

Reading Between the Lines...from How to Read Literature Like a Professor

This is a very short recap of some of the chapters in Thomas C. Foster's terrific book. This will serve as a jumping-off point in our discussions of much of what we read, and also as a template for an original literature analysis of one of your summer reading books. There are additional excellent chapters in the book, and much more information given on each of these categories, as well as examples. I highly recommend a thorough reading!

1. Every Trip is a Quest

Look for examples of archetypal characters as well as allusions and situations. This means knights, dragons, princesses, a grail, danger; but please be aware that a dragon could be a semi truck, and the princess could be "the popular girl" in high school. Quest literature relies heavily on Homer, Virgil, myths, and the King Arthur legend. Components that Foster mentions: a) a quester b) a place to go c) the stated reason to go there d) challenges and trials E) a real reason to go (the real reason is ALWAYS some sort of self-knowledge) (Foster 3).

Examples: Huck Finn, Harry Potter, Star Wars, Lord of the Rings

2. Eating is an Act of Communion

Eating is a mundane, bodily function. Describing every meal that a character eats would be dull, time-consuming, and frankly odd. Therefore, when an author chooses to include food, it is generally significant. Breaking bread together illustrates sharing and peace (not always in a religious sense, and often not), or some kind of bond. Similarly, awkward or "failed" meals show the lack of a bond.

Examples: Huck Finn, Lord of the Flies, To Kill a Mockingbird

3. Vampires in Literature (look for ghosts and doppelgangers, too!)

Don't be on the lookout for fanged critters in dark capes, or you'll miss the real vampires. Vampires can be (but aren't always) seductive and sexy, but their basic premise and purpose is to selfishly exploit others (16). They steal the life force of others...and it isn't always as obvious as blood!

Examples: Daisy Miller

4. Archetypes/Stereotypes...or "Where Have I Seen Her Before?" (28)

Be on the lookout for characters that you will 'recognize' from history, legends, myths, etc. This is more than a brief allusion; it is frequently a re-working of a real character in a way that is slowly recognizable.

5. When in Doubt, It's from Shakespeare

Many authors rely heavily on the Bard for his pithy and insightful statements into human nature. Rather than use a lengthy explanation that sums up guilt, an author might rely on a reference to "Out, damn spot!" and assume that a worldly reader will make the connection. Given that fewer and fewer people read less and less Shakespeare, this can be tough. If something sounds poetic and lovely, for gosh sakes Google it. It's probably Will. Even his plots have been relentlessly rehashed.

Examples: O, 10 Things I Hate About You, Kiss Me Kate, The Lion King, West Side Story.

6. ...or the Bible!

If it isn't Will, it's probably from the Bible, another rich source that any culturally literate reader should know. We will learn a lot of allusions that derive from the Bible, but be on the lookout for rich imagery and language that mentions famous Biblical people or stories (Eden, Cain and Abel, the four horsemen, the gospels).

Examples: Pulp Fiction, East of Eden, Absalom Absalom

7. Mythology

Yet another rich, fertile ground for authors to plow. Look for characters, situations, lessons, and references. I recommend reading Edith Hamilton's Mythology if you don't feel that you are familiar with most of the basic Greek and Roman myths; Norse mythology is far less commonly used, but still interesting.

Examples: O, Brother, Where Art Thou?

8. Look for the Weather

Pay careful attention to the weather in the pieces that we read. It is typically significant and packed with meaning. For the same reason that food is not always discussed, weather is not mentioned unless it is important. Remember, "it's never just rain" (75). Weather can be cleansing...ominous...portentous... you name it.

9. Symbolism...Is that a Symbol?

"Sure it is" (97). Please remember that almost anything can serve as a symbol, and not everyone will agree on what it is symbolizing. Some are frequently used, even trite... fire, the sun, black birds, etc. Keep an open mind, and if you think that something is symbolic, be prepared to defend that. If you can textually defend it, you are right. Don't forget that an allegory is different from a symbol. Also, keep in mind:

"One mention is an occurrence. Two may be a coincidence, but three constitutes a definite trend" (280).

10. It's All Political

Well, not all...but much. If you can place a work in an author's historical context or use what you know about that author's beliefs, you may find that the work is a political statement or allegory. This may not serve you well in the AP test itself (it is rare that a passage presents itself as a political statement on its own merit), but in reading and reviewing literature holistically it is very important.

Examples: Fall of the House of Usher, Animal Farm, Rip van Winkle.

11. Christ Figures

No person in history has more effectively illustrated the concept of sacrifice and redemption. Whether you are a believer or no, the story of Jesus Christ is one you must know if you will recognize some of the subtle subtext in many works of literature. Remember please that a Christ figure need not fulfill all of the qualities listed, and may only have a few of them. Keep a lookout for:

- a) crucified, or wounds in hands, feet, side, or head
- b) in agony
- c) self-sacrificing
- d) good with children
- e) good with loaves, fishes, water, wine
- f) thirty-three
- g) carpentry
- h) humble modes of transportation or manner
- i) walks on water

- j) outstretched arms
- k) spends time alone in wilderness
- l) tempted, confronted by the "devil"
- m) spends time with thieves, prostitutes, the lowly
- n) creates parables, aphorisms
- o) buried, rose on third day
- p) disciples...look for the number 12
- q) forgiving
- r) redeems the unworthy (Foster 119-120).

Again, this list isn't comprehensive. Just keep your eyes open.
Examples: Old Man and the Sea

12. Water is Baptism

When a character enters water, one of two things happens: he comes out or he drowns. If he comes out, look for changes in that character.

Example: Ordinary People

13. Geography Matters!

For this category, I am talking about almost anything that is physical geography. A tunnel, a hill, a valley, a mountain, North, South, East, West, the sea, a pond...anything. Think for a moment of the stereotypes you have heard of those from the South...now, why would you as an author place a scene there, or have someone travel there? There is intention behind geography...it is your job to discern it.

Examples: The Most Dangerous Game, Of Mice and Men

14. Seasons are also important!

The symbolism of the seasons is pretty tried-and-true, so look beyond the obvious here. Spring is rebirth, Summer illustrates joy and freedom, Fall is a decline, and Winter is death. Don't rely solely on those statements...either an author is richly exploiting those tired stereotypes, or turning them on their ear.

15. Scars and Deformities

When a character has a flaw or deformity, it is significant. An author takes the time to describe it, and in some cases limit what a character can physically do, for a reason. While this can sometimes indicate or mirror something damaged within, that can be too easy, so don't be lazy when analyzing this.

Examples: Harry Potter, Grendel, the Hunchback

