

Study Guide
How to Read Literature Like a Professor

Introduction: How'd He Do That?

1. What fictional character does Thomas Foster say is a literary version of the devil?
2. What answer does Foster use to tell students how they can get better at understanding this "language of reading"?

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

1. What five things does a quest consist of?
2. What is the real reason for a quest (always)?
3. What is Foster's overall point about journeys or trips in literature?
4. In the example story Foster uses to discuss the basic components of a quest, what does he use to represent the "Holy Grail" -- that is, the item being sought?

Chapter 2: Nice to Eat with You: Acts of Communion

1. What does "communion" mean?
2. For what reason does Foster suggest that authors often include meal scenes?

Chapter 3: Nice to Eat You: Acts of Vampires

1. What are the "essentials of the vampire story" and what do they represent?
2. Which novella does Foster spend several pages analyzing as a "vampire" story?

Chapter 4: If It's Square, It's a Sonnet

1. Visually speaking, why is a sonnet roughly "square"?
2. How can recognizing that a poem is a sonnet help us understand the poem's meaning?

Chapter 5: Now, Where Have I Seen Him Before?

1. What does Foster mean when he says that "there's no such thing as a wholly original work of literature"?
2. What does Foster mean by the term intertextuality?
3. What is the benefit, or value, of picking up on the parallels between works of literature?

Chapter 6: When In Doubt, It's from Shakespeare...

1. Why do so many writers allude to Shakespeare?
2. What are some of the ways that Shakespeare influences writers?

Chapter 7: ...Or the Bible

1. Why is the Bible so often alluded to in literature?
2. What are some of the ways that writers allude to the Bible?
3. What's the benefit of knowing/understanding Bible allusions in literature?

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Chapter 8: Hansel and Gretel

1. Why do writers borrow from “kiddie lit” in their works?
2. What are some of the ways writers allude to “kiddie lit” in their writings?

Chapter 9: It’s Greek to Me

1. What does Foster mean by the term myth?
2. Why do writers allude to mythology?
3. What are some of the ways that writers allude to mythology?

Chapter 10: It’s More Than Just Rain or Snow

1. How can weather be symbolic in literature?
2. How can weather serve as a plot device in literature?
3. What are some of the common “meanings” of various types of weather?

Chapter 11: Is That a Symbol?

1. What impacts a reader’s understanding of symbolic meaning?
2. What, besides objects, can be symbolic?
3. How should a reader approach symbolism in a text?
4. What does Foster discuss as a literary symbol for several pages of the chapter?

Chapter 12: It’s All Political

1. In what ways do authors include social criticism in their writings?
2. Why do authors include social criticism in their writings?
3. What are some of the common “political” issues that writers tackle?
4. What famous tales are discussed in this chapter?

Chapter 13: Geography Matters...

1. How can geography reinforce theme?
2. How can geography define/develop character?
3. How can geography be character?
4. How can geography play an important plot role?
5. What are some patterns of symbolism with regard to geography?

Chapter 14: Marked for Greatness

1. What might physical marks or imperfections symbolize?
2. How can landscapes be “marked” as well? What might it mean?
3. Beyond the individual, what can imperfection or deformity indicate?
4. What are some of the symbolic indications of monsters in literature?
5. What famous literary characters are discussed in this chapter?

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Chapter 15: He's Blind for a Reason, You Know

1. What can physical blindness mirror?
2. What is often the irony behind a blind character?
3. How are darkness and lightness related to sight?

Chapter 16: It's Never Just Heart Disease...

1. What are some of the symbolic possibilities associated with the heart?
2. What are some of the most common diseases in literature?

Chapter 17: Don't Read with Your Eyes

1. Why did I italicize "your" in the chapter title, above?
2. What is Foster's main point in this chapter?
3. Do we have to accept the values of another culture to accept the impact those values had on the writing?

Chapter 18: Is He Serious? And Other Ironies

1. What does Foster mean when he says, "Irony trumps everything"?
2. How can you tell if something is ironic?
3. What does Foster mean when he says, "Irony doesn't work for everyone"?

Envoi

1. What short-short story does Foster use as the basis for the "test case" in this chapter?
2. How did Foster's point in Ch. 19 illustrate that if you read carefully and consider all the possibilities, you will discover your own ideas, which result in a deeper reading experience?