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INN HUCKLEBERRY FINN

# How to Read Literature Like a Professor

A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines

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Help note: Definition of *milquetoast*: a timid, meek, or unassertive person (pronounced milk-töst)

## Introduction

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### How'd He Do That?

Mr. LINDNER? THAT MILQUETOAST?

Right. Mr. Lindner the milquetoast. So what did you think the devil would look like? If he were red with a tail, horns, and cloven hooves, any fool could say no.

The class and I are discussing Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), one of the great plays of the American theater. The incredulous questions have come, as they often do, in response to my innocent suggestion 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 meekly apologetic little man, has been dispatched from the neighborhood association, check in hand, to buy out the family's claim on the house. At first, Walter Lee

Younger, the protagonist, confidently turns down the offer, believing that the family's money (in the form of a life insurance payment after his father's recent death) is secure. Shortly afterward, however, he discovers that two-thirds of that money has been stolen. All of a sudden the previously insulting offer comes to look like his financial salvation.

Bargains with the devil go back a long way in Western culture. In all the versions of the Faust legend, which is the dominant form of this type of story, 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. This pattern holds from the Elizabethan Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* through the nineteenth-century Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* to the twentieth century's Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and *Damn Yankees*. In Hansberry's version, when Mr. Lindner makes his offer, he doesn't demand Walter Lee's soul; in fact, he doesn't even know that he's demanding it. He is, though. Walter Lee can be rescued from the monetary crisis he has brought upon the family; all he has to do is admit that he's not the equal of the white residents who don't want him moving in, that his pride and self-respect, his *identity*, can be bought. If that's not selling your soul, then what is it?

The chief difference between Hansberry's version of the Faustian bargain and others is that Walter Lee ultimately resists the satanic temptation. Previous versions have been either tragic or comic depending on whether the devil successfully collects the soul at the end of the work. Here, the protagonist psychologically makes the deal but then looks at himself and at the true cost and recovers in time to reject the devil's—Mr. Lindner's—offer. The resulting play, for all its tears and anguish, is structurally comic—the tragic downfall threatened but avoided—and Walter Lee grows to heroic stature in

wrestling with his own demons as well as the external one, Lindner, and coming through without falling.

A moment occurs in this exchange between professor and student when each of us adopts a look. My look says, "What, you don't get it?" Theirs says, "We don't get it. And we think you're making it up." We're having a communication problem. Basically, we've all read the same story, but we haven't used the same analytical apparatus. If you've ever spent time in a literature classroom as a student or a professor, you know this moment. It may seem at times as if the professor is either inventing interpretations out of thin air or else performing parlor tricks, a sort of analytical sleight of hand.

Actually, neither of these is the case; rather, the professor, as the slightly more experienced reader, has acquired over the years the use of a certain "language of reading," something to which the students are only beginning to be introduced. What I'm talking about is a grammar of literature, a set of conventions and patterns, codes and rules, that we learn to employ in dealing with a piece of writing. Every language has a grammar, a set of rules that govern usage and meaning, and literary language is no different. It's all more or less arbitrary, of course, just like language itself. Take the word "arbitrary" as an example: it doesn't mean anything inherently; rather, at some point in our past we agreed that it would mean what it does, and it does so only in English (those sounds would be so much gibberish in Japanese or Finnish). So too with art: we decided to agree that perspective—the set of tricks artists use to provide the illusion of depth—was a good thing and vital to painting. This occurred during the Renaissance in Europe, but when Western and Oriental art encountered each other in the

1700s, Japanese artists and their audiences were serenely untroubled by the lack of perspective in their painting. No one felt it particularly essential to the experience of pictorial art.

Literature has its grammar, too. You knew that, of course. Even if you didn't know that, you knew from the structure of the preceding paragraph that it was coming. How? The grammar of the essay. You can read, and part of reading is knowing the conventions, recognizing them, and anticipating the results. When someone introduces a topic (the grammar of literature), then digresses to show other topics (language, art, music, dog training—it doesn't matter what examples; as soon as you see a couple of them, you recognize the pattern), you know he's coming back with an application of those examples to the main topic (void!). And he did. So now we're all happy, because the convention has been used, observed, noted, anticipated, and fulfilled. What more can you want from a paragraph?

Well, as I was saying before I so rudely digressed, so too in literature. Stories and novels have a very large set of conventions: types of characters, plot rhythms, chapter structures, point-of-view limitations. Poems have a great many of their own, involving form, structure, rhythm, rhyme. Plays, too. And then there are conventions that cross genre lines. Spring is largely universal. So is snow. So is darkness. And sleep. When spring is mentioned in a story, a poem, or a play, a veritable constellation of associations rises in our imaginative sky: youth, promise, new life, young lambs, children skipping. . . . on and on. And if we associate even further, that constellation may lead us to more abstract concepts such as rebirth, fertility, renewal.

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

Same way you get to Carnegie Hall. Practice.

When lay readers encounter a fictive text, they focus, as they should, on the story and the characters: who are these people, what are they doing, and what wonderful or terrible things are

happening to them? Such readers respond first of all, and sometimes only, to their reading on an emotional level; the work affects them, producing joy or revulsion, laughter or tears, anxiety or elation. In other words, they are emotionally and instinctively involved in the work. This is the response level that virtually every writer who has ever set pen to paper or fingertip to keyboard has hoped for when sending the novel, along with a prayer, to the publisher. When an English professor reads, on the other hand, he will accept the affective response level of the story (we don't mind a good cry when Little Nell dies), but a lot of his attention will be engaged by other elements of the novel. Where did that effect come from? Whom does this character resemble? Where have I seen this situation before? Didn't Dante (or Chaucer, or Merle Haggard) say that? If you learn to ask these questions, to see literary texts through these glasses, you will read and understand literature in a new light, and it'll become more rewarding and fun.

Memory. Symbol. Pattern. These are the three items that, more than any other, separate the professorial reader from the rest of the crowd. English professors, as a class, are cursed with memory. Whenever I read a new work, I spin the mental Rolodex looking for correspondences and corollaries—where have I seen his face, don't I know that theme? I can't *not* do it, although there are plenty of times when that ability is not something I want to exercise. Thirty minutes into Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider* (1985), for instance, I thought, Okay, this is *Shane* (1953), and from there I didn't watch another frame of the movie without seeing Alan Ladd's face. This does not necessarily improve the experience of popular entertainment.

Professors also read, and think, symbolically. Everything is a symbol of something, it seems, until proven otherwise. We ask,

Is this a metaphor? Is that an analogy? What does the thing over there signify? The kind of mind that works its way through undergraduate and then graduate classes in literature and criticism has a predisposition to see things as existing in themselves while simultaneously also representing something else. Grendel, the monster in the medieval epic *Beowulf* (eighth century A.D.), is an actual monster, but he can also symbolize (a) the hostility of the universe to human existence (a hostility that medieval Anglo-Saxons would have felt acutely) and (b) a darkness in human nature that only some higher aspect of ourselves (as symbolized by the title hero) can conquer. This predisposition to understand the world in symbolic terms is reinforced, of course, by years of training that encourages and rewards the symbolic imagination.

A related phenomenon in professorial reading is pattern recognition. Most professional students of literature learn to take in the foreground detail while seeing the patterns that the detail reveals. Like the symbolic imagination, this is a function of being able to distance oneself from the story, to look beyond the purely affective level of plot, drama, characters. Experience has proved to them that life and books fall into similar patterns. Nor is this skill exclusive to English professors. Good mechanics, the kind who used to fix cars before computerized diagnostics, use pattern recognition to diagnose engine troubles: if this and this are happening, then check that. Literature is full of patterns, and your reading experience will be much more rewarding when you can step back from the work, even while you're reading it, and look for those patterns. When small children, very small children, begin to tell you a story, they put in every detail and every word they recall, with no sense that some features are more important than others. As they grow, they begin to display a greater sense of the plots of their stories—what elements actually add to the significance and which do not. So too with readers. Beginning students are often

swamped with the mass of detail; the chief experience of reading *Dr. Zhivago* (1957) may be that they can't keep all the names straight. Willy veterans, on the other hand, will absorb those details, or possibly overlook them, to find the patterns, the routines, the archetypes at work in the background.

Let's look at an example of how the symbolic mind, the pattern observer, the powerful memory combine to offer a reading of a nonliterary situation. Let's say that a male subject you are studying exhibits behavior and makes statements that show him to be hostile toward his father but much warmer and more loving toward, even dependent on, his mother. Okay, that's just one guy; so no big deal. But you see it again in another person. And again. And again. You might start to think this is a pattern of behavior, in which case you would say to yourself, "Now where have I seen this before?" Your memory may dredge up something from experience, not your clinical work but a play you read long ago in your youth about a man who murders his father and marries his mother. Even though the current examples have nothing to do with drama, your symbolic imagination will allow you to connect the earlier instance of this pattern with the real-life examples in front of you at the moment. And your talent for nifty naming will come up with something to call this pattern: the Oedipal complex. As I said, not only English professors use these abilities. Sigmund Freud "reads" his patients the way a literary scholar reads texts, bringing the same sort of imaginative interpretation to understanding his cases that we try to bring to interpreting novels and poems and plays. His identification of the Oedipal complex is one of the great moments in the history of human thought, with as much literary as psychoanalytical significance.

What I hope to do, in the coming pages, is what I do in class: give readers a view of what goes on when professional students of literature do their thing, a broad introduction to the codes and patterns that inform our readings. I want my students not

only to agree with me that, indeed, Mr. Lindner is an instance of the demonic tempter offering Walter Lee Younger a Faustian bargain; I want them to be able to reach that conclusion without me. I know they can, with practice, patience, and a bit of instruction. And so can you.

How to Read  
Literature  
Like a  
Professor



erature. Part of pattern recognition is talent, but a whole lot of it is practice: if you read enough and give what you read enough thought, you begin to see patterns, archetypes, recurrences. And as with those pictures among the dots, it's a matter of learning to look. Not just *to look* but *where* to look, and *how* to look. Literature, as the great Canadian critic Northrop Frye observed, grows out of other literature; we should not be surprised to find, then, that it also looks like other literature. As you read, it may pay to remember this: **there's no such thing as a wholly original work of literature.** Once you know that, you can go looking for old friends and asking the attendant question: "now where have I seen her before?"

One of my favorite novels is Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978). Lay readers and students generally like it, too, which explains why it has become a perennial strong seller. Although the violence of the Vietnam War scenes may turn some readers off, many find themselves totally engrossed by something they initially figured would just be gross. What readers sometimes don't notice in their involvement with the story (and it is a great story) is that virtually everything in there is cribbed from somewhere else. Lest you conclude with dismay that the novel is somehow plagiarized or less than original, let me add that I find the book wildly original, that everything O'Brien borrows makes perfect sense in the context of the story he's telling, even more so once we understand that he has repurposed materials from older sources to accomplish his own ends. The novel divides into three interwoven parts: one, the actual story of the war experience of the main character, Paul Berlin, up to the point where his fellow soldier Cacciato runs away from the war; two, the imagined trip on which the squad follows Cacciato to Paris; and three, the long night watch on a tower near the South China Sea where Berlin manages these two very impressive mental feats of memory on the one hand and invention on the other. The actual war, because it

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### Now, Where Have I Seen Her Before?

ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS about being a professor of English is that you get to keep meeting old friends. For beginning readers, though, every story may seem new, and the resulting experience of reading is highly disjointed. Think of reading, on one level, as one of those papers from elementary school where you connect the dots. I could never see the picture in a connect-the-dot drawing until I'd put in virtually every line. Other kids could look at a page full of dots and say, "Oh, that's an elephant," "That's a locomotive." Me, I saw dots. I think it's partly predisposition—some people handle two-dimensional visualization better than others—but largely a matter of practice: the more connect-the-dot drawings you do, the more likely you are to recognize the design early on. Same with lit-

really happened, he can't do much about. Oh, he gets some facts wrong and some events out of order, but mostly, reality has imposed a certain structure on memory. The trip to Paris, though, is another story. Actually, it's all stories, or all those Paul has read in his young lifetime. He creates events and people out of the novels, stories, histories he knows, his own included, all of which is quite unwriting on his part, the pieces just appearing out of his memory. O'Brien provides us with a wonderful glimpse into the creative process, a view of how stories get written, and a big part of that process is that you can't create stories in a vacuum. Instead the mind flashes bits and pieces of childhood experiences, past reading, every movie the writer/creator has ever seen, last week's argument with a phone solicitor—in short, everything that lurks in the recesses of the mind. Some of this may be unconscious, as it is in the case of O'Brien's protagonist. Generally, though, writers use prior texts quite consciously and purposefully, as O'Brien himself does; unlike Paul Berlin, he is aware that he's drawing from Lewis Carroll or Ernest Hemingway. O'Brien signals the difference between novelist and character in the structuring of the two narrative frames.

About halfway through the novel, O'Brien has his characters fall through a hole in the road. Not only that, one of the characters subsequently says that the way to get out is to fall back up. When it's stated this baldly, you automatically think of Lewis Carroll. Falling through a hole is like *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). Bingo. It's all we need. And the world the squad discovers below the road, the network of Vietcong tunnels (although nothing like the real ones), complete with an officer condemned to stay there for his crimes, is every bit as much an alternative world as the one Alice encounters in her adventure. Once you've established that a book—a man's book at that, a war book—is borrowing a situation from Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, anything is possible. So with that in mind, readers must

reconsider characters, situations, events in the novel. This one looks like it's from Hemingway, that one like "Hansel and Gretel," these two from things that happened during Paul Berlin's "real" war, and so on down the line. Once you've played around with these elements for a while, a kind of Trivial Pursuit of source material, go for the big one: what about Sarkin Aung Wan?

Sarkin Aung Wan is Paul Berlin's love interest, his fantasy girl. She is Vietnamese and knows about tunnels but is not Vietcong. She's old enough to be attractive, yet not old enough to make sexual demands on the virginal young soldier. She's not a "real" character, since she comes in after the start of Berlin's fantasy. Careful readers will find her "real" model in a young girl with the same hoop earrings when the soldiers frisk villagers in one remembered war scene. Fair enough, but that's just the physical person, not her character. Then who is she? Where does she come from? Think generically. Lose the personal details, consider her as a type, and try to think where you've seen that type before: a brown-skinned young woman guiding a group of white men (mostly white, anyway), speaking the language they don't know, knowing where to go, where to find food. Taking them west. Right.

No, not Pocahontas. She never led anyone anywhere, whatever the popular culture may suggest. Somehow Pocahontas has received better PR, but we want the other one.

Sacajawea. If I need to be guided across hostile territory, she's the one I want, and she's the one Paul Berlin wants, too. He wants, he needs, a figure who will be sympathetic, understanding, strong in the ways he's not, and most of all successful in bringing him safely to his goal of getting to Paris. O'Brien plays here with the reader's established knowledge of history, culture, and literature. He's hoping that your mind will associate Sarkin Aung Wan consciously or unconsciously with Sacajawea, thereby not only creating her personality and impact but

also establishing the nature and depth of Paul Berlin's need. If you require a Sacajawea, you're really lost.

The point isn't really which native woman figures in O'Brien's novel, it's that there is a literary or historical model that found her way into his fiction to give it shape and purpose. He could have used Tolkien rather than Carroll, and while the surface features would have been different, the principle would have remained the same. Although the story would go in different directions with a change of literary model, in either case it gains a kind of resonance from these different levels of narrative that begin to emerge; the story is no longer all on the surface but begins to have depth. What we're trying to do is learn to read this sort of thing like a wily old professor, to learn to spot those familiar images, like being able to see the elephant before we connect the dots.

*You say stories grow out of other stories. But Sacajawea was real.*

As a matter of fact, she was, but from our point of view, it doesn't really matter. History is story, too. You don't encounter her directly, you've only heard of her through narrative of one sort or another. She is a literary as well as a historical character, as much a piece of the American myth as Huck Finn or Jay Gatsby, and very nearly as unreal. And what all this is about, finally, is myth. Which brings us to the big secret.

Here it is: **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 or watched is part of it. *The Thousand and One Nights. Beloved.* "Jack and the Beanstalk." *The Epic of Gilgamesh. The Story of O. The Simpsons.* T. S. Eliot said that when a new work is created, it is set among the monuments, adding to and altering the order. That always sounds to me a bit too much like a graveyard. To me, literature is something much more alive. More like a barrel of eels. When a writer creates a new eel, it wriggles its way into

the barrel, muscles a path into the great teeming mass from which it came in the first place. 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 simile 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. And they don't have to stick to genre. Poems can learn from plays, songs from novels. Sometimes influence is direct and obvious, as when the twentieth-century American writer T. Coraghessan Boyle writes "The Overcoat II," a postmodern reworking of the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Gogol's classic story "The Overcoat," or when William Trevor updates James Joyce's "Two Gallants" with "Two More Gallants," or when John Gardner reworks the medieval *Beowulf* into his little postmodern masterpiece *Grendel*. Other times, it's less direct and more subtle. It may be vague, the shape of a novel generally reminding readers of some earlier novel, or a modern-day miser recalling Scrooge. And of course there's the Bible: among its many other functions, it too is part of the one big story. A female character may remind us of Scarlett O'Hara or Ophelia or even, say, Pocahontas. These similarities—and they may be straight or ironic or comic or tragic—begin to reveal themselves to readers after much practice of reading.

*All this resembling other literature is all well and good, but what does it mean for our reading?*

Excellent question. If we don't see the reference, it means nothing, right? So the worst thing that occurs is that we're still reading the same story as if the literary precursors weren't there. From there, anything that happens is a bonus. A small part of what transpires is what I call the *aha!* factor, the delight we feel at recognizing a familiar component from earlier experience. That moment of pleasure, wonderful as it is, is not enough, so that awareness of similarity leads us forward. What



typically takes place is that we recognize elements from some prior text and begin drawing comparisons and parallels that may be fantastic, parodic, tragic, anything. Once that happens, our reading of the text changes from the reading governed by what's overtly on the page. Let's go back to *Cacciato* for a moment. When the squad falls through the hole in the road in language that recalls *Alice in Wonderland*, we quite reasonably expect that the place they fall into will be a wonderland in its own way. Indeed, right from the beginning, this is true. The oxcart and Sarkin Aung Wan's aunts fall faster than she and the soldiers despite the law of gravity, which decrees that falling bodies all move at thirty-two feet per second squared. The episode allows Paul Berlin to see a Vietcong tunnel, which his inherent terror will never allow him to do in real life, and this fantastic tunnel proves both more elaborate and more harrowing than the real ones. The enemy officer who is condemned to spend the remainder of the war down there accepts his sentence with a weird illogic that would do Lewis Carroll proud. The tunnel even has a periscope through which Berlin can look back at a scene from the real war, his past. Obviously the episode could have these features without invoking Carroll, but the wonderland analogy enriches our understanding of what Berlin has created, furthering our sense of the outlandishness of this portion of his fantasy.

This dialogue between old texts and new is always going on at one level or another. Critics speak of this dialogue as *intertextuality*, the ongoing interaction between poems or stories. This intertextual dialogue deepens and enriches the reading experience, bringing multiple layers of meaning to the text, some of which readers may not even consciously notice. The more we become aware of the possibility that our text is speaking to other texts, the more similarities and correspondences we begin to notice, and the more alive the text

becomes. We'll come back to this discussion later, but for now we'll simply note that newer works are having a dialogue with older ones, and they often indicate the presence of this conversation by invoking the older texts with anything from oblique references to extensive quotations.

Once writers know that we know how this game is played, the rules can get very tricky. The late Angela Carter, in her novel *Wise Children* (1992), gives us a theatrical family whose fame rests on Shakespearean performance. We more or less expect the appearance of elements from Shakespeare's plays, so we're not surprised when a jilted young woman, Tiffany, walks onto a television show set distraught, muttering, bedraggled—in a word, mad—and then disappears shortly after departing, evidently having drowned. Her performance is every bit as heartbreaking as that of Ophelia, Prince Hamlet's love interest who goes mad and drowns in the most famous play in English. Carter's novel is about magic as well as Shakespeare, though, and the apparent drowning is a classic bit of misdirection. The apparently dead Tiffany shows up later, to the discomfort of her faithless lover. Shrewdly, Carter counts on our registering "Tiffany = Ophelia" so that she can use her instead as a different Shakespearean character, Hero, who in *Much Ado About Nothing* allows her friends to stage her death and funeral in order to teach her fiancé a lesson. Carter employs not only materials from earlier texts but also her knowledge of our responses to them in order to double-cross us, to set us up for a certain kind of thinking so that she can play a larger trick in the narrative. No knowledge of Shakespeare is required to believe Tiffany has died or to be astonished at her return, but the more we know of his plays, the more solidly our responses are locked in. Carter's sleight of narrative challenges our expectations and keeps us on our feet, but it also takes what could seem merely a tawdry incident and reminds us, through

its Shakespearean parallels, that there is nothing new in young men mistreating the women who love them, and that those without power in relationships have always had to be creative in finding ways to exert some control of their own. Her new novel is telling a very old story, which in turn is part of the one big story.

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

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. Sarkin Aung Wan needs to be a great character, which she is, before we need to worry about her resemblance to a famous character of our acquaintance. If the story is good and the characters work but you don't catch allusions and references and parallels, then you've done nothing worse than read a good story with memorable characters. If you begin to pick up on some of these other elements, these parallels and analogies, however, you'll find your understanding of the novel deepens and becomes more meaningful, more complex.

*But we haven't read everything.*

Neither have I. Nor has anyone, not even Harold Bloom. Beginning readers, of course, are at a slight disadvantage, which is why professors are useful in providing a broader context. But you definitely can get there on your own. When I was a kid, I used to go mushroom hunting with my father. I would never see them, but he'd 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 and less vague. In a few moments I would begin seeing them myself, not all of them, but some. And once you begin seeing morels, you can't stop. What a literature professor does is very similar: he tells you when you get near mushrooms. Once you know that, though (and you generally are near them), you can hunt for mushrooms on your own.

## 6

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

Quick quiz: What do John Cleese, Cole Porter, *Moonlighting*, and *Death Valley Days* have in common? No, they're not part of some Communist plot. All were involved with some version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, by that former glover's apprentice from Stratford-upon-Avon, William Shakespeare. Cleese played Petruccio in the BBC production of the complete Shakespeare plays in the 1970s. Porter wrote the score for *Kiss Me, Kate*, the modern musical-comedy version on Broadway and on film. The *Moonlighting* episode called "Atomic Shakespeare" was one of the funniest and most inventive on a show that was consistently funny and inventive. It was comparatively faithful to the spirit of the original while capturing the essence of the show's regular characters. The truly odd duck here is