
*How to
Read Literature
Like a Professor:
For Kids*

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HARPER

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Dedication

For my sons, Robert and Nathan

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INTRODUCTION

How'd He Do That?

MR. LINDNER? *THAT wimp?*

Right. Mr. Lindner, the wimp. So what did you think the devil would look like? If he were red with a tail, horns, and cloven hooves, any fool would know to turn down his offer.

The class and I are discussing Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). The confusing questions arise when I suggest that Mr. Lindner is the devil.

The Youngers, an African-American family in Chicago, have made a down payment on a house in an all-white neighborhood. Mr. Lindner, a meek little man, has come to visit with a check in hand. He (along with all the neighbors) wants the family to take the check and move right back out again.

At first Walter Lee Younger confidently turns down the offer. He believes that the family's money (a life insurance payment they received after the death of Walter's father) is secure. But shortly after sending Mr. Lindner away, he discovers that two-thirds of that money has been stolen. All of a sudden Mr. Lindner's insulting offer comes to look like the family's salvation.

Bargains with the devil go a long way back. Most take the form of the Faust legend. In this old story, the devil offers Faust a life of pleasure, riches, and power, in return for his soul. Faust accepts happily, enjoys his good times, and then repents too late as the devil drags his dying soul to hell. It's a story that's retold often. Each time, the hero is offered something he desperately wants—power or knowledge or a fastball that will beat the Yankees—and all he has to give up is his soul.

In Hansberry's version, when Mr. Lindner makes his offer, he doesn't mention Walter Lee's soul. He doesn't even know that he is demanding it. He is, though. Walter Lee can be rescued from his family's crisis. All he has to do is to admit that he's not equal to his new white neighbors, that his pride and self-respect, his *identity*, can be bought.

If that's not selling your soul, what is?

But Walter Lee resists the devil's temptation. He looks at himself and at the true cost of the bargain and recovers in time to reject the devil's—Mr. Lindner's—offer. Walter Lee grows into a hero as he wrestles with his own demons as well as with the one who comes to visit with a check, and he comes through without falling. His soul is still his own.

SOMETHING ALWAYS HAPPENS in this conversation between professor and students. Each of us gets a look at our faces. My look says, "What, you don't get it?" Theirs says, "We don't get it. And we think you're making it up." Basically, we've all read the same story, but we haven't used the same tools to analyze it.

It might seem as if the teacher is inventing a way to interpret the story out of thin air. Actually, the teacher just has some more experience. And the teacher has gathered, over the years, a kind of "grammar of literature." That's a certain set of patterns, codes, and rules that we can learn to use when we're reading a piece of writing.

Stories and novels have a very large set of conventions, or rules, or things that you can learn to expect: types of characters, plot rhythms, chapter structures, points of view. Poems have a great many conventions of their own. Plays, too. And there are certain conventions that show up in all three. Spring usually means the same thing, whether it's mentioned in a poem or a play or a novel. So do

snow. So does darkness. So does sleep.

~~Whenever spring is mentioned, we all start to think of the same ideas: youth, promise, young lambs, children skipping . . . on and on. And if we keep thinking, we might get to other concepts, like new birth, new life, renewal.~~

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

Same way you get to Carnegie Hall. Practice.

When readers first read a piece of fiction, they focus on the story and the characters: who are the people, what are they doing, and what wonderful or terrible things are happening to them? They will respond emotionally, with joy or horror, laughter or tears, anxiety or delight. This is what every author hopes for.

But when an English teacher reads, though he will respond emotionally as well, a lot of his attention will also be fixed on other things. It will be asking other questions. Where did that joy or grief or anxiety *come* from? Does this character seem like any others I've read about? Where have I seen this situation before? If you learn to ask these questions, you'll read and understand literature in a new light. And it will become even more rewarding and fun.

CHAPTER ONE

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

OKAY, SO HERE'S the deal: let's say you're reading a book about an average sixteen-year-old kid in the summer of 1968. The kid—let's call him Kip Smith, who hopes his acne clears up before he gets drafted—is on his way to the A&P to get a loaf of bread. His bike is a one-speed with a coaster brake and therefore very embarrassing to ride, and riding it to run an errand for his mother makes it worse. Along the way he has a couple of disturbing experiences, including an unpleasant encounter with a German shepherd. And it's all topped off in the supermarket parking lot when he sees the girl of his dreams, Karen, laughing and fooling around in Tony Vauxhall's brand-new car, a Barracuda.

Now, Kip hates Tony already because he's got a name like Vauxhall and not Smith, and because the Barracuda is bright green and goes approximately the speed of light, and also because Tony has never had to work a day in his life. Karen, who is laughing and having a great time, turns and sees Kip, who asked her out not so long ago. And she keeps laughing.

Kip goes on into the store to buy the loaf of Wonder Bread that his mother told him to pick up. As he reaches for the bread, he decides right then and there to lie about his age to the Marine recruiter, even though it means going to Vietnam, because nothing will ever happen to him if he stays in this one-horse town where the only thing that matters is how much money your father has.

What just happened here?

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

In other words, a quest just happened.

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

True. But think about it. What is a quest made of? A knight, a dangerous road, a Holy Grail, at least one dragon, one evil knight, one princess. Sounds about right? That's a list I can live with. We've got a knight (named Kip), a dangerous road (nasty German shepherd), a Holy Grail (a loaf of Wonder Bread), at least one dragon (trust me, a '68 Barracuda could definitely breathe fire), one evil knight (Tony), one princess (Karen).

Seems like a bit of a stretch.

At first, sure. But let's think about what a quest is made of. It needs five things:

1. a quester;
2. a place to go;
3. a stated reason to go there;
4. challenges and trials along the way;
5. a real reason to go there.

Item 1 is easy; a quester is just a person who goes on a quest, whether or not he knows it's a quest. In fact, he usually doesn't know. Items 2 and 3 go together: someone tells our main character, our *hero*, to go somewhere and do something. Go in search of the Holy Grail. Go to the store for some bread. Go to Mount Doom and throw in a ring. Go there, do that.

Now remember that I said the *stated* reason for the quest. That's because of item 5.

The real reason for the quest is *never* the same as the stated reason. In fact, more often than not the quester fails at the stated task. (Frodo makes it all the way to Mount Doom, but does he throw the ring in the fire? No, he does not. Really—go read it again if you don't believe me.) So why do heroes go on these quests, and why do we care? They go because of the stated task, believing that it is the real mission. We know, however, that their quest is educational. They don't know enough about the only subject that really matters: themselves. **The real reason for a quest is *always* self-knowledge.**

Frodo may have saved the world from Sauron, but that really just turned out to be a bit of luck. What his quest actually brings him is a new understanding of the value of mercy and who needs it: Gollum, Frodo himself, and probably everybody in Middle Earth.

Or here's another example. You know the book, I'm sure: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1957). Wait a minute. *The Grinch is on a quest?* Sure. Here's the setup:

1. *Our quester*: a grumpy, cave-dwelling creature who's had it up to here with the noise, celebration, and general happiness of Christmas.
2. *A place to go*: from his mountaintop cave to the village of Whoville, far below.
3. *A stated reason to go there*: to steal every Christmas present, tree, and bit of decoration he can lay his hands on.
4. *Challenges and trials*: a risky sleigh trip down the mountain, considerable effort packing up the Christmas presents and trimmings, an encounter with a two-year-old girl who puts all the Grinch's efforts in peril simply by asking a question, and a painfully difficult trip back up the mountain with an overloaded sleigh.
5. *The real reason to go*: to learn what Christmas actually means, to have his shriveled head expand back to its proper size (or even bigger), and to find genuine happiness.

Once you get the hang of it, you can see how *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* follows the conventions of a quest tale. So does *The Lord of the Rings*. *Huckleberry Finn*. *Star Wars*. *Holes*. And most other stories of someone going somewhere and doing something, especially if the going and the doing weren't the protagonist's idea in the first place.

A word of warning: if I sometimes speak here and in the chapters to come as if a certain statement is always true, I apologize. "Always" and "never" are not words that have much meaning when it comes to literature. For one thing, as soon as something seems to always be true, some wise guy will come along and write something to prove that it's not.

Let's think about journeys. Sometimes the quest fails or is not taken up by the protagonist. And every trip really a quest? It depends. Some days I just drive to work—no adventures, no growth. I'm sure that the same is true in writing. Sometimes plot requires that a writer get a character from home to work and back again. But still, when a character hits the road, we should start to pay attention, just to see if, you know, something's going on there.

Once you figure out quests, the rest is easy.

CHAPTER TWO

Nice to Eat with You: Acts of Communion

SOMETIMES A MEAL is just a meal. Characters in books can get hungry just like people outside of books. More often, though, it's not. In books, whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion.

Communion has for many readers one and only one meaning. While that meaning is very important, it is not the only one. Nor does Christianity have a lock on the practice. Nearly every religion has some kind of ritual where the faithful come together to share nourishment. But not all communions are holy. In books, there are quite a few kinds of communion.

Here's the thing to remember about communions of all kinds: in the real world, breaking bread together is an act of sharing and peace, since if you're breaking bread, you're generally not breaking heads. You usually invite your friends to dinner, not your enemies. In fact, we're quite particular about who we eat with. Generally, eating with someone is a way of saying, "I'm with you, I like you, we form a community together." And that is a kind of communion.

So it is in literature. And in literature, there is another reason. Writing a meal scene is so difficult and basically so *dull* (what can you say about fried chicken that hasn't already been said?), that the author really needs to be some very important reason to include one in the story. And that reason has to do with how the characters are getting along. Or not getting along.

How about the main character (who doesn't even have a name) of Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960)? He doesn't want to eat green eggs and ham. Not even to try them. *And* he doesn't want to listen to the little creature named Sam coaxing and begging and nagging him to take just one bite. In fact, he wants Sam to go away. "You let me be!" he orders Sam. But when he finally does give in and try, he likes green eggs and ham—and he even likes Sam. He eats, and he gains a friend. Communion at its simplest.

Sometimes just meaning or planning to share some food is all that the story needs—you don't actually have to see the characters taking a single bite. Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) is all about eating, even though it starts out as one of the hungriest books out there. Charlie and his family live on bread, potatoes, and cabbage, and not enough of any of it. They are slowly starving.

There is love in this downtrodden family, though, and the person poor little Charlie loves the most is his grandpa Joe. Grandpa Joe gives Charlie all the money he has in the world: a dime. Charlie uses the dime to buy (what else?) a chocolate bar. And Charlie and Grandpa Joe share the experience of hesitating, almost fearfully, peeling off the wrapper to see if, underneath, they will find the golden ticket that will let them into Willy Wonka's fabulous chocolate factory.

They don't find it. They find only a chocolate bar.

And they both burst out laughing.

They don't have to take a bite of the candy for readers to see what these two characters share. They share the sense of fun, of excitement, and of possibility that is a part of childhood. They share laughter. They share *hope*. Their communion over the bar of Willy Wonka's chocolate brings them closer than ever, and the old man and the little boy spend the rest of the book at each other's side.

What about when characters don't eat together? What if a meal turns ugly or doesn't happen at all?

There's a different outcome, but the same logic. If a tasty meal or snack or a delicious bar of chocolate suggests that good things will happen between the people who share it, then a meal that doesn't work out is a bad sign. It happens all the time on television shows. Two people are at dinner and a third comes up, and one or both of the first two refuse to eat. They place their napkins on the plates, or say something about having lost their appetites, and walk away. Immediately we know what they think about the intruder.

Consider another book about chocolate: Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974). Well, the title says the book is about chocolate. Actually the book is about bullying. And corruption. And power. About what it takes—and what it costs—to stand up to people with power. Jerry Renault defies the students who control his school by refusing to sell chocolates for a fund-raiser, and he is destroyed for that choice. No one supports him. He's on his own.

Nobody eats, either. In an entire book about chocolate, nobody tastes one mouthful. There is no eating, there is no communion, and there is no help for Jerry. If anybody had ever cracked open a box of those fund-raiser chocolates and taken a bite, the poor kid might have had a chance.

CHAPTER THREE

Nice to Eat You: Acts of Vampires

WHAT A DIFFERENCE one little word makes! If you take the “with” out of “Nice to eat with you,” it begins to mean something quite different. Less wholesome. More creepy. It just goes to show that not all eating that happens in literature is friendly. Not only that, it doesn’t even always look like eating. Beyond here, there be monsters.

Vampires in literature, you say? Big deal. I’ve read *Twilight*. *Dracula*. Anne Rice.

Good for you. Everyone deserves a good scare—or a good swoon. But actual vampires are only the beginning. Not only that, they’re not even necessarily the most alarming. After all, you can at least recognize a vampire who has fangs.

Let’s start with Dracula himself. You know how in all those Dracula movies, or almost all, the Count has this weird attractiveness to him? Sometimes he’s downright sexy. Always, he’s dangerous and mysterious, and he tends to focus on beautiful, unmarried women. And when he gets them, he grows younger, more alive (if we can say this of the undead). Meanwhile, his victims become like him and begin to seek out their own victims.

Now let’s think about this for a moment. A nasty old man, attractive but evil, violates your women, leaves his mark on them, steals their innocence, and leaves them helpless followers in his shadow. I think we’d be reasonable to conclude that the whole Count Dracula story is up to something more than merely scaring us out of our wits. In fact, we might conclude that it has something to do with sex.

But what about vampires who never bite?

You’re right—famously, Edward does not bite Bella. But the vampire hero of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005) is mysteriously and powerfully attractive, isn’t he? (Just like Dracula.) And he *wants* to bite Bella, doesn’t he? (Just like Dracula.) Edward may be different in his self-control, but not in his desire. He wants exactly what Dracula wants—the blood of an innocent young woman. A young woman whose bedroom he creeps into. A young woman he watches while she sleeps.

So vampirism isn’t about vampires?

Oh, it is. It is. But it’s also about other things: selfishness, exploitation, a refusal to accept that other people have the right to exist, just for starters. We’ll come back to this list a little later on.

This rule also applies to other scary favorites, such as ghosts or doppelgängers (ghost doubles or evil twins). Ghosts are always about something besides themselves. Think of the ghost of Hamlet’s father, when he takes to appearing on the castle ramparts at midnight. He’s not there simply to haunt his son; he’s there to point out something seriously wrong in Denmark’s royal household. (What’s wrong? Oh, just that the king’s brother first murdered the king and then married his widow.)

Or consider Marley’s ghost in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), who is really a walking, clanking, moaning lesson in ethics for Scrooge. Or take Dr. Jekyll’s other half. In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Robert Louis Stevenson uses the hideous Mr. Hyde to show readers that even the most respectable man has a dark side. Writers use ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and all manner of scary things to symbolize certain things about our everyday existence.

Ghosts and vampires are never only about ghosts and vampires.

Here’s where it gets a little tricky, though: the ghosts and vampires don’t always have to appear in visible form. Sometimes the really scary bloodsuckers are entirely human.

Henry James has a famous story, "Daisy Miller" (1878), in which there are no ghosts, there is no demonic possession—there's nothing more mysterious than a midnight jaunt to the Colosseum in Rome. Daisy is a young American woman who does as she pleases. She upsets the social customs of the rich Europeans she meets. Eventually, Daisy dies, apparently because she caught malaria on her trip to the Colosseum. But you know what actually kills her? Vampires.

No, really. Vampires. I know I told you there weren't any supernatural forces at work here. But you don't need fangs and a cape to be a vampire.

Daisy wants the attention of a man named Winterbourne. Winterbourne and his aunt and the circle of friends watch Daisy and disapprove of her. But because of a hunger to disapprove of something, they never cut her loose entirely. Instead, they play with her yearning to become one of them. At last, Winterbourne spots Daisy with a (male) friend at the Colosseum at night and pretends not to see her. Daisy says, "He cuts me dead!" That should be clear enough for anybody.

The important points of the vampire story are all here. There's an older man who represents corrupt, worn-out values. There's a fresh, innocent young woman. The woman loses her youth, energy, and virtue. The older man continues to live. The young woman dies.

There are books, of course, where the ghost or vampire is just a cheap thrill, without any particular meaning. But such works tend not to have much staying power in readers' minds. We're haunted only while we're reading. In the books that continue to haunt us, however, the figure of the vampire, the cannibal, the spook, shows up again and again, whenever someone grows in strength by weakening someone else.

That's what the vampire figure really comes down to: using other people to get what we want. Denying someone else's right to live. Placing our own desires, particularly our ugly ones, above the needs of someone else. My guess is that as long as people act in selfish ways, the vampire will be with us.

CHAPTER FOUR

If It's Square, It's a Sonnet

EVERY NOW AND then, I'll ask my students what kind of poem we're talking about—what *form* the poem uses. The first time, the answer will be “sonnet.” The next time, “sonnet.” Care to guess about the third? Very good. Basically, I figure the sonnet is the only poetic form most readers will ever need to know. It's very common, has been written in every time period since the English Renaissance, and is still popular today.

After I tell the students the first time that the poem is a sonnet, someone asks me how I knew so fast. I tell them two things. First, that I read the poem before class (useful for someone in my position or theirs, come to think of it). And second, that I counted the lines when I noticed the shape of the poem. It's square. The miracle of the sonnet, you see, is that it is fourteen lines long and most lines have ten syllables. And ten syllables of English are about as long as fourteen lines are high. Square.

Okay, great. Who cares?

I agree, up to a point. I think people who read poems should always read the poem first, without even thinking about its form or its style. They should not begin by counting lines or looking at line endings to find the rhyme scheme. Just enjoy the experience.

After you've had that first experience, though, one of the extra pleasures you can get is seeing how the poet worked that magic on you. There are many ways a poem can charm the reader: choice of images, music of the language, idea content, wordplay. And form.

You might think that a poem of a mere fourteen lines is only capable of doing one thing. But you'd be wrong. A sonnet, in fact, has two units of meaning, and a shift takes place between the first and the second. These two units are closely related to the two parts of the sonnet. And it's the sonnet's form that creates those two parts.

Most sonnets have one group of eight lines and one of six. (You can have a Petrarchan sonnet, which has an octave—eight lines—and a sestet, a group of six. Or a Shakespearean sonnet, which has three groups of four lines—three quatrains—and a couplet, two lines. But even there, the first two quatrains join up to make a group of eight lines, and the last quatrain joins up with the couplet to make a group of six.) However it works, the basic pattern is 8/6.

Let's look at an example.

Christina Rossetti was a British poet of the late 1800s. This is her poem “An Echo from Willow Wood” (about 1870). I suggest you read it out loud, to get the full effect.

Two gazed into a pool, he gazed and she,
Not hand in hand, yet heart in heart, I think,
Pale and reluctant on the water's brink,
As on the brink of parting which must be.
Each eyed the other's aspect, she and he,
Each felt one hungering heart leap up and sink,
Each tasted bitterness which both must drink,
There on the brink of life's dividing sea.
Lilies upon the surface, deep below

Two wistful faces craving each for each,
Resolute and reluctant without speech:—
A sudden ripple made the faces flow,
One moment joined, to vanish out of reach:
So those hearts joined, and ah were parted so.

It's a terrific little poem in its own right, and a good poem for our purposes. For one thing, it has neither a thee nor a thou in sight, so we get rid of some of the confusion that older poetry slings at modern readers. Anyway, I like Christina Rossetti, and I think that more people should be able to fall in love with her.

At first glance the poem doesn't really look square. True, but it's close. So the first question is how many sentences? (Not lines, of which there are fourteen, but sentences.) The answer is three.

Can you guess where one period falls? Right. End of line eight.

The first eight lines, the octave, carry one idea. In this case, it's two sentences of four lines each (which we call quatrains). This is pretty common. The last six lines, the sestet, carry another related idea. In the octave, Rossetti creates a still, unmoving picture of two lovers right before some kind of event. Everything in it points to how they are about to go away from each other. They are "on the brink of parting which must be." And yet, with all this anxiety and fear—full of "hungering" and "bitterness"—their surface, like that of the water, is calm. Inside, their hearts may leap up and sing, yet they show nothing, since they don't even look at each other, but only at each other's reflection in the water.

In the sestet, though, a puff of breeze creates a ripple and dissolves that carefully controlled image. The water, which has brought them—or their reflections—together, now pulls them apart. What is possible in the octave (the separation of the lovers) becomes real in the sestet.

Without making any extravagant claims—no, this is not the greatest sonnet ever written—we can say that "An Echo from Willow-Wood" is an excellent example of its form. Rossetti tells a story of human longing and regret within the boundaries of fourteen lines. The beauty of this poem lies, in part, in the tension between the small package and the large emotions it contains. We feel that the story is in danger of breaking out of its vessel, but of course it never does. The vessel, the sonnet form, actually becomes part of the meaning of the poem.

And this is why form matters, and why teachers pay attention to it: it just might mean something. When a poet chooses to write a sonnet instead of, say, something on the scope of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it's not because he or she is lazy. Short poems take far more time per line, because everything has to be perfect, than long ones.

We owe it to poets, I think, to notice that they've gone to this trouble. And we owe it to ourselves to understand the nature of the thing we're reading. When you start to read a poem, then, look at the shape.

CHAPTER FIVE

Now Where Have I Seen Him Before?

ONE OF THE many great things about being an English teacher is that you get to keep meeting old friends. For beginning readers, though, every story may seem new. Each book feels unconnected to any other book. It's like one of those pictures where you connect the dots. When I was a kid, I could never see the picture in a connect-the-dots drawing until I'd put in nearly every line. Other kids could look at a page full of dots and say, "Oh, that's an elephant." Me, I saw dots.

Part of this is just how good you happen to be at seeing two-dimensional pictures. But a lot of it is practice. The more connect-the-dots drawings you do, the more likely you are to recognize the picture early on. Same with literature. Part of pattern recognition is talent, but a whole lot of it is practice. You read enough, and think enough about what you read, you'll begin to see patterns: things that happen again and again.

It may pay to remember this: **there's no such thing as a completely original work of literature**

Once you know that, you can go looking for old friends and asking the question: "Now where have I seen him (or her) before?"

Take Bod, the hero of Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2008). Bod is very young, still in diapers, when he's left an orphan. Accidentally, cheerfully, in fact, he wanders into a haunted graveyard. He's too young to know that cemeteries, tombstones, and ghosts are supposed to be scary, so he's not scared. The ghosts see him for what he is—a child who needs a family. They give him one, so they take him in. The graveyard becomes his home. And the graveyard's solitary, brooding vampire becomes young Bod's guardian, carefully keeping him safe against all the perils of the outside world until he's old enough to face them on his own.

Now, forget all the details about graveyards, ghosts, and vampires, and think of Bod as a type. A very young orphaned boy, all on his own in a scary and threatening place. A human boy taken in by a group of nonhumans, with a protective and mysterious guardian who is also not human. Have you met him before?

You have if you know Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), where the human boy Mowgli is raised by wolves and watched over by a black panther. Put an orphan boy who needs a family in the jungle, and you have *The Jungle Book*. Put him in a graveyard, and you have *The Graveyard Book*. Even the book's title is a big clue. Neil Gaiman not only used Kipling's story on purpose; he wanted readers to know that's what he was doing.

Which brings us to the big secret: **there's only one story.**

There, I said it, and I can't very well take it back. There is only one story. Ever. One. It's always been going on and it's everywhere around us and every story you've ever read or heard of or watched is part of it. *The Thousand and One Nights*. Harry Potter. "Jack and the Beanstalk." *Romeo and Juliet*. *The Simpsons*.

To me, literature is something like a barrel of eels. When a writer creates a new eel, it wriggles its way into the barrel. It's a new eel, but it shares its eelness with all those other eels that are in the barrel or have ever been in the barrel. Now, if that doesn't put you off reading entirely, you know you're serious.

But the point is this: stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems. Of course poems

can learn from plays, songs from novels. Sometimes the influence is direct and obvious, as it is with *The Graveyard Book*. Other times it's less direct and more subtle. Maybe a modern-day miser makes the reader think of Scrooge. A female character may remind us of Scarlett O'Hara or Ophelia or Pocahontas. After much practice of reading, you begin to notice these similarities.

All this "books look like other books" is all well and good, but what does it mean for our reading?

Excellent question. If we don't see the reference, the connection, then it means nothing, right? Which isn't bad. If you don't know *The Jungle Book* and you don't realize that Neil Gaiman was using it when he wrote *The Graveyard Book*, you can still enjoy the novel on its own. It's a fun story, it works, and it gives pleasure to its readers. From there, everything else that happens is a bonus.

But if you *do* realize that *The Graveyard Book* refers to *The Jungle Book*, you get more. A small part of this is what I call the *aha!* factor. It's the delight we feel at recognizing something familiar, something we've met before. *Aha!* Bod is Mowgli. We get it.

That moment of pleasure, wonderful as it is, is not enough on its own. Once we notice a similarity, it leads us forward. We begin to draw comparisons and parallels between the two books. We begin to think about what it means that Bod is in a graveyard, while Mowgli is in a jungle. We begin to think about wilderness and what it might mean. And we begin to think even more about the big point Kipling and Gaiman are both making: what does it say about people in general that a pack of wolves or a group of ghosts, must take in a human baby and keep him safe? When home is a jungle or a graveyard, when animals or monsters become family, what does that mean about the people and communities that are *supposed* to create homes for Mowgli and for Bod?

Well, what does it say? What does it mean?

I'm not going to tell you. But the point is, once you realize that *The Graveyard Book* and *The Jungle Book* are connected, you can ask these questions in new ways, and you have new places to hunt for the answers.

This conversation, back and forth between old books and new, is always going on. It makes the experience of reading books deeper and richer. The more we notice that the book we're reading is speaking to other books, the more similarities we begin to notice, and the more alive the text becomes.

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

First of all, don't worry. If a story is no good, being based on *Hamlet* won't save it. The characters have to work as characters, as themselves. Silas the vampire needs to be a great character, which he is, before we need to worry about his resemblance to Bagheera the black panther. If the story is good and the characters work, but you don't notice the ways it connects to an older book, then you've done nothing worse than read a good story with characters you will remember. If you begin to pick up on some of these connections, however, you'll find that your understanding of the novel becomes deeper and more meaningful.

But we haven't read everything.

Neither have I. Nor has anyone. Young readers, of course, have a slightly harder time, which is why teachers are useful in pointing out things you might have missed or didn't know to look for. When I was a kid, I used to go mushroom hunting with my father. I would never see them, but he would say, "There's a yellow sponge," or "There are a couple of black spikes." And because I knew they were there, my looking would become more focused. In a few moments, I would begin seeing them for myself. And once you begin seeing mushrooms, you can't stop. What an English teacher does is very similar; he tells you when you get near mushrooms. Once you know that, you can hunt for mushrooms on your own.

CHAPTER SIX

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

IF YOU LOOK at any literary period between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, you'll be amazed by how much Shakespeare you find. He's everywhere, in every form you can think of. And he's never the same: every age and every writer reinvents its own Shakespeare.

Woody Allen took *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and made it into his film *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*. Naturally.

The BBC series *Masterpiece* has redone *Othello* as the story of black police commissioner John Othello, his lovely white wife, Dessie, and his friend Ben Jago, who resents the fact that he was not picked for promotion. If you know that Shakespeare's Othello is manipulated by his jealous friend Iago, into murdering his wife, Desdemona, then you won't be surprised if things go badly for John, Dessie, and Ben as well.

West Side Story (1957) famously reworks *Romeo and Juliet* (about 1591–95), as two doomed lovers are parted by prejudice and violence. *Romeo + Juliet* also became a movie in the 1990s featuring hip teen culture and automatic pistols. And that's a century or so after Tchaikovsky's ballet based on the same play. Then there is Sharon M. Draper's *Romiette and Julio* (1999), about two teenagers falling deeply in love. But a dangerous local gang is firmly opposed to an African-American girl and a Latino boy dating each other, and soon Romiette and Julio's relationship—and their lives—are at risk.

Hamlet comes out as a new film every couple of years, it seems. Tom Stoppard takes two minor characters from *Hamlet* and gives them an entire play of their own in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. And the 1960s TV series *Gilligan's Island* even had an episode in which the characters put together a musical *Hamlet*. Now that's art.

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

But that's not all.

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

- *To thine own self be true.*
- *All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players.*
- *What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.*
- *Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!*
- *Get thee to a nunnery.*
- *A horse! a horse! My kingdom for a horse!*
- *Double, double, toil and trouble
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.*
- *By the pricking of my thumbs*

Something wicked this way comes.

Oh, and lest I forget:

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

Ever heard any of those? This week? Today? In my copy of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, Shakespeare takes up forty-seven pages. My first guess is that you probably have not read most of the plays from which these quotations are taken; my second guess is that you knew at least some of the phrases anyway.

All right, so Shakespeare is always with us. What does that mean?

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

It makes them sound smarter?

Smarter than what?

Than quoting Rocky and Bullwinkle, for instance.

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

Plus it shows that you've read him, right? It shows that you're an educated person.

Not necessarily. I could have given you Richard III's famous request for a horse since I was nine. My father was a great fan of that play, so I heard that famous line ("A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!") early on. My dad was a factory worker with a high school education. He wasn't particularly interested in impressing anybody with his fancy learning. He was pleased, however, to be able to talk about these great stories, these plays he had read and loved.

We love the plays, the great characters, the fabulous speeches, the witty comebacks. I hope never to be stabbed, but if I am, I'd sure like to be able to answer, when somebody asks me if it's bad, "'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve," as Mercutio does in *Romeo and Juliet*. I mean, to be dying and clever at the same time, how can you not love that?

Rather than saying that quoting Shakespeare proves you're smart, I think what happens is that writers quote what they've read or heard. And they have more Shakespeare stuck in their heads than anyone else. (Except, of course, Bugs Bunny.)

But there's something else you may not have thought of. Shakespeare is also someone writers can struggle against, or bounce their ideas off. It's worth remembering that few writers simply copy bits of Shakespeare's work into their own. More commonly, they take a little from the older work while also letting their own newer work have its say. The new writer has his own agenda, his own slant, and his own things to put on things.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, both the young lovers commit suicide. In *West Side Story*, Tony is murdered but Maria survives. In *Romiette and Julio*, both teens live to the end of the book. Each ending says different things about the characters, their families and communities, and their attitudes (and the reader's attitudes) toward life and death. Each asks readers to think about what a tragedy is. And each one is even more interesting if you think, not just about the modern movie or book, but about the four hundred-year-old play that inspired it.

That's what writers can do with Shakespeare. Of course, they can do it with other writers as well, and they do, but not quite as often. Why? You know why. The stories are great, the characters compelling, the language fabulous. And we know him. You can base your new work on Fulke Greville if you like, but you'd have to provide footnotes.

So what's in it for readers? When we recognize the connections between Shakespeare and

something new we are reading, we bring our own knowledge to the story. We become partners with the writer in creating meaning. Even before we start reading, we know some of what the writer wants us to know—for example, that Tony and Maria or Romiette and Julio will face danger because of their love for each other. We know it because Shakespeare has already told us.

Our understanding of both works becomes richer and deeper when we see the connections between them. We figure out something about the newer work. Maybe even see the old one with new eyes.

And the writer we know better than any other, the one whose language and whose plays we “know” even if we haven’t read him, the one it’s easiest and most rewarding for a writer to use in this way—Shakespeare.

CHAPTER SEVEN

. . . Or the Bible

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

Guess what? So have your writers. Poets. Playwrights. Screenwriters.

Maybe a writer doesn't need characters, theme, or a plot, but just a title. The Bible is full of possible titles. James Dean starred in the famous movie *East of Eden*. (Why east? Because John Steinbeck, who wrote the story on which the film is based, knew his Genesis. To find yourself east of Eden is to be outside of the garden, in a fallen world. Which is the only kind of world we know, and certainly the only kind there could be in a James Dean movie.) William Faulkner has *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Go Down, Moses* (1942). (Okay, that last one's from a spiritual, but the story itself is about a biblical story.) Suppose you want to write about one sister who can't seem to win any love or recognition from her family and another sister everyone adores. You might turn to a biblical story of two brothers and call your book *Jacob Have I Loved* (1981), as Katherine Paterson did.

Poetry is absolutely full of Scripture. John Milton took most of his subjects from you-know-where: *Paradise Lost* (1667), *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes* (both 1671). Those questing knights in the anonymous late-fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* (1590–1596) are searching on behalf of their religion, whether they know it or not (and they usually do know). Even Geoffrey Chaucer's pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* (1384) are making an Easter pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral. Neither they nor their tales are particularly holy, but much of their talk involves the Bible and religious teachings.

Some serious Bible stories turn comic in the hands of a modern writer. In Eudora Welty's story "Why I Live at the P.O." (1941), the narrator is in the grips of sibling rivalry. Her younger sister has just arrived back in her family's town, daughter in tow. The narrator is outraged because she has to cook two chickens to feed five grown-ups and a small child just because her "spoiled" younger sister has come home. What Sister can't see, but we can, is that those two birds are really a fatted calf. It may not be the grandest feast ever cooked, but it definitely *is* a feast, and a feast is what you have when the Prodigal Son comes home. Even if the Prodigal Son turns out to be a daughter.

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

A Bible scholar? Well, I'm not. But even I can sometimes recognize when a writer is making use of something from the Bible. Here's how it works.

Four children make their way through a mysterious wardrobe into a magical land. This land is in the grip of perpetual winter and ruled by a cruel and selfish witch. But there is hope that a savior will come, hope that these four children will somehow bring that savior to this frozen wasteland.

This might seem like the setup for many a fantasy novel. Children often make journeys to fantastic, magical places. There are often evil witches or other villains who need to be defeated. But when one of the children gives in to temptation and betrays the others to the witch; and when the savior offers his own life in return for the life of the traitor; and when two of the children stay awake to talk with the savior on the night before his death—you can start to see some parallels to the Bible.

can't you? And when the savior is actually killed and then *comes back to life*, you know we're not just talking about Narnia, right?

You can read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) simply as a riveting adventure. But you can also notice the way C. S. Lewis uses Edmund's betrayal to parallel that of Judas, and Aslan's sacrifice to parallel that of Christ. And if you do, the story picks up added weight and meaning. The *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* doesn't simply exist in a far-off fairy-tale world. Its story becomes timeless, speaking of the pain and grief and guilt and forgiveness and hope that human beings everywhere have always lived with. And that is a story that never grows old.

C. S. Lewis isn't the only writer who decided to create a character whose life looks a lot like Jesus's. (Although, as far as I know, he is the only one who made that character a lion.) A fictional character like Aslan, whose story parallels that of Jesus, is called a Christ figure. If you have your eyes out for Christ figures in your reading, this list may be helpful.

1. crucified, wounds in the hands, feet, side, and head
2. in agony
3. self-sacrificing
4. good with children
5. good with loaves of bread, fishes, water, and wine
6. thirty-three years old when last seen
7. works as a carpenter
8. doesn't use fancy modes of transportation (feet or donkeys preferred)
9. believed to have walked on water
10. often seen with arms outstretched
11. spends time alone in the wilderness
12. tempted by the devil
13. last seen in the company of thieves
14. likes to tell stories and parables and uses wise sayings
15. carried his own cross
16. dead and buried, but came back to life on the third day
17. has disciples, twelve at first, although they are not all faithful to him
18. very forgiving
19. came to save an unworthy world

This list, of course, doesn't cover everything the Jesus of the Bible ever said or did. That's okay. It's not a list about religious belief; it's a list to help us recognize certain kinds of characters who we might come across in books.

Say we're reading a book, a novel. And let's say this novel has a man in it. The man is old, very poor, and his work is humble; he's not a carpenter but a *fisherman*. Jesus had some dealings with fishermen, too, so there's a point of connection. And the old fisherman hasn't had much good luck for a long time, so no one believes in him. But one young boy does. There're two points from our list: the old man is *good with children*. And *he has a disciple*.

And this old man is *very good and pure*, so that's another point of connection. Because the world that he lives in isn't quite so good. You could even think of it as fallen.

Out fishing by himself, the man hooks a big fish that takes him out far beyond where he's been before, to where the sea becomes a *wilderness*. He's all alone. He *suffers a lot of pain*. His *hands* are ripped up by struggling with the fishing line; he thinks he's broken something in his *side*. But he encourages himself with *wise sayings* like "A man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but

not defeated.”

~~The man's struggles with the fish last *three days*. The people left on land think he is *dead*. His great fish is ruined by sharks, but he manages to drag its skeleton back to the port. When he returns, it's like he's *come back to life*. He has to walk up a hill from the water to his shack. He carries the mast of his ship, which makes him look like *a man carrying a cross*. Then he lies on his back, exhausted. *His arms are thrown out to the sides. His hands, hurt and raw, are showing.*~~

And the next morning, when everyone sees the skeleton of the giant fish, even the doubters begin to believe in the old man again. He brings *a kind of hope* to his world.

And . . . yes? Did you have a question?

Didn't Ernest Hemingway write a book like that?

Yes, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). It's easy to spot that he meant the old man, Santiago, to be a Christ figure.

It's not always so simple. Not every Christ figure will have all nineteen items on our list. (Even Santiago didn't.) They don't have to be male. Don't have to be human—think of Aslan. Don't have to be Christian. Don't even have to be good. But if a character is a certain age, does certain things (hand out wine and bread, blesses children, you know what I mean), suffers in certain ways (keep an eye out for those wounds in the hands, feet, and/or side), or sacrifices himself or herself or itself for others (that's the big one), then you should pay attention.

Why are there Christ figures? The short answer is that the author wants to make a certain point. Perhaps the character's sacrifice will mean more to us if we see it as similar to the greatest sacrifice we know of. Maybe it has to do with saving somebody (or everybody). Or hope. Or miracles. But count on it, the writer is up to something. Noticing that he's using a character as a Christ figure is one way to start figuring it out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hansel and Gretel

BY NOW I'VE beaten you severely about the head and shoulders with the idea that all literature grows out of other literature. That could include novels, stories, plays, poems, songs, opera, movies, television, commercials, and possibly a variety of electronic media we haven't even seen yet. So let's try being writers for a moment. You want to borrow from some source to add a bit of flesh to the bare bones of your story. Who ya gonna call?

Actually, *Ghostbusters* is not a bad answer. For right now, anyway. But will people in a hundred years know this movie? Maybe not.

Something a little more traditional? Homer? Half of the people who read that name will think of the guy who says, "D'oh!" and not of the guy who wrote *The Iliad*. Shakespeare, then? He's been the go-to guy for four hundred years. But some people think quoting Shakespeare makes you look stupid, or like you're trying too hard. Plus all the good quotes are already taken.

James Joyce? Too complex. T. S. Eliot? He's all quotes from other writers to begin with.

It's tough being a writer. What can you find to use that *all* of your readers will know?

Alice in Wonderland. *Treasure Island*. The Narnia novels. *The Cat in the Hat*. *Goodnight Moon*. We may not all know Shylock (he's from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, by the way), but we all know Sam-I-Am. Fairy tales, too. "Snow White." "Sleeping Beauty."

So if you're a writer and you want to use a fairy tale, what do you do?

You might decide to tell the whole story, just as your readers know it, only more thoughtfully and more deeply than a brief fairy tale can manage. So you expand it into a novel. Robin McKinley did this with "Beauty and the Beast" when she wrote *Beauty* (1978). Or you could shake things around, perhaps giving us "Hansel and Gretel" from the point of view of the witch (who was living peacefully enough in her gingerbread cottage before two brats started nibbling on the window frames). Or Morgan le Fay's side of the King Arthur legend, as Marion Zimmer Bradley did with *The Mists of Avalon* (1982). Or you might change the time and the setting. Frances Hodgson Burnett took "Cinderella" into Victorian London and gave us *A Little Princess* (1905).

You, the writer, can pick and choose, deciding what you're going to keep of the old story and what you're going to let go. Frances Hodgson Burnett certainly did. She kept the good and lovely little girl (Sara doesn't think she's pretty, but other people do) whose mother is dead. She kept the mean stepmother—well, almost. Sara's father doesn't get married a second time, but he does send Sara to a boarding school, where Miss Minchin, the headmistress, is as cruel as any wicked stepmother right out of the Brothers Grimm. Once Sara's father dies and Sara is left penniless, Miss Minchin makes Sara a slave in the kitchen, trudge out into stormy weather on errands, and sleep in a freezing attic full of rats. Burnett kept the stepsisters but changed them. Sara's two close friends at school are not wicked in the least, but they can't help Sara much without bringing Miss Minchin's wrath down on their heads. And they *are* spoiled, at least compared to Sara—they get enough to eat, warm clothes to wear, and an education. Sara gets none of these things.

Burnett didn't need the ball. She had no use for the glass slipper or for Prince Charming. But she kept the fairy godmother—again, with her own twist. A kind neighbor takes pity on Sara and sends her things—new clothes, warm blankets, delicious food, books to read—in such a secret and mysterious

way that it seems like magic. In the end, it turns out that this kind neighbor is, in fact, Sara's guardian, a combination of a fairy godfather and a new father to make up for the one she lost. Sara goes to live a life of riches and luxury with him. A happy ending, just like every fairy tale should have.

Burnett used several pieces of the "Cinderella" story to create her novel. You, as the writer, don't have to. Maybe you only want the glass slipper, and it isn't even glass, it's a Nike running shoe. Maybe you just want a trail of bread crumbs, or a sleeper awakened by a kiss. You can bring the whole story to your reader's minds with just one small detail.

Why? Because fairy tales and legends, like Shakespeare and the Bible, and all other writing and storytelling, belong to the one big story. And also because, since we were old enough to be read to or to be propped up in front of a television, we've been living on that story.

As readers, we want something new in our stories, but we want familiarity too. We want a new novel to be not quite like anything we've read before. At the same time, we want it to be enough like stories we already know that we can use those stories to make sense of it. If a book manages both things at once, newness and familiarity, it creates a harmony—a new tune that sings along with the melody of the main story. And those harmonies are where a sense of depth comes from. Those harmonies may come from the Bible, or from Shakespeare, or from humbler, more familiar stories.

So the next time you go to the bookstore and carry home a new novel, don't forget your Brothers Grimm.

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