

WHAT SETS LITERARY ANALYSIS APART FROM SIMPLY READING A WORK?
DOUGLAS' NOTES ON *HOW TO READ LITERATURE LIKE A PROFESSIONAL*

Memory, symbol, and pattern separate a professional reading from a normal, common reading. Literature scholars are blessed and cursed with memory. When they read, their brains constantly spin through countless other works looking for similar traits, patterns, literary terms, foreshadowing, themes, settings, characters, and so on. We do this with literature and movies. We think symbolically. We weren't born this way. It comes with practice, practice, practice. This is why students read works and feel like "I just don't get it." This is also why students sometimes think that teachers "make up this stuff."

To an English teacher, everything is a symbol (or other literary device) until proven otherwise. Due to undergraduate and graduate studies in literature, English teachers learn to see things for what they are (a tree on a tropical, isolated island in the Atlantic Ocean) and for what they symbolize to a particular character(s) in a certain work (a corrupted Garden of Eden image – *Lord of the Flies*).

A related quirk of English teachers is their ability to recognize patterns. English teachers learn to take in the affective/ basic level (plot, drama, characters) of a story, but they also see patterns in the story. Experience has proven to us that life and books fall into similar patterns. This isn't anything new. Car mechanics used patterns to fix cars long before computer diagnosis was available. A reader's experience will become much more enjoyable if he learns to look back while reading and finds these patterns. As very young children, we all tell stories. We pay no attention to what details are important or not important. This is why inexperienced readers become swamped with the mass of details found in most literary works: names, dates, places, events, characters. Experienced readers have learned to absorb those details (Roger throwing rocks at a littlun), find patterns, and file this information away until it is needed later in the work.

Literary scholars read and analyze text in much the same way as physiologists read and analyze patients.

Literature is like a magic trick. It's an ILLUSION of real life, but it's not real life. On the surface it seems like the magician put the girl in the box and sawed her in half, and then he put her back together again. If that was done in real life, there would be screaming, blood, and possibly death. Magic and literature are illusions of real life. They look and seem real, but everything is set up and performed for a PURPOSE, for a REASON.

SOME (ALMOST ALWAYS) FACTS ABOUT LITERATURE

(Having read the title, be warned. “Always” and “Never” are not words that have meaning in literature. As soon as something seems to be always or never true, an author comes along and writes something to prove it’s not.)

1. THE REAL REASON FOR A QUEST (JOURNEY, TRIP) IS ALWAYS SELF-KNOWLEDGE.
 - a. A quester
 - b. A place to go
 - c. A stated reason to go there
 - d. Challenges and trials
 - e. The real reason to go—always self-knowledge
2. WHENEVER PEOPLE EAT OR DRINK TOGETHER, IT’S COMMUNION.
Communion is the practice of the coming together of the faithful to share sustenance; it isn’t always religious).
3. STORIES CONTAINING GHOSTS, VAMPIRES, MONSTERS, AND THE LIKE ARE NEVER ONLY ABOUT GHOSTS, VAMPIRES, MONSTERS, AND THE LIKE.
Beowulf, Hamlet, Frankenstein, A Christmas Carol, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, The Turn of the Screw, Tess of the D’Urbervilles, The Metamorphosis. Sometimes the monsters aren’t seen in the story. They are characters who suck the life out of other characters.
4. IF IT’S SQUARE, IT’S A SONNET.
14 lines, one of three basic rhyme schemes, written in iambic pentameter = sonnet
5. THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS A WHOLLY ORIGINAL WORK OF LITERATURE.
The mind of a writer whether consciously or unconsciously weaves flashes, bits, and pieces of every childhood experience, past reading, every movie he’s ever seen, everything that lurks in the recesses of his mind into a work. Both Tolkien and Rowling deny this, but think about it. Every experience they have ever had made them who they are, who they are appears on the page when they write.
6. THERE IS ONLY ONE STORY.
Don’t jump for joy yet. You still have to read, read, and read. All stories come from another story. All poetry comes from other poems. However, they can come from other genres, too. *Beowulf* was retold in *Grendel*. The movie *10 Things I Hate About You* was based on Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*. Harry Potter mimics Greek mythology, Latin Mythology, Tolkien, and others. Tolkien’s trilogy reflects the state of the world at the time he wrote it. World war was beginning.
7. WHEN IN DOUBT, THE WORK PROBABLY ALLUDES TO SHAKESPEARE.
It’s true. Disney’s *The Lion King* was based on *Hamlet*. Iago from Disney’s *Aladdin* is a name from Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* is from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.
8. IF IT’S NOT FROM SHAKESPEARE, IT’S PROBABLY FROM THE BIBLE.
If the Devil can quote scripture, so can writers. Even writers who are not viewed as religious can and will include allusions to the Bible: gardens, trees, apples serpents, plagues, paring waters, loaves, fish, betrayal, denial, loss of innocence,

the fall from grace, doves, floods, and on and on. The Bible is the number one most often alluded to work of literature in the world. It is followed by Greek mythology and Roman mythology.

9. CHILDREN’S LITERATURE AND KIDDIE LIT IS IMPORTANT.

We may not all know the Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*, but we all know Cat from *Cat in the Hat*. We know *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Treasure Island*, the Narnia novels, Hansel and Gretel, and every other fairy tale ever told. We may not have read them word for word, but we know the plots of the stories. Writers don’t always use the entire story; sometimes they use only part of story. Horror movies incorporate the Hansel and Gretel theme frequently. A guy and a girl get lost in the woods (or some other scary, unfamiliar place). They venture in, bad things begin to happen, and they wish and pray for a way to go back to where they started (bread crumbs).

10. MYTH IS A BODY OF STORY THAT MATTERS.

The greatest sources of myths are the Bible (don’t be offended by that phrasing), Greek myths, and Roman myths. There are also myths in Shakespeare, King Arthur, and fairy tales. Myths are a source of material for writers. These stories are so much a part of our consciousness that our unconscious doesn’t always notice. Don’t believe me? Where is UGA located? What’s the capital of France?

11. IT’S MORE THAN JUST RAIN AND SNOW. IT’S NEVER JUST WEATHER.

Why did the author choose to make it rain on the wedding day of the president’s daughter? Rain does more than just flood. Rain makes us cold, wet, uncomfortable, and miserable. It can be mysterious, democratic, and isolating. Rain can also be restorative, cleansing, purifying, and transformative. Rain can be ironic. April showers do bring May flowers, but TS Eliot wrote that “April is the cruelest month.”

12. DOES THE AUTHOR REALLY MEAN THAT?

Now’s here’s the point at which students begin to wonder and question all the allusions, symbols, and patterns of works. Can any writer really have had all that going on in his head at one time? Did he really mean all of that? Well, yes. Sort of. Maybe. Sure. The actual answer is no one really knows for sure unless the writer tells us. (Coleridge, TS Eliot, Joyce, and some others actually included notes to their works when the works were published.) Most literary writers have some sort of education. They’ve studied Latin, Greek, classical poetry, Dante, and Shakespeare in much greater depth than you are studying it. Even the writers who dropped out of school studied some literature. You are studying it now. You’ve heard these stories before. Any good writer began as a good reader. Writers read. They read everything! Plus, didn’t I mention earlier that writers whether consciously or unconsciously include elements from other stories and other experiences in their works? Did Harper Lee sit down and consciously DECIDE to make Atticus Finch a Christ figure? Probably not. However, she was born, bred, and raised in Alabama in the 1920s and 30s. Like nearly every other southerner, she was raised in the church where men were taught to strive to be like Christ in their actions, words, and deeds. When she wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she modeled Atticus on her own father, who would have been taught those same values as a child. Lee wanted a good, selfless, strong, honest

character who did the right thing for everyone regardless of race, religion, or personality. She created Atticus. We as literary scholars turned Atticus into a Christ-like character.

13. ...MORE THAN IT'S GONNA HURT YOU: CONCERNING VIOLENCE IN LITERATURE

Violence is one of the most personal and intimate acts between human beings, but it can also be cultural and societal in its implications. If someone punches you in the nose in real life, it's aggression. However, in literature violence is usually something more than just literal aggression. The violence has to have some meaning beyond mere mayhem. Think of *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin. Her death by intentional drowning is about more than her. The action speaks for the experience of women during that time period. It's the ultimate act of taking responsibility for her life. She ends her own life. Students are often upset by Edna's actions because she chooses to leave behind her two children, but remember. Edna is not a real person. She doesn't live down the street from you. There are not two little boys who will be scarred for life because of her actions. This is a story. Literature mimics, not duplicates, real life. Violence in literature was placed there for a reason, for a purpose that is highly symbolic. Even accidents in literature are not truly accidents. The author planned them and made them appear in that work for a reason.

14. IS THAT A SYMBOL?

Of course it is. I'm not just being a wise guy, but here is my general response. "Of course it is. What do you think it means?" The problem with that is people expect symbols to mean something. Not just any something, but one something in particular. Well, it doesn't work like that. There are some things that generally only mean one thing. A cross stands for religion. The color white usually stands for purity. However, even these meanings can change depending on the story and the author. Studying literature isn't like studying math. There is no ONE right answer. Sorry. Symbols have a range of possible meanings. But we want it to mean one thing and one thing only. That's makes learning it and studying it so much easier. Well, that would destroy the work. The novel would cease to be what is it, a network of meanings that permit a limitless range of possible interpretations. Literature is a form of art. A painter picks up his brush to paint. There's a reason he chose the sky blue paint instead of the royal blue paint. He's trying to convey something with that color. That's what writers do. They are conveying with diction, word choice. Also, it's not just objects and images that are symbolic. Actions can be symbolic. Well, how am I supposed to figure out what a symbol means? You are supposed to associate freely, brainstorm, take notes, discuss with other readers, look up ideas, THINK! Then you need to organize your thoughts, group them together, reject some ideas, accept others. Ask questions of the text. Ask why? Why did the author include this image, color, sound, or whatever? Reading literature is a highly intellectual activity. Much of what we think about literature comes from what we feel first. Having these instincts doesn't mean they work at their highest level. The more you exercise (read and think) about symbols, the better you become at analysis.

15. IS THAT AN ALLEGORY?

If by chance that one thing does only stand for one thing, then it's not a symbol. It's an allegory. *Lord of the Flies*, *Animal Farm*, *Everyman*, and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* are allegories. In *Pilgrim's Progress* the main character is named Christian (what does he stand for?) and he takes a journey to the Celestial City (what do you think that is?) and along the way he meets characters named Faithful, Evangelist, and Great Despair (what do you think they stand for?).

16. WHAT'S IN A NAME?

As I have already stated, authors choose every word, every sentence, every event for a deliberate reason and purpose. Having stated that again, remember this. What takes you five minutes to read may have taken the writer five hours to write. Writers want those words, images, and descriptions to describe what they want them to describe. Therefore, names are important. If someone mispronounces your name, what do you do? You immediately correct that person. Sometimes we only do the correcting in our heads, but we do it. Names identify us from everyone else. Even if someone else has the same name as you, it's not the same is it? No. You are different from that other same name person. You just are. In literature, names are also important. To tell a story an author usually names the characters. It's basically how we tell them apart. But what do names mean? Let's start with a name we recognize, Mary. Who was the first Mary we learned about -- Mary, the mother of Christ. From Mary we go to Joseph, the earthy father of Christ. Now, I'm not talking about real life Marys and Josephs who ride the bus with you and eat bugs and make weird noises. We are talking about literature, where all words are chosen deliberately including names. Names have to carry whatever message the writer wants to convey about the character or the story. There's a short story titled "The Astronomer's Wife;" the wife's name is Ms. Ames. Say it out loud. She apparently *misaimed* at some point during her life. In *Passage to India* a woman is named Adela Quested. That's pretty hard to pronounce, but try to say it aloud. It sounds something like *I led a quest*. No, it's not an exact match, but you should hear the reference to the word *quest*. Of all the names in the world, the author chooses that one. Why? Also when a character changes names, that's a form of rebirth.

17. IT'S ALL POLITICAL.

This is why we study the literary periods. Knowing something about the time period of a work in which a writer writes helps us understand the work. That time period does not mandate or control the author's work, but it does give us insight into the author's world at that time. Works reflect social, political, and national attitudes, beliefs, and movements of the times. Sometimes this is lost to modern readers because we live in different time. However, the works still speak to us. Shakespeare isn't still read 400 years later just because someone likes it. It has something to say to us, today, now. *The Importance of Being Earnest* isn't just hilarious; it mocks the Victorian values that demanded certain manners, styles, customs, and such. Why does Scrooge change in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*? Dickens wanted the English to learn the same lesson as Scrooge; all life is valuable, even the poor, homeless, and destitute. Some people believe political works are written by former vice-presidents, congressmen, commentaries, analysts, and presidents alone. Well, some are, but those are not what I'm talking

about. I mean literature. Let's face it. *Primary Colors*, a political novel written to mirror the Clinton campaign and office, probably isn't going to age well or become a literary classic. However, *Julius Caesar*, *Animal Farm*, *Anthem*, *Lord of the Flies*, "Rip Van Winkle," and *A Christmas Carol* have lasted because they say something in those works and in those characters that we see in ourselves and our society. It's political writing cleverly disguised as entertainment. Is every work a major political work? No. Writers are interested in the world around them. Therefore, some works have stronger political agendas and some only touch on politics. Even Poe touches on politics in "The Fall of the House of Usher." He is commenting on the nobility and their quirks and oddness. He's not trying to change the system; he's only including it because it fits with the story he wants to tell. Well, why don't authors just say these things in their works? Well, if Sophocles actually said that the Oedipus trilogy was a political work concerning the Spartans and the Athens, he would have been killed. Why didn't Shakespeare have Claudius just tell his brother King Hamlet that he hated him and wanted the throne and his wife? That's called treason. They put people to death for that. To paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, no man in his right mind wants to go to jail, or to be killed.

18. YES, SHE'S A CHRIST FIGURE, TOO.

We live in a Christian society. We do. That doesn't mean that everyone in our society is Christian, but it does mean that Christianity influences so much of our conscious and unconscious lives. I once had a student say to me, "That's not fair to atheists. They don't know the Christian way of life." Ok, listen to me. Atheists don't wake up on a Tuesday morning and proclaim "There is no God!" They study all religions. They form opinions, thoughts, and ideas. Eventually they come to the conclusion that there is no God. However in order to reach that conclusion, they read, heard, learned, or studied the same Bible stories as we did. They know about Adam, Eve, Noah, the flood, King Solomon, and the others. I've also had students tell me, "I don't go to church that much. I don't know these stories." Well, guess what? No one, even those who claim to be, is an expert on the Bible. No one person knows everything about God, Christianity, and religion. If we read a work that alludes to the great flood and Noah, and you don't know that story, guess what you need to do? Read that story! Look it up on the internet. No matter what your religious beliefs, to get the most out of reading British and American Literature, we all have to know something about the Old and the New Testament. Having said all of that, let's return to the topic of Christ figures. There are certain traits that make a character a Christ figure. This doesn't mean that Simon from *Lord of the Flies* is Christ. That's not what I meant at all. He's a Christ FIGURE. Simon has traits in common with Christ, but they are not the same being. If Simon was Christ, his name would be Christ, not Simon. No literary Christ figure can ever be as pure, as perfect, as divine as Jesus Christ. Features of a Christ figure: crucified, martyred for a cause, wounds --in hands, feet, side, and head--, in agony, self-sacrificing, good with children, good with fish, loaves of bread, wine, water, thirty-three years old, a carpenter, humble, walks on water, outstretched arms, spends time alone in the wilderness, confronted the devil, seen in the company of thieves, tells parables or stores with

lessons, buried on the third day, has followers, forgiving, unmarried, carries a burden, good and pure, wears a crown of thorns, or wants to redeem the world. A Christ figure may have one, two, or lots of these traits. Rarely will a Christ figure have all of these traits. The Christ figure may have Christ like traits that aren't on this list. Religious knowledge is helpful, but holding religious beliefs too tightly can be a problem. (Avoid the all or nothing approach to religion— the Christ figure MUST have all these traits or he is not a Christ figure. Literature doesn't work like that. It doesn't deal in absolutes.) *The Old Man and the Sea* contains Santiago, a Christ figure. *King Lear* is a Christ figure at times. Atticus Finch is a Christ figure. Having stated all of this, that doesn't mean that a story can mean anything you want it to mean. All of these ideas are based on the text from the story. That's why we learn quotes. If readers could see anything they wanted to in a story, that wouldn't be called reading. That would be called writing.

19. FLIGHTS OF FANCY

Basic physics says that humans can't fly. We just can't. What about airplanes? That's still not us flying; that's a machine flying and us riding. For most of human history, we have been earth bound. Accept that as a fact. Therefore, if a character is suspended in air even briefly he is more than likely symbolic. The Greek story of Daedalus and Icarus is possibly the most famous of all flying myths. You need to know this myth. It's the basis of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. In general flying is freedom, freedom from specific circumstances and general burdens. A character who can fly is not anchored to something in the novel. Now sometimes there are characters who should be able to fly but can't. Imagine a story about a bird who can't fly. That's irony. Irony trumps everything. What about characters who don't quite fly, fall from a great distance, or have their flights interrupted. That means something, too. In general, this is a bad thing, but it varies depending on the work. Readers are thrilled by the possibility of flying, but they are also frightened at the prospect of falling. There are many stories that contain no actual examples of flight. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is basically about a little boy who wants to grow up and become a writer, but he has to leave home to do this. He has to fly away, but there are no wings or actual flight involved. This is metaphorical flight. The soul takes wings and leaves whatever it is behind.

20. IRONY TRUMPS EVERYTHING

Irony trumps everything. "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez contains an old, smelly man who falls to earth and seems to perform miracles that don't work out right. Summer should be warm, rich, and liberating, but what if the author makes it hot, dusty, and stifling? TS Eliot takes our connotations of spring and turns them around with "April is the cruelest month."

21. IF SHE COMES UP, IT'S BAPTISM.

If you ever noticed how often literary characters get wet? Well, it means something. Drowning or not drowning has profound plot implications. To survive a drowning isn't to just merely be alive. It is to be alive again, reborn. That character has or will change symbolically. It's like a baptism, death and rebirth through the medium of water. Think back to Edna in *The Awakening*. She

chose to alter her relationship with the world and how she would leave this world. Chopin could have had Edna fall, hit her head, and drown. In a sense, Edna has been drowning in life for as long as she can remember. She's lost in her world and has no control over it. Now, not every character who is dunked in water experiences baptism. The character has to be ready to receive the baptism. When writers baptize a character, they generally mean death, rebirth, a new start, or a new identity. However, baptism can mean other things too. So, if a character drowns, what does that mean? He is dead. Every drowning serves its own purpose within the context of that work.

22. GEOGRAPHY MATTERS...

When you tell others that you are going on vacation, what do they ask first? Where are you going? Location is extremely important in literature. What is geography? Geography includes hills, creeks, swamps, bogs, islands, beaches, degrees of latitude, oceans, rivers, and so on. Geography is setting, but it can also be psychology, attitude, finance, industry, and whatever else forges the characters of the location. Think of *Wuthering Heights*. The Heights and the Grange are very different places, just as different as their inhabitants. In Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," there are many reasons Poe spends the opening pages describing the location. The landscape, architecture, weather, mood, and tone merge to set the story in motion. In *The Heart of Darkness*, the Europeans don't really understand much about the Congo or Africa. They don't know the land, the river, or the climate. They don't understand what they are facing. In *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck and Jim reach a fork in the river at the same time that Huck has to make a decision about whether or not to risk eternal damnation by helping Jim or to do what he has been taught is morally right and turn in Jim. Here's a general rule: When writers send characters south, it's so they can run amok. The effects can be comic or tragic, but they run amok because the characters are having encounters with the subconscious.

23. SEASONS MATTER TOO

For as long as literature has been written, the seasons have stood for the same sets of meanings. Spring is generally a time of rebirth, new beginnings, youth, childhood, and newness. Young lovers escape during the springtime. In Henry James' *Daisy Miller*, why is the main character named after a spring flower? She's young, fresh, direct, open, naïve, and flirtatious. Daisies bloom in springtime. Summer is the time when the young begin to mature, hence the symbolic meaning behind summer weddings. They are leaving childhood behind and becoming adults. Summer is also passion, love, and fulfillment. Fall is a time of middle age – creaky, yellow leaves, it's starting to get cold, birds have recently left, tiredness, harvest (agricultural and personal), and so on. Winter is a time of death, night, sleep, stillness, resentment, and old age. Winter is also anger and hatred. King Lear rages during a winter storm.

24. ONE STORY

There's only one story. What's this one story about? Well, no one knows for sure. It's not about anything, but it's about everything. It's about everything that anyone wants to write about. The stories are about what humans ponder, what it means to be human. Humans are interested in themselves and their place in time

and space. Do writer's think about this as they write? No, yes, sometimes, not really. It depends. The big word for this is intertextuality. That means everything's connected. It's unavoidable. Even avoidance is a form of interaction. Some writers say "I wasn't even thinking about that." It doesn't matter. Writing contains archetypes or patterns. Somewhere back in myth land each story component comes into being. It works so well that story tellers for generations, thousands of years, decide to keep it. Don't bother looking for the originals. You can't find the archetype just as you can't find the pure myth. Some scholars once thought that myths originated with the Bible; however, humans existed for thousands of years before. The stories existed before the ancient Greeks and Romans. The myths must go back to ancient oral and pictorial traditions. When Ug and Grug the cavemen were painting pictures, I'm sure the stories they were telling came from someone else.

25. MARKED FOR GREATNESS

In real life, when people have physical imperfections, it doesn't mean anything thematically, metaphorically, or spiritual. However, in literature it means a great deal. Quasimodo is a hunchback, Piggy has asthma, Oedipus has damaged feet and eyes, Victor Frankenstein's Creature is a man made of many parts, Achilles' feet were different, and Shakespeare's Richard III is as mentally twisted as his scoliosis. Not all characters who are marked are as repugnant as Richard. In fairy tales, the hero is marked in some way: scarred, lame, wounded, painted. He is set apart. Even Harry Potter has a scar. If a writer brings up a physical problem, handicap, deficiency, or disability, it means something.

26. HE'S BLIND FOR A REASON

The soothsayer/ seer/ prophet in *Oedipus Rex* is blind, but he can see things in the spirit and divine world that others are oblivious to. Oedipus will eventually become blind himself, so will Gloucester from *King Lear*. If an author introduces a blind character, every other scene will make some reference to sight: light, darkness, who can see, who can't see, and who won't see. In James Joyce's "Araby" the narrator lives on a "blind" street. In Act II of *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo is blind.

27. IT'S NEVER JUST HEART DISEASE

In literature there is no better, no more metaphorical illness than heart disease, like Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour." In real life heart disease is frightening, sudden, shattering, exhausting, but not lyrical or metaphorical. The heart is the symbol of emotion. It has been used in literature as this symbol for at least 2800 years. Knowing this, writers use this knowledge and create heart disease in characters as metaphors for bad love, loneliness, cruelty, disloyalty, cowardice, lack of determination, etc. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Man of Adamant" is about a man who hates mankind and is convinced everyone is a sinner. He moves to a cave that drips water filled with calcium. Slowly the calcium enters his body and his heart turns to stone. He suffers from a heart disease. Maybe Paul from "The Rocking-Horse Winner" dies of heart failure. Maybe Miles from *The Turn of the Screw* dies from heart failure. Maybe. If heart trouble shows up in a work, begin to look for its significance. Also remember

that some characters can choose a heart ailment. As in Hawthorne's work, a character can choose to isolate his heart from others.

28. ...AND RARELY JUST ILLNESS.

In James Joyce's short story "The Sisters," we learn that a priest is dying (it's Joyce...priests die) and there is "no hope" for him; he suffers from paralysis. Hummmmwhat's Joyce saying here? A priest with no hope -- it's not the just the priest who is sick. What is really ill in the story? As in most Joyce works, the inhabitants of Dublin and Ireland are paralyzed by the structures laid upon them by church, state, and convention. There are principles that govern the use of disease in literature.

- a. *Not all diseases are created equal.* TB is frequent in Victorian literature. Syphilis is less common in literature, but what are its implications? How does one acquire such a disease as syphilis?
- b. *It should be picturesque.* Even consumption (TB) has some beauty in it. The coughing up blood and the sounds of hacking up a lung are not at all pretty, but TB patients have translucent skin, and they can take on the appearance of a martyr.
- c. *It should be mysterious in origin.* Back to TB. Keats nor the Brontës had any idea that caring for sick family members would lead to their doom. That love and tenderness was rewarded with a lengthy, fatal illness that goes way beyond ironic.
- d. *It should have strong symbolic or metaphorical possibilities.* TB was a wasting disease in terms of the individual wasting away, growing thinner, and in terms of the waste of a life that had barely begun.

The metaphorical possibilities a disease offers override all other considerations. Take plagues for example. In *Oedipus Rex*, Thebes has been hit by various plagues: withered crops, stillborn children, etc. A plague can destroy entire cities and populations by what characters believe to be divine wrath (they knew nothing of sanitation). Dickens killed off characters by giving them fevers. The character contracted the fever, took to bed, and then died. Fevers could represent the randomness of life, the harshness of life, the powers of the divine, or a variety of other possibilities. In Poe's "The Masque of Red Death," he may be alluding to TB or the bubonic plague, but his disease is what no real disease can ever be. Exactly what the author wants it to be.

30. DON'T READ WITH YOUR EYES

If you are going to understand a story, you must read it NOT through your eyes, but through the eyes of the characters. I've often have students say to me, "Well, I would never do that." Great, it's not your story. It is irrelevant what you would or would not do. The story exists in its own world, not yours. It mimics life, but that doesn't mean it imitates your life. After reading *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I had a student tell me that she would never leave behind everything she knew to start her life over again. Well, it's not her story. It belongs to the characters of that work. In *The Awakening*, Edna drowns herself in the Gulf of Mexico. I would never do that. However, having read the entire book and analyzed it, I can explain what caused Edna to make that choice. What is meant by "don't read with your eyes" also includes not bringing your modern day ideas,

standards, and conceptions to the work. If you are reading a 400 year old Shakespeare play, you can't understand it using the world of email, iPods, and internet (Even though some modern movie directors have tried). You must understand the historical moment of the story. This is why we include the literary period and county in our book cards. When in college, someone asked my instructor why *The Last of the Mohicans* contained so much violence. I was astonished. That was the life they lived. Also, after reading several Greek myths, I had a student tell me that he would have never believed in the Greek gods or goddess. Sure, he wouldn't have (that drips with sarcasm). No one had heard of Jesus or Christianity. The Greek myths were all the Greeks had to explain their world. Now, too much acceptance of the author's viewpoint can lead to difficulties. Consider the Greek myths. Do I expect you to change your religion, travel to Mount Olympus, and worship Zeus? No, but I do expect you to understand that an entire ancient culture believed these myths and took them for fact with the same conviction that most of us take Christianity for fact. Another point, when reading strongly female literature (boys don't groan), I hear students say, "Why doesn't she just get a job?" Obviously that student doesn't understand the time period of the story. Think about it. Women didn't work outside of the home, and just who was going to give these women jobs? The grocery store manager. Nope. Think!

31. IS HE SERIOUS? AND OTHER IRONIES

Understand this – Irony Trumps Everything! If there is a road, a hero is supposed to travel down it. Roads, oceans, paths, etc only exist in literature so that someone can travel. Mark Twain, John Bunyan, Geoffrey Chaucer, Robert Frost, and others use thoroughfares as a means to travel someone, to change. However, there are exceptions to this. *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett is a famous exception. Two tramps wait by a desolate road they never take. The two don't go anywhere; they just wait. Everyday they stand and wait in the exact spot as the day before. This is ironic. They wait by a road (a symbol of travel), but they never take the road anywhere. Rain is another example. Rain implies life, birth, promise, restoration, etc. However, in Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*, the hero walks out into the rain after his lover and her child have both died in childbirth. None of the normal associations with rain are going to happen for this character. This is ironic. The author takes our expectations and unhinges them. Irony works because it deviates from our expectations. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* has a line in which one character says of another recently widowed character, "her hair has gone quite gold with grief." We expect it to say her hair has turned grey with the stress of grieving; however, blond implies something different. Irony Trumps Everything! This means that everything you ever learned about literature is rubbish when irony is introduced.

32. HOW DO YOU KNOW IT'S IRONY?

Consider these questions when reading.

A. What does the story signify?

What is the author saying in the story? What do you see as its meaning?

B. How does the story signify?

What elements does the author employ to cause the story to signify whatever it signifies?

What elements cause it to mean the things you take it to mean?

GROUND RULES FOR IDENTIFYING IRONY

- A. Read Everything
- B. Use any interpretive strategies you've picked up from this guide or elsewhere.
- C. Employ no outside sources about the story. Don't poke around on the internet looking for answers until you have come up with your own conclusion.
- D. Write down your results, so there's no fudging.

33. ENVOI?

Envoi means a short stanza concluding a poem in certain archaic metrical forms, as a ballad, and serving as a dedication, or a similar postscript to a prose composition. When writers finish their books and send them off into the world on their missions, the books become orphans. The orphans lose what little parental protection the authors could offer. This theory is often hard for students to understand. Authors create these books, works of art. Then critics and literary scholars take the books and devourer them by turning them into symbols, metaphors, and literary devices that the author may or may not have intended. That's part of art. The art is created and released into the world. It has to succeed, fail, soar, or falter by itself. The artist loses control over its interpretations, meanings, and ideas. The works become what they become.

I learned this quote at the AP Reading: *We can only analyze the books we read, not the ones the writers wrote.*

This guide is not a comprehensive guide to literature. There are many more possibilities to be explored. No one handout, book, or guide could include every literary idea for every literary work.

Notes compiled from

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