is trapped by being forced to live in the circus to survive. Roads, often meant to signify journeys to achieve something, lead to nowhere in "Waiting for Godot". An arrow, utilized to kill a priest in "The Arrow From Heaven", is not fired from a bow to kill from distance, but used by hand to stab up close instead – the opposite way in which it is intended to be used.

Christianity

Christianity is a major influence in literature, especially in the Western tradition, William C. Foster reveals in his book "How to Read Literature Like a Professor". Christianity owes heavily to the Bible, which in turn, also heavily influences Western literature. The Bible is frequently mentioned, quoted, cited, referenced, or alluded to in innumerable works of literature, for it is central not only to Western civilization, but because its versatility and relevance are timeless.

Foster provides numerous examples of literature that owe to the Bible for deeper meaning and importance. For example, the end of the short story "Sonny's Blues" – where one estranged brother buys the other a drink, in the form of a trembling cup – may be viewed as a simple but kind gesture on the surface, but ultimately has far



deeper connotations. But the cup does not tremble from the music and dancing going on around the brothers, but rather because the cup is a reference to Isaiah 51:17, which speaks of sons losing their way, their way back uncertain and not guaranteed. In “Beloved”, the white men who come to take Sethe and her children away ride in on four horses, which references the End Times and the Apocalypse and is symbolic of the end of the new life that Sethe has been living.

Jesus Christ also heavily influences literature directly as well through the representation of characters in specific stories, poems, or novels as “Christ figures” or being “Christ-like”. These characters often share many, if not all, of the traits of Christ, ranging from a gentle and forgiving nature to having to endure suffering for a greater purpose. Sacrifice also heavily pays into suffering, as does simple imagery. “The Old Man and the Sea” involves a kindly old fisherman who seeks redemption and to offer hope, as did Jesus Christ, and in one scene, the old man lays on his back with his arms outstretched in the image of Christ.

Literary Borrowing and Referencing

All writing borrows from other writing, William C. Foster explains in “How to Read Literature Like a Professor”. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly, all literature references are based on, or allude to, other literature. Foster contends that this is actually beneficial and adds depth and meaning to stories and plots in ways that are not otherwise possible. For example, many books borrow imagery from the Bible, such as in “Beloved”, but to great benefit and added depth. Four riders coming to take away Sethe’s freedom becomes a more meaningful passage in lieu of the Book of Revelation. In another example, a Vietnam War novel of the 1970s, “Going After Cacciato”, borrows from the classic children’s story “Alice in Wonderland”.

There are various other examples of literary borrowing that Foster references throughout his book. For example, Alex Burgess's novel "A Clockwork Orange" borrows heavily from Christianity due to Burgess's own deep and abiding Christianity. Just as the Bible and Christianity must contend with the problem of the existence of evil, so too does Burgess's "Clockwork Orange". Mark Twain's "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" borrows from the Arthurian romance tradition, in the tales of King Arthur from hundreds of years before. The quest theme of King Arthur tales shows up again in Jack Kerouac's "On the Road".

Foster presents the interesting find of an Egyptian scroll from 4,500 years ago, which laments that there are no more original ideas or new stories to be told. Foster explains that all stories ultimately come from one story, but what that story is, he has no idea, for all stories are traced back through each other to thousands of years in the past, with many, especially from the oral tradition, forgotten or lost. Still, he contends that this is more beneficial than anything, and he demonstrates this through his test case “The Garden Party”, where he relates the main character’s journey to the valley town to the Greek myth of Persephone descended into Hades.



Physical attributes

The physical attributes of characters are incredibly important in understanding literature, characters, and context, William C. Foster explains in “How to Read Literature Like a Professor”. More often than not, scars, deformities, illnesses, blindness, physical shape, and other attributes of characters affect their actions, and the events of the plot. Traditionally, characters that are “marked” by some physical condition, usually a deformity, are marked for greatness, either good or bad. Two of the most notable examples Foster provides are Shakespeare’s Richard III and Tiresias in “Oedipus”.

Shakespeare’s heavily fictionalized version of King Richard III, in “Richard III”, has a hunched-back, withered arm, and a limp, which sets him apart from everyone else at court. In Shakespeare’s play, Richard murders his nephews to attain the throne, and is responsible for much death and suffering, all of which are indicative of his true, evil nature. This evil nature is expressed through his horrible deformities, showing physically how far he is from God as is his body far removed from a normal body, or goodness.

In the “Oedipus Cycle” by Sophocles, the character of Oedipus is marked for greatness by his deformed feet. Indeed, “Oedipus” means “wounded feet” and makes it quite clear that Oedipus is marked for a greater purpose, and indeed, it turns out to be the case. However, Oedipus refuses to follow his destiny, and runs from it –only to run right into it in the end. He is blind to the truth of this as it occurs, even though Tiresias, who is physically blind, is able to see the truth as it occurs. When confronted with the truth, Oedipus blinds himself physically and literally, for he has been blind figuratively.

Interpretation

Interpretation is a major concern that William C. Foster addresses in his book “How to Read Literature Like a Professor”. Literature, Foster contends, needs to be read not just for plot, but for deeper meanings by way of symbols, symbolism, reference to other stories, and so on. Interpretation, like reading, is a very personal and intimate thing that varies from person to person. No two people will approach a piece of writing in exactly the same way, and neither one will come away with the exact same ideas, no matter how slight the differences in interpretation may be. Foster cautions readers to be observant, but to only read into the text what is already in the text. Readers should not be concerned with the motives of the writer for what has been written, but must be concerned only with the meaning in the text itself, Foster explains.

Foster elaborates later on in his book why readers should only be concerned with the text and not the writer. The writer is not always available to be questioned, and in many cases, the writer has been dead for a long time. Everything rests therein on the writing, not the writer. Focusing on the writing allows the reader to draw a deeper understanding based on the text, and only the text, rather than straining to incorporate motive where it is not needed or not possible. This is why interpretation, through paying attention and seeking to read more deeply into literature, is so important.



In some situations, it will be easy for readers to interpret meaning and symbolism. For example, in "Nights at the Circus", it will be readily easy to interpret the woman with wings being unable to leave the circus - the woman with the power of flight, and freedom, being trapped at the circus -as irony. For example, in Toni Morrison's novels, Christian elements - such as rivers and four horsemen - are readily apparent and easily interpreted. However, in other pieces of writing, such as John Donne's "The Flea", interpretation is more difficult due to the very personal nature of symbolism for Donne. Instead of the flea symbolizing annoyance, itching, and aggravation, but for Donne, it is a symbol of love.



Styles

Structure

William C. Foster divides his book "How to Read Literature Like a Professor" into thirty-four primary sections, consisting of a preface, introduction, 27 numerically-ordered chapters, two interlude sections placed at different points within the ordered chapters, and concludes the structure of the book with a postlude, envoi, and appendix full of reading suggestions. The preface introduces the second edition of the book, where as the introduction introduces the core concepts of the book. Each of the numerical chapters revolve around a specific idea, symbol, or aspect of literature, such as sex, violence, water, seasons, weather, characters, setting, and so on. The interludes remind readers of various things, such as remembering to keep the overall plot of a novel in mind while seeking out symbols or symbolism. The postlude sums up the book, answers a few important questions relating to authorship and interpretation, and then concludes with a farewell by way of the envoi, followed up by a recommended reading list.

Perspective

William C. Foster writes his book "How to Read Literature Like a Professor" in the first-person perspective, which serves to be his own. He speaks with authority as an English professor on literature, writing in an objective manner, but also making references to himself throughout the book. His authority on the subject are clear, and he writes from this point of view, of having knowledge that many of his readers may not, which he seeks to impart to them through the book.

Tone

William C. Foster adopts a casual, engaging, and friendly tone in his book "How to Read Literature Like a Professor." Given the subtitle of the book, "A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines", this is highly important and necessary. Foster addresses the audience as he would a student, class, or friend in conversation, making references various types of media, from books to movies, and making references to himself and his own life as well. The highly personal style allows him to teach and make points without becoming too dry or dragged down in terms specific to English literature and interpretation.



Quotes

Every language has a grammar, a set of rules that govern usage and meaning, and literary language is no different.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Introduction paragraph 7)

Importance: Right away, Foster explains that even literature has a language of its own, and a set of rules that govern its usage. He will elucidate these rules, and engage the reader to use these rules when reading literature. His own book will be a sort of guide to that effect.

The real reason for a quest is always self-knowledge.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Chapter 1 paragraph 9)

Importance: Foster explains that, while trips may only sometimes just be trips, sometimes they are much more, and become a quest to achieve something in the end. But no matter what is being sought, knowledge is acquired, and this is always the real reason the author has in mind.

Ghosts and vampires are never only about ghosts and vampires.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Chapter 3 paragraph 9)

Importance: Foster reveals that ghosts and vampires often have deeper meanings than mere horror or revulsion, but serve a symbolic purpose. Hamlet's father's ghost haunts Hamlet to let him know something is wrong in the royal house, whereas Dracula can be interpreted as a tale of sexual restraint.

Myth is a body of story that matters.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Chapter 8 paragraph 2)

Importance: Not all myths are fictional, Foster explains, because they explain and speak to, and explain, human nature and humankind. Some myths are true, and others are not, but all have the same effect.

It's never just rain.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Chapter 9 paragraph 3)

Importance: Foster expands on his study of various symbols and symbolism to include that of weather, such as rain. Rain is never just rain, but serves a deeper purpose. It can be cleansing or depressing, redeeming or disheartening, all depending on the situation.

Authors rarely introduce violence straightforwardly, to perform only its one appointed task, so we ask questions.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Chapter 11 paragraph 17)

Importance: Violence, like other symbols, is never just violence. Violence usually has a



greater purpose or symbolism, such as the case with Sethe in "Beloved." There, she consigns her daughter to death by murdering her, rather than consigning her to slavery, a fate worse than death.

Flight is freedom.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Chapter 15 paragraph 10)

Importance: Flight serves to be one of the most common symbols in literature, and usually means freedom. It can be used straightforwardly to represent freedom, or it can be used ironically, such as in the case of the woman with wings who is forced to live in a circus in "Nights at the Circus".

There's only one story.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Interlude paragraph 1)

Importance: Foster draws on a 4,500 year-old Egyptian scroll whose author laments that there are no more new stories to tell. This reinforces Foster's revelation that all stories borrow from other stories, and all stories ultimately come from one story, all the way back through history, but what the one story is, he does not know, and no one else does, either.

If you want your audience to know something important about your character (or work at large), introduce it early, before you need it.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Chapter 22 paragraph 11)

Importance: Foster explains that it is best to let readers know important or crucial information about a character early on, because it makes it easier to reference this information later on in the book, but also increases the depth of the plot and clues readers into important information.

Don't read with your eyes.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Chapter 24 paragraph 4)

Importance: Here, Foster tells readers to remove themselves from their place of reading, to contextualize what is being read, both in terms of the book, and when and where it was written. For example, to the modern reader, American apples at mealtimes may seem common and ordinary, but to the characters of "The Dead", they are a luxury. This is also true of the prevailing political ideas, social conventions, and cultures of the times in which the books are written and set. While a reader does not have to accept what they read, they at least need to understand what they are reading.

Every work teaches us as we go along.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Chapter 25 paragraph 18)

Importance: Foster returns to his point that a work must stand or fall on its own, regardless of the author and whatever symbols and references it uses. A solid work is its own world and order, and builds upon itself page by page. In the end, that is what



matters. The Author may not always be around to explain things, so the work must explain itself, and the reader must rely on the work, and only the work itself, to understand.

Own the books you read.

-- Thomas C. Foster (Postlude paragraph 13)

Importance: Foster, toward the end of his book, tells reader to own the books that they read - not just literally, but figuratively as well. Reading should be an enjoyable and rewarding experience, and rather than simply reading to read, readers should read to truly understand. This allows them to own a book, for it becomes a deeply personal experience in the process of reading and understanding.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What is William C. Foster's overall purpose for his book? Who is his intended audience? Who became part of the overall audience. Why?

Topic 2

What is literary language as Foster defines it? Choose three rules of literary language and explain them with examples from the text.

Topic 3

What are symbols? Choose three symbols in the book and explain them, along with examples of such symbols cited in the text.

Topic 4

What are the rules and requirements for a quest? List them and describe them. Choose a work of literature that meets the rules and requirements, and explain how through examples from the book.

Topic 5

What is the truth behind the use of ghosts and vampires in literature? What sorts of things do they represent? What are some modern examples of this?

Topic 6

Explain the influence of Christianity and the Bible on literature, and select three examples to illustrate the point.

Topic 7

Explain the influence of Shakespeare on literature, and select three examples to illustrate the point.



Topic 8

Explain how myth and fairy tales have influenced literature, and select three examples to illustrate the point.

Topic 9

Explain what Foster means when he says in Chapter 24, "Don't read with your eyes". Provide examples to this point.

Topic 10

Select a work of literature in any form, read it, and analyze it using the methods demonstrated by Foster. Explain the plot, characters, setting, and important symbols and themes, as well as context and borrowing. What deeper meanings does the work of literature have as a result?