

epic, but I'm pretty sure this is not an instance of that. Rather, it stands as an example—or several examples—of the sort of surrogate fate that befalls heroes. And, alas, the people close to them.

If we except lyric poetry, nearly all literature is character-based. That is, it's about *people*. This is not an observation unique in the history of literary criticism, but it bears remembering from time to time. And for people, characters, to hold our interest as readers or viewers, it is important for them to do things from time to time. Big things: go on quests, marry, divorce, give birth, die, kill, take flight, tame the land, make a mark. Small things: go on walks, dine, take in a movie, play in the park, have a drink, fly a kite, find a penny on the ground. Sometimes the small things become big. Sometimes the big things are smaller than they seem at first. No matter how large or small the actions, though, the most important thing that characters can do is change—grow, develop, learn, mature, call it what you will. As we know from our own lives, change can be difficult, painful, arduous, possibly dangerous. Sometimes even fatal.

Just not to the main character.

One of the most complex instances of this surrogacy phenomenon is also one of the oldest. If ever there was a flawed hero, he is Achilles. *The Iliad*, contrary to popular imagination, is not the story of the Trojan War. Rather, it relates the events of a very small period of time, something like fifty-three days out of the war's ten years. You see, even epics work best if they are about not widespread events but single actions and their consequences—the hero returning home, the rescuer coming to the aid of a community plagued by a monster, the fall from grace of the original two humans. This epic is especially pure: the actions of a single man and their impact on thousands. When I say this part in class, I speak in italics: this work is about *the wrath of Achilles*.

The Big Man becomes angry when Agamemnon, the leader

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Never Stand Next to the Hero

AS YOU KNOW BY NOW, from time to time I like to give you life advice. This next bit is the most important lesson I can impart to you, so listen up. If you're approached by some guy to drive his chariot, ask his name. If he says, "Hector," do not consent. Do not stand still. Do not walk away. Run. Very fast. When I teach *The Iliad*, my favorite comic routine is pointing out what happens to Hector's charioteers. The average space between a charioteer being named and being skewered is about five lines. Occasionally, he gets speared before being identified, which seems really unfair. We finally reach the point where I have only to say something like, "Oh, look, a new charioteer," then pause. Everyone knows what comes next. Now, Homer actually has a good bit of intentional comedy in his

of the Greek forces, steals Achilles's war bride. From there, everything that happens stems from his inordinate anger toward Agamemnon and all those who follow him (essentially, everyone except Achilles's circle). From the tide of battle turning against the Greeks to the final showdown with Hector, it's all about Achilles, even in those numerous books in which he makes no appearance. He's mad and he's going home to Phthia (I've long thought that he doesn't go only because it's unpronounceable), which may strike us as more childish than manly. He doesn't go, but while he stays beside his ships, his heart hardens against the Greeks. Hundreds die; he doesn't care. Agamemnon apologizes and offers to give back everything he took, the girl included. Nearly all of the main heroes—Odysseus, Agamemnon, Diomedes, Eurypylus—are injured; no interest. Clearly, there is only one thing that will prompt him to action. He's not going to like it. His second-in-command, Patroclus, begs him to reenter the war or, failing that, to release the rest of his tribe, the Myrmidons, to return to the fighting, with Patroclus in the lead.

You see where this is heading, right?

Before we get there, however, a bit of context. In addition to being second-in-command, Patroclus has been best friends with Achilles since childhood. There's a long, rather soapy story about how the lesser man came to live in the home of the greater, and how their friendship developed. They are repeatedly depicted in the poem in close proximity to each other, sitting close or leaning against each other. Wait, it gets worse. Patroclus will indeed go into battle, but not as himself. Instead, he wears Achilles' armor. This has the long-term effect of causing Achilles to acquire the fabulous armor made for him by the god Hephaestus. In the short term, it allows Patroclus to frighten the Trojans, who believe for a while that he is the person they most fear; it also provides him the opportunity to be almost as great as his friend. That "almost"

is key. Patroclus visits great mayhem on the Trojans, indeed more than any other Greek thus far. At one point he plunges into the mass of the Trojans three times, each time killing nine enemy warriors. That's quite aside from the named killings he accomplishes. He is so terrific, in fact, that he gets carried away and tries to take the city. The mistake proves fatal. The difference between being Achilles and *almost* being Achilles is the difference between living and dying.

Patroclus's death serves several of Homer's narrative purposes, all of them having to do not with him but with Achilles. Most significantly, the great man must lay aside his anger toward Agamemnon. The problem is that he is essentially an angry person, so the emotion can't be dispelled, only redirected. In killing Patroclus, Hector has unwittingly volunteered to become the new target of that fury. Patroclus is also the only person present at the war for whom Achilles could (and does) genuinely grieve. They're friends from childhood, closer than some brothers. Achilles may rage over having his concubine taken away, but he would never mourn her as he does Patroclus. His ritual debasement—pouring ash and sand over his body and in his hair, weeping copiously, throwing himself on the ground—is one of the great scenes in the epic, every bit the rival of any of the battles. And only one man can make that happen. It's just that Patroclus has no say in the matter.

Nearly tied with that reason for Patroclus's death is the need for new armor, Hector having taken the old as spoils of the fight. But wait, you say—if Patroclus doesn't die, Achilles doesn't need new armor. That's true, but the fact is that wonderful though it may be, his old armor just isn't cool enough for him to be the greatest Greek hero, by which the Greeks understood the greatest hero ever (they were kind of like Americans that way). To make the kind of splash Homer has in mind, Achilles needs not just excellent but divine armor, the

stuff only a god can make. And he'll get it, compliments of Hephaestus, the Olympian smith. Tough job, but somebody's got to do it.

And that's the problem with being best pals with a hero. They have needs, or perhaps the narrative has needs on their behalf, but they cannot fulfill those requirements directly, not if the story is to continue. Hey, guess what? That's what friends are for. When Shakespeare needs a line to be crossed that cannot be uncrossed between the Capulets and the Montagues, does he kill Romeo? Of course not. Poor Mercutio, who is really a more engaging fellow than the hero, has to carry that freight. If James Fenimore Cooper in *The Last of the Mohicans* needs to establish the villainous bona fides of Magua and give the protagonist a motive for revenge (not that he generally needs one), does he kill off Natty Bumppo? Not on your life. Rather, he kills young Uncas, the son of Natty's best friend and fellow scout, Chingachgook. In fact, in story and song, book and film, there is generally no more persuasive reason for revenge, outrage, or prompting to action than the killing of the best friend (or his progeny). It really doesn't pay to get too close to hero-types.

But that seems so unfair.

Darned right it's unfair. But you know what? No one cares. Literature has its own logic; it is not life. Not only that, but (and this is key): **characters are not people.** Oh, they may seem like people, skipping and tagging and weeping and laughing and all the rest, but they aren't actually people, and we forget that at our peril.

What do you mean, they're not people? If that's true, why should we even care about them?

Excellent question. Or questions. First things first: They're not people because they have never existed. I mean, have you ever met one on the street? Naturally, you wouldn't meet Achilles or Huck Finn or someone from historical literature,

but you also won't be meeting any characters out of contemporary literature. Which is mostly a good thing. Harry Potter is not running around loose outside the pages of his books, Voldemort either (see what I mean about a good thing?). Oh, you can meet folks dressed like them sometimes, but not the real deal. Characters may be based on actual persons. Hemingway scholars are fond of reminding us that this character is based on that friend or (more commonly) former friend of the novelist, but being based on that friend is a long way from being him. We do not—and should not—read the character through the filter of the original, if there is one.

I know I have said this before and will say it again, but it bears repeating: if it's not in the text, it doesn't exist. We can only read what is present in a novel, play, or film. If something informed the author's creation of the text but the evidence is not present *in* the text, that's a matter for scholars concerned with motives, not with readers wrestling with meaning. Think of it this way: a vast majority of readers will have no access to that nontextual evidence. How, then, can we expect it to have any bearing on the way we read? The characters are purely textual creations, constructs of words. We know them through descriptions of them as well as through their own words and actions and those of other characters—not through the words (unreported) of the writer's brother-in-law or best enemy on whom the character may be "based." We process those words and actions and decide what to think, with a little help from the author.

Now, your second question: if they're not real people, why should we care about them? Why indeed? Why cheer at Harry Potter's victories? Why weep at Little Nell's death? Why feel anything at all for persons who never existed? Easy. Because we can't help ourselves. Here's the thing about those nonpersons that make us care: **Characters are products of writers' imaginations—and readers' imaginations.** Two powerful

forces come together to make a literary character. The writer invents him, using such elements of memory and observation and invention as she needs, and the reader—not readers collectively this time but each individual reader in private—reinvents him, using those same element of *his* memory, *his* observation, and *his* invention. The first, writerly, invention sketches out a figure, while the second, readerly, invention receives that figure and fills in the blank spaces. Sometimes we fill in spaces in ways not authorized by the text without ever noticing that we did so; every experienced reader has gone back to some favorite novel in search of a cherished passage, some crystal-clear personality trait, that is in fact absent from the text. We shape, or rather reshape, characters in order to make sense of them. Reading, as I have said elsewhere, is a full-contact sport; we crash up against the wave of words with all of our intellectual, imaginative, and emotional resources. What results can sometimes be as much our creation as the novelist's or playwright's. Or more: Is it any wonder, then, that we care about what happens to them?

Many of us learned during our formative years that having a shallow, immature, impulsive, reckless friend is hazardous. If we were characters in a novel or film, we probably wouldn't have learned that, or would have with our dying breath; the condition is often fatal to bystanders. Three films—among lots of possible examples—make the point: *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), and *Top Gun* (1986). In each of these films, a young man with a chip on his shoulder is at war with the world: Jim Stark (James Dean) in *Rebel*, Tony Manero (John Travolta) in *Fever*, and Pete “Maverick” Mitchell (Tom Cruise) in *Top Gun*. Their mix of anger, overconfidence, and alienation makes them difficult to handle and often unpredictable. And each of them is responsible for the death of someone close. Jim Stark's recklessness leads to the death of a rival, Buzz Gunderson, in a foolish automotive challenge

game when his car goes off a cliff. Jim's acolyte, young Plato Crawford (Sal Mineo), also dies after coming unhinged at the intensity of the events and rushing the police with a pistol Jim had secretly unloaded in an attempt to keep everyone safe. Tony's antics lead to the death of Bobby C., who falls from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Maverick's risk-taking turns dark when he loses control of his F-16, and his Radio Intercept Operator and best friend, Goose (Anthony Edwards), dies in the resulting crash. There's a lot of death here involving falls from great heights, so that might be something to investigate another day.

Structurally, these three films are very similar: the immature young man must learn the lessons he needs to grow up. But because of the nature of the lessons and the cinematic need for drama, those lessons are learned vicariously. In other words, a major motion picture isn't much if the main character dies well before the end. Instead, his lieutenant (or, occasionally, his rival; sometimes both) must do the dying for him. Then we get drama, death, and guilt: the movie trifecca. There are plenty of other instances of this phenomenon. In Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, Jim's overconfidence leads to the death of the local chieftain's son, Dain Waris, whom he treats like a brother. For this transgression, Jim willingly submits to being shot through the heart by the chieftain, Doramin, reminding us that Conrad is, at root, a tragedian. In David Lean's masterpiece, the film *Lawrence of Arabia*, T. E. Lawrence's (Peter O'Toole, who also played Lord Jim) two young disciples die horribly (quicksand, accident with dynamite) while trying to emulate him, chiefly so that he can learn firsthand that his war is not a game.

These mishaps for seconds-in-command can take many shapes. I've focused on the tragic side here, but they can also be comic or mixed. Huck Finn gets into scrapes, but the bad things happen to the escaped slave Jim, who shares the raft. All kinds of perils threaten Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp in his

various silent films, but the board across the face or the anvil on the head (okay, I don't think there are actually any of *those*) almost always befalls whatever hapless colleague or pursuer happens to be standing beside him. The pie in the face only occasionally hits the comic lead; more commonly, he ducks to pick up a nickel and it hits the wealthy woman or bank president behind him.

There are all kinds of sources of this next-man-over mayhem—cosmic spite, bad luck, the need for a whipping boy, you name it—but they nearly all come under the heading of plot exigency. The plot *needs* something to happen in order to move forward, so someone must be sacrificed. That “someone” is rarely the protagonist. Oh, the unfairness of it all. In truth, it's worse than that.

You see, literary works are not democracies. We hold this truth to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal. We may, but the country of Novels, Etc., doesn't. In that faraway place, no character is created equal. One or two get all the breaks; the rest exist to get them to the finish line. Here's what E. M. Forster, whose name you see a lot in these pages, had to say on the subject in his book *Aspects of the Novel*: the fictive world (I'm paraphrasing here) is divided up into *round* and *flat* characters. Round characters are what we could call three-dimensional, full of traits and strengths and weaknesses and contradictions, capable of change and growth. Flat characters, not so much. They lack full development in the narrative or drama, so they're more two-dimensional, like cartoon cutouts. Some critics call these two types of literary personnel *dynamic* and *static*, but we'll go with round and flat. And between these two, round characters get all the breaks. What this means is that, conventionally, the point of a work is to follow one or two major figures through to their endpoint for good or ill, to watch how they develop or grow. Or don't. Pretty much everyone else exists as a plot device and is subject

to cancellation whenever the plot demands a sacrifice. If to get to the finish line the hero must walk over a sea of bodies, then so be it. He can die at said line, but he's got to get there. See also *Hamlet*.

I'm going to go out on a limb here, take the generous view, and suggest that in real life, everyone is a fully rounded character. I have from time to time had my doubts, but let's go with it. What I mean is that we are all complete beings. We have many different qualities that don't always fit together very smoothly. More important, we're all capable of growth, development, and change. We can get better, although we sometimes fail to do so. To put this another way, we are all, each and every last one of us, the protagonist of our own story. Those stories frequently clash with one another, so other people may not seem as complete, or at least as urgently complete, as ourselves, but that doesn't alter the other person's reality. But that basic truth has nothing to do with literature. In fictive works, some characters are more equal than other characters. A lot more equal.

To get our heads around this notion, we need to go back to that basic point about characters not being people: They are representations, in greater or lesser detail, of human beings. Real people are made out of a whole lot of things—flesh, bone, blood, nerves, stuff like that. Literary people are made out of words. Can't breathe, can't bleed (even if a surprising number appear to), can't eat, can't love. They can be made to seem to do those things, but they don't actually do them. If you met one on the street, you'd be seriously disappointed. If writers made them as whole as we are, you'd be seriously bored. Even round characters are somewhat less than complete beings. They are merely simulacra, illusions meant to suggest fully formed humans. To the extent that we believe in them, that is a credit to the writer. And to us. But this creates a problem for us. The trick is to believe in them, as reader, and to rec-

ognize the unreality, as critic. What we're trying to do here is create expert readers, folks we might describe as reader-critics. You know, readers who can simultaneously take pleasure from a work and analyze it. Yeah, yeah, I know all that Wordsworth noise about "we murder to dissect." It's nonsense. I don't know a soul who appreciates and enjoys literature as much as experts who can really take it apart. Why do you think we became experts in the first place? Because we loved reading this stuff. Intelligent readers can keep both these notions in mind at once. Analysis only sounds threatening to pleasure; in practice, no sweat.

So why aren't all characters round?

Very logical question. Good one, too. The answers are mostly practical, rather than aesthetic. Characters are created on something like a need-to-know basis. Their utility is all that matters. Writers give them only as much reality as they need to do their jobs. Why?

* First of all, focus. If every character was developed to the same highly articulated degree, then how would we know on whom to focus our attention? That could get really confusing, and one thing we know about readers is that they don't like to be any more confused than necessary.

* Second, intensity of labor. Thinking up a full backstory for every character, no matter how minor, as well as the complete panoply of qualities, interests, shortcomings, phobias, and so on would be exhausting. It's hard enough to deal with them the way they are.

* Third, confusion of purpose. If a character is there to be a villain, finding out he loves his mother or owns a dog may be a distraction from the main point. Unless

he kicks it (or her). Flat characters are easier to know in terms of their intent and narrative purpose, and we readers can use all the help we can get.

* Fourth, just consider length. Almost every short story would become a novella, perhaps a novel, in order to get in all that detail. Every novel would become *War and Peace*, and *War and Peace* would simply crush your chest. That's a heavy loss of conciseness with no corresponding gain in information. As we saw in the first point, that expansion of information would also be a loss. And I think we can agree that literary works are as long as we wish them to be already.

I've made this flat/round thing sound binary, but it is really more of a continuum. There are wholly flat characters, to be sure. But there are also those who fall somewhere closer to the rounded end of the graph, were we to make one. We find out, for instance, that Claudius, Hamlet's uncle and the villain of the play, is capable of remorse over his actions. Hamlet sees him at prayer; what he doesn't know but we discover is that Claudius is so blackened that he finds himself incapable of praying. Best friend Horatio is loyal to itself, but even he has doubts about the prince from time to time. So if we were to make a scale with, say, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or the gravediggers at one end and Hamlet at the other, we wouldn't see something like a barbell with a long flat line connecting two bundles gathered at either end. Somewhere along that line would appear (in something like this order from flatter on toward rounder) Polonius, Laertes, Horatio, Ophelia, Gertude, Claudius, Hamlet. In case you're wondering, the ghost of Hamlet's father is pretty flat. Yorick doesn't count. In order to be a character, you have to be more than a skull.

Novelists and playwrights have considered these matters over the years, as we see in their essays and sometimes in their works.

Numerous pieces of advice from Forster, John Gardner, Henry James, David Lodge, and others have addressed the question of minor characters. Dickens tries to make up for the lack of attention that his minor figures receive by making them memorable, by giving them some astonishing tic or tagline, as with Mrs. Micawber's "I never will desert Mr. Micawber." No one ever asks her to, making her repeated use of the line more eye-catching. Indeed, when we recall characters from Dickens, it is chiefly the rogue's gallery of secondary figures who spring to mind: Magwitch, Miss Havisham, Jaggers, Bill Sikes, Mr. Micawber, Barkis and Peggotty, Uriah Heep.

During the postmodern era, questions about the inner lives of minor characters have made their way to the page and stage. I mentioned Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) earlier. Its main thrust is the question, where do minor characters go when they're not onstage? Stoppard is not speaking of the actors playing those roles but of the characters themselves. For those of you who may be a little rusty on your Hamletology, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are those two hapless dupes who shepherd Hamlet off to England, there ostensibly (but unknown to them) to be killed. Hamlet, however, is not so dim, and he engineers not only an escape but a scheme in which the two messengers deliver their own death warrants to the English king. They have—what?—maybe five minutes of stage time out of three-plus hours of tragedy. What, Stoppard asks, do they get up to during all that downtime? The play seems a bit of absurdist nonsense, but it's nonsense with a purpose. More recently, Jon Clinch gave us the novel *Finn* (2007), which examines in full the life of one of American literature's most odious specimens, Huck Finn's Pap. If anything, he's even worse when given more space. Then there is the cottage industry that seems determined to cover every aspect of all things Austen, including giving minor characters more room to run amok. This trend may be one

of the first for which the twenty-first century will need to apologize.

All of this discussion of major and minor characters goes back a long, long way. Aristotle suggested an intimate connection between the shape of the plot and the nature of the characters involved. His discussion is sometimes reduced to the formulation, "Plot is character revealed in action." There have not been a lot of improvements on that notion over the millennia. What he means is that plot, not actions themselves but the way those actions are structured, grows out of the nature of the characters, which we then discover through their actions. The contemporary formulation is this bit of circular thinking: plot is character in action; character is revealed and shaped by plot. We must recognize that character is essential to fictional and dramatic literature. That includes all kinds of characters. We need flat ones as well as round, static as well as dynamic. In the final analysis, they're all doing the same thing, making the story or novel or play reach its end and making that end seem inevitable. What happens to Gatsby must feel like the only outcome, given who Gatsby is and who Nick is and who Daisy is. And Tom and George Wilson and Myrtle Wilson. It takes a village to murder a character.

What's that? You say this time the hero gets bumped off?

Are you sure about that? Maybe we should have a talk.

I'm kidding, right? John Donne went there long ago, getting a lot of mileage out of the tiny pest. I mentioned earlier that Donne was a lawyer and clergyman by trade—he was dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London for the last decade of his life—but earlier he was a rake as well as a writer fond of sexy metaphors. It was the task of every literary rake to talk his romantic targets into giving him what he wanted in the cleverest fashion possible. Here's one of Donne's efforts:

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two;
And this, alas! is more than we would do.

This is just the first stanza of "The Flea," but, allowing for a thee and thou, we can make sense of it. The male speaker is asking his reluctant lover to consider that the flea has done what she won't let him do: it has mingled their two beings, in this case by taking blood from each of them. See, he says, our blood is already joined, so what's the big deal about having a roll in the hay? There's no shame in the flea, or in our having been bitten by it; why should there be shame in our having sex?

He goes on in this vein in the next two stanzas, first asking her not to kill the flea, since that would amount to killing, in a funny bit of illogic, all three of them, and speaking of the insect as "our marriage bed." We understand throughout that he is not entirely sincere, that the flea is an occasion for comic posing as well as sexual begging. In stanza three, she does kill the flea—not a happy sign for the imploring lover—and he suggests that there will be no more dishonor in her consenting

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It's My Symbol and I'll Cry If I Want To

SO FAR WE'VE BEEN TALKING about figures that are fairly common and well-known. A lot of things in the world have more or less ready-made associations—or associations so long in use that they seem ready-made to us latecomers. Rivers? Change, flow, flood, or drought. Rocks? Stasis, resistance to change, permanence. When Yeats puts an imagined stone in his hypothetical river in "Easter 1916," he contrasts the flux of the river with the unyielding stone, and we all get it without having to think very deeply. So far, so good.

Now, what if it's not something seen around the house of literature every day? What if it's, oh, I don't know, a cow? Or a goat? Lots of sheep in pastoral poems, not so many goats. Let's go off the deep end here; how about a flea? You think

to sex than there is in her having killed the flea. This kind of extended metaphor running through the poem as an organizing device is called a *conceit*, something at which Donne and his so-called metaphysical poet colleagues excelled. Often, as here, the device seems more important than the subject, the latter seeming to have been dreamt up in order to employ the former. The occasion, a lover's urgent request, may be amusing, but not nearly so much as using an annoying flea as the basis for such an argument.

So here's the payoff: how many times have you seen a strategy like this? Not the sexual request, the use of a flea (or, alternatively, a mosquito, tick, horsefly, or any other biting insect). Pretty much never, right? One of the things we've been talking about in this book is how we can build a sort of literary database of imagery and its uses: rain, check; shared meals, check; guests, check; and so on. What that database relies upon, naturally, is repetition. If enough writers use a given object or situation in enough works, we start to recognize and understand the range of possible meanings. They don't have to say, "Hey, pay attention! It's raining!" They can simply make it rain and we'll do the rest. The writers don't even have to think about it; it can rain because that's what the plot demands. We can figure things out from there.

The point is, we have, as writers, artists, and readers, a common pool of figurative data built up over centuries of use in a host of situations and for a multiplicity of purposes—a store of images, symbols, similes, and metaphors that we not only can access but do, almost automatically. We may not think our way through the implications of a flood in a movie, but we can feel its impact—apart from the surface fact of things getting washed away—at a level before conscious thought. This warehouse of implications, as it were, permits texts to mean more than one thing simultaneously.

Let's be clear, just so no one runs off the rails: these impli-

cations are invariably *secondary*. The *primary* meaning of the text is the story it is telling, the surface discussion (landscape description, action, argument, and so on). There comes a point in our literary development when we nearly all lose sight of that fact. If you want to trip up an advanced English class, ask them, "What's this story about?" They fall all over themselves coming up with "hidden" meanings, many of which may actually be correct. They just forget to say that it's about a bigot whose wife invites a blind man to dinner. Any fourth grader can do it, but eventually we lose the skill as we pursue what lies beneath, so it's worth exercising that muscle every so often. Think of it this way: if the novel is a complete disaster as a piece of storytelling, it can't be saved by all the symbols in the world. No, I did not just condemn *Moby-Dick*; it succeeds by rules of narrative that not many people can grasp (especially at seventeen or twenty, when most of us get fouled in its lines).

None of this diminishes the importance of those secondary meanings; they still matter. They are what provide texture and depth to a work; without them, the literary world would be a little flat. They instill resonance as we recognize something in a new work that we might have seen elsewhere or that deepens the meaning of the surface story. It's one thing, say, for a young woman to feel passionately toward her rescuer, quite another if the rescue was from drowning (as opposed to from a runaway carriage or a pack of wolves), since in almost drowning she has experienced something quite close to death. She has been, in a sense, reborn. That shared storehouse of *figuration*—that is, types of figurative representation such as symbols, metaphors, allegory, imagery—allows us, even encourages us, to discover possibilities in a text beyond the literal. We have spent a great deal of time discussing various items stored in that vault, from gardens to baptisms to journeys to weather and seasons to food to illness, but its contents are vastly greater than any book can possibly cover. Happily, once you understand the principle, you

can uncover and grapple with individual instances as you go. After all, you've been doing it all your life without knowing, so the only difference is that you're moving ahead thoughtfully.

On the other hand, what about those figurative elements that are not part of the common share? I suggested that Donne's tiny bloodsucker was a private symbol. Here's another one from the same guy. In "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," he is bidding farewell to his beloved. In attempting to soften the blow he says, in effect, "just think of it like this: you are the foot of a compass [think geometry, not geography], while I am the pencil point. No matter how far I must range out, we are always connected, so I cannot break free of you. You are the center of my existence even when we are far apart." Actually, he provides twin compasses, with each of the lovers being the center of the other's existence. I'm not sure that allows for a lot of movement, but we'll pass on that for now; after all, it's a great image. It's a lot of fun to debate in class whether he is sincere or just using a line to make a quick morning-after getaway (evidence in the poem runs in both directions), but for right now, that's beside the point. For our purposes, there's a problem: no map exists for this new territory. There just aren't a lot of poems that make use of mathematical devices. Oh, three hundred or so years later Louis MacNeice will refer to "slide snide rules" in his "Variation on Heraclitus," leaving the hapless instructor to explain to mystified students that in the old days (i.e., before calculators) the slide rule was something we used for math and physics calculations. There may also be a poem or two out there somewhere that allude to the abacus, although I've not seen them. But you just won't find a lot of references to protractors and compasses. So what to do with such a reference?

Figure it out.

I know, I know. That sounds really lame, but sometimes the truth does hobble. In a situation where we encounter purely

private symbols, there are some things we can fall back on. Most important, there's context. Where in the poem does the image reside? (In this case, the final three stanzas, after he has discussed disappearances of a more permanent sort.) How does he use the image? What does he seem to mean by it? In other words, what are the words, read carefully, telling us? We also have another set of tools available: our own good sense and reading savvy. As we become expert readers through practice, we gain the ability to transfer knowledge from one area to another. True, before this poem we have no practice with compass imagery, but we do have experience with figures of distance and connectedness. We know how other forms of staying in touch work, from letters to telephone calls to messages by courier (although those often go badly). We understand lovers' oaths and all that goes with them. What we learn pretty quickly is that this is not the hardest image we'll ever have to deal with. We can do this.

Of course, some writers make it hard. I mentioned Yeats and a fairly public symbol earlier, but he is notorious for his capacity to employ very private images and symbols. One of his favorites involves a tower. And not just any tower, not the ivory tower of popular cliché, but a very specific example. His tower. Around 1915 or 1916 he bought a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century (dates on these matters are a little fuzzy) Anglo-Norman tower, a sort of bastion-minus-its-castle, although it was called Ballylee Castle. Using the Gaelic word for tower, he rechristened it Thoor Ballylee, a curious affection given the poet's signature inability to master the old language. But then, Yeats was a funny guy. Once he acquires the tower from his great friend Lady Gregory, it quickly dominates his poetry. Sometimes it merely stands for being rooted

in the soil of Co. Galway, which was a great desire of his. At others, it can be an emblem of imperfect art, as when he goes up to the roof and leans on a broken stone crenel. Frequently, it is most significantly itself, the place from which he can, in relative safety, watch the competing military forces move up and down the road during the Irish Civil War (“Meditations in Time of Civil War”). Or it is the building on which he intends to have a dedicatory poem inscribed (“To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee”). It is a retreat from the modern world, a refuge, a connection to an aristocratic past, an object of great solidity. It becomes the title of successive books, such as *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair* (1933), after its most notable interior feature. And then there are the gyres.

What do you mean—what are gyres?

Okay, so here’s where private systems of symbols really kick in. Yeats has an entire visionary system that he articulates in *A Vision* (1925). This system has lots of moving parts, but key among them are the gyres—which he always pronounced with a hard g. His gyres are spinning conical things with the point of one resting (if spinning things rest) in the base of the other. Clear as mud, right? Imagine an hourglass. Now, split it at the narrowest point. If you can somehow cause those two halves to intersect with each other (easier with nonsolid objects) and cause them to spin in opposite directions, you’ve got it. The gyres embody opposing historical or philosophical or spiritual forces, so they’re a little like Hegel’s or Marx’s dialectic, in which opposing forces clash together to create a new reality. Except that dialectics don’t spin or whirl.

There is no end to the fun Yeats has with gyres, and once they pop up in his thinking—shortly after his marriage in 1917—they are everywhere, from the wheeling flights of birds taking off from water to whirlwinds to anything vaguely circular. But one of his favorites involves that winding stair inside

a tower, something at once exotic and homey that he would have encountered every day in his summer residence. Like gyres, the tower and spiral stairway are inseparable; one is not much use without the other. One of the great beauties—and challenges—of reading Yeats is that you find symbols and metaphors that you will find nowhere else in all of literature. His system of figuration is private, idiosyncratic, even, as some claim, hermetic, sealed off, airless. You’ll never get some parts of him on a first reading; it may require special information (I have studied *A Vision*, but that’s a lot to ask of civilians). So it takes some work to get everything you want from some of his poetry.

And here’s the thing: there’s no road map. You can work with stock symbolism till the cows are back in the barn, and it won’t help. These symbols are private. That doesn’t mean no visitors allowed. I don’t claim to offer a comprehensive examination of figuration in literature, but even if I did manage such a thing, in this instance you would still be on your own. If, instead of twenty-some chapters, this book had a hundred twenty-some, or two hundred twenty-some, it still wouldn’t have a chapter on gyres. In order to warrant such a chapter, we would need at least two poets dealing in them. To date, there is only one. I suspect that statement will always be true. Singular systems don’t get general discussions.

That, however, doesn’t mean we can’t decode his writing. We may not get it all, but we can do a good bit. When Yeats, for instance, in “The Wild Swans at Coole” has his swans go wheeling up in “great broken rings,” we have no trouble with the image itself, that of a great flock of huge, white birds rising in loose circles into the air. Does it matter if readers don’t get the larger symbolic implications? Not really. There are layers and layers of possible meanings here, and we take what we can find, what we are prepared to deal with at the moment of our

reading. Besides, in this case, the contrast between the aging, earthbound speaker and the always young, airborne birds is worth all the gyres that ever were. Or weren't.

So here's a strategy: **use what you know.** I have spent many years teaching twentieth-century writing—Joyce, Faulkner, Woolf, Eliot, Pound, Fowles, O'Brien (several of those), all the heavy hitters of innovative writing. You know, the scary ones. And without exception, those writers produce books that we must learn to read as we go. *Ulysses* isn't like, well, anything. It isn't *Dubliners* or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce's two earlier works, nor is it much like works by other so-called stream-of-consciousness writers, whatever affinities it may have with them. The only thing that can really prepare you to read *Ulysses* is reading *Ulysses*: As you can tell, I'm a lot of help in class. Still, it's true; there are some narrative strategies in the novel that readers will never have seen before and, likely, will never see again. Oh, by the way, what you learn there will also not really prepare you for *Finnegans Wake*. That novelty is part of the excitement as well as the challenge of the book. There's so much that's just plain new: I don't know how you can't love that, although students routinely remind me that it's possible. The same can be said for *Mrs. Dalloway* or *The Waste Land* or *As I Lay Dying* or *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or even *The Great Gatsby*, if in slightly less gaudy ways. What I've learned from all these modern and postmodern works has led me to conclude that it is true of others as well: **every work teaches us how to read it as we go along.** The big lessons, for best results, occur early on. Context helps a lot in reading new or unfamiliar forms of literature. Page three helps with page four, which helps with pages eight and fifteen, and so on. Not every book presents the same level of challenge; the lessons in Dickens are somewhat more modest than those in Joyce (and have mainly to do with endurance). Even so, every page of a literary work is part of an education in reading.

The other thing, aside from immediate context, that helps us with the occasional rough patch is everything else we have read. And by "reading" here, I am taking a liberal view. You read novels and poems, of course. But you also "read" a play even if you see it in its proper setting, a theater, and not between the covers of a book. Well, then, do you also "read" a movie? I believe so, although some films may reward reading more than others. Hollywood has always produced a certain number of films that do not repay the application of brainwaves—think gross-out comedies; titles whose last name is a number, as in *Rambo 17½*; and some adaptations of comic books. But since I have invoked comic books, yes, you read those as well. And in reading all those forms of narrative and presentation, you prepare yourself for new works. In the present instance, in analyzing the more familiar and shared examples of symbolic representation, we gain practice in understanding figuration. From there, we can move forward to encounter new and stranger examples. Most of the time, we do this without thinking about it, but thinking about it might be useful. When I suggest to students that they use their past reading experiences, their response is on the order of, "We don't have any." Which, as we have just seen, is untrue. And here's what I say in reply: **You know more than you think you do.** No, you have not read everything. But you have probably read enough—enough novels, memoirs, poems, news stories, movies, television shows, plays, songs, enough everything when it's all added up. The real problem is that "inexperienced" readers tend to deny themselves credit for the experience they do have. Get over it! Focus on all that you do know, not all that you don't. And use it.

Not every private symbol is entirely idiosyncratic. Sometimes an image or scene is merely turned to innovative uses. Usually,

if someone introduces a tightrope or high wire into a work, our attention is turned entirely to matters of balance, to the void beneath the wire. Such a pattern is perfectly logical: the thrill and fascination of the performance lies not merely in the difficulty but also in the possibility of calamity. For persons of a certain age (mine, for instance), the most notable example would be Leon Russell's song "Tight Rope" (1972), in which the twin perils, the chasms on either side, are described variously as ice and fire, hate and hope, and life and death. But there's another way of viewing the wire. Especially the highest wire act ever performed. On a bright August morning in 1974, the French aerialist Philippe Petit walked a wire between the then-still-new twin towers of the World Trade Center. This was, of course, twenty-seven years before two jetliners commandeered by terrorists reduced the buildings to rubble, with terrible loss of life. Eight years after that atrocity, Colum McCann published his novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), in which Petit's feat acts as the framing device that connects stories of diverse New Yorkers on that summer's day. A few of them have witnessed the walk, while most have only heard about it second- or thirdhand, as indeed most residents of the city would have. But here's the thing: McCann does not use the wire as a metaphor for hazard and disaster, although that possibility is always present both in Petit's performance and in the lives—and deaths—of the characters in the framed narrative. Rather, McCann points out the other dimension of a tightrope, not its narrowness but its length. To accomplish his stunt, Petit connects the two towers by means of his cable. The novel follows this metaphor throughout, showing how lives are joined together by the most unlikely and seemingly flimsy of filaments. The brilliance of the novel grows out of its insistence that the real star is not the walker but the wire; everyone, including the narrator, gives full due to the "crazy man," as most see him, walking between the buildings, but it

is the braided cable supporting him that constitutes the real magic. The novel has been described as "kaleidoscopic" and "dazzling," and properly so. If those adjectives are apt, and I believe they are, the dazzling part is McCann's finding a conceit, a controlling metaphor, that enables him to string together disparate lives from Bronx hookers to a Manhattan district court judge to art poseurs to a ruined Irish monk to the owner of a Park Avenue penthouse—in other words, to portray a city that is itself dazzlingly kaleidoscopic.

The way McCann deploys his dominant figure is uncommon, possibly unique, yet it is by no means difficult to read or comprehend. The reason that this seeming paradox is true is that for the most part humans are very good at entering these "private" realms, at inferring meanings, at judging the implications of texts—in other words, we're good at reading. So when Samuel Beckett sticks characters in ash cans or Edward Albee plants them in a sandbox, or when Eugène Ionesco turns them into rhinoceroses, we may scratch our heads at first, given that we've never seen that situation, but with a little time and imagination, we'll figure it out. Even the weird stuff usually makes sense on some level. Maybe especially the weird stuff.