

## AP LITERATURE SUMMER READING 2019

### 1. “How to Mark a Book” by Mortimer Adler, Ph.D.

This is where you must BEGIN your summer assignments. I have included this in this packet but it can also be found at <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/adler.html>

Read Dr. Adler’s essay, “How to Mark a Book.” Formally, we call this “annotation,” and it is not only recommended, it is REQUIRED in this class. That being said, marking a book (or anything we read) is certainly an activity that is personal and unique to you as an individual. It is important that you create a system that works well for you—consider the possibilities of highlighters, colored pens or pencils, and post-it notes as some of your options. Your personal book marking system will develop over time.

### 2. *How to Read Literature Like A Professor* - Thomas C. Foster

ISBN-13: 978-0062301673 (I recommend purchase so you can annotate freely but this is not mandatory. I have included the most important chapters in this packet.)

Your next assignment is to read the chapters from *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* that are included in this packet. This book is an invaluable resource for students who are interested in doing more than just a cursory reading of any text they encounter. Foster, a professor of English at the University of Michigan, humorously provides an introduction to literary analysis. In a very informal style (this is not a textbook), Foster focuses on literary basics: major themes and motifs, literary models, and narrative devices...all of which will be helpful as we study texts throughout the school year ahead.

Some of what you read will be familiar to you, and some of it will be new and provide “food for thought” as you read your summer novel. As you read, you should annotate (see the article “How to Mark a Book” by Mortimer Adler, Ph.D.), and might consider taking notes as well.

### 3. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley- purchase of this book is recommended but not mandatory. You can download a free (and legal!) copy from Project Gutenberg or the Internet Archive. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* by Thomas Foster will help you to understand the novel better.

**A. Before you read *Frankenstein*:** Re-read Chapter 21 “Marked for Greatness” from Foster’s book paying attention to what he says about *Frankenstein*.

**B. After you read *Frankenstein*:** Apply the following chapters from Foster’s book to *Frankenstein*. (If you purchased your book, the chapter numbers might be different so go by the chapter titles.)

Chapter 1 “Every Trip Is a Quest”

Chapter 6 “...or *The Bible*”

Chapter 8 “It’s Greek to Me” (think Prometheus)

Chapter 9 “It’s More Than Just Rain or Snow”

Chapter 11 “...More Than It’s Gonna Hurt You: Concerning Violence”

Chapter 12 “Is That a Symbol?”

Chapter 19 “Geography Matters...”

Chapter 20 “...So Does Season”

Chapter 24 “Don’t Read with Your Eyes”

**ASSIGNMENT:** Respond to each chapter by writing a well-developed paragraph that explains the main points Foster is making and show how they apply to *Frankenstein* (150 word minimum). Include at least two specific textual examples (at least one of which is a direct quote from the novel) that show how Mary Shelley is using the technique or idea discussed in Foster’s chapter. **Use MLA parenthetical citation to indicate where in the novel you found your examples.**

## How to Mark a Book

By Mortimer J. Adler, Ph.D.

from [The Radical Academy](#)

You know you have to read "between the lines" to get the most out of anything. I want to persuade you to do something equally important in the course of your reading. I want to persuade you to write between the lines. Unless you do, you are not likely to do the most efficient kind of reading.

I contend, quite bluntly, that marking up a book is not an act of mutilation but of love. You shouldn't mark up a book which isn't yours.

Librarians (or your friends) who lend you books expect you to keep them clean, and you should. If you decide that I am right about the usefulness of marking books, you will have to buy them. Most of the world's great books are available today, in reprint editions.

There are two ways in which one can own a book. The first is the property right you establish by paying for it, just as you pay for clothes and furniture. But this act of purchase is only the prelude to possession. Full ownership comes only when you have made it a part of yourself, and the best way to make yourself a part of it is by writing in it. An illustration may make the point clear. You buy a beefsteak and transfer it from the butcher's icebox to your own. But you do not own the beefsteak in the most important sense until you consume it and get it into your bloodstream. I am arguing that books, too, must be absorbed in your blood stream to do you any good.

Confusion about what it means to "own" a book leads people to a false reverence for paper, binding, and type -- a respect for the physical thing -- the craft of the printer rather than the genius of the author. They forget that it is possible for a man to acquire the idea, to possess the beauty, which a great book contains, without staking his claim by pasting his bookplate inside the cover. Having a fine library doesn't prove that its owner has a mind enriched by books; it proves nothing more than that he, his father, or his wife, was rich enough to buy them.

There are three kinds of book owners. The first has all the standard sets and best sellers -- unread, untouched. (This deluded individual owns woodpulp and ink, not books.) The second has a great many books -- a few of them read through, most of them dipped into, but all of them as clean and shiny as the day they were bought. (This person would probably like to make books his own, but is restrained by a false respect for their physical appearance.) The third has a few books or many -- every one of them dog-eared and dilapidated, shaken and loosened by continual use, marked and scribbled in from front to back. (This man owns books.)

Is it false respect, you may ask, to preserve intact and unblemished a beautifully printed book, an elegantly bound edition? Of course not. I'd no more scribble all over a first edition of 'Paradise Lost' than I'd give my baby a set of crayons and an original Rembrandt. I wouldn't mark up a painting or a statue. Its soul, so to speak, is inseparable from its body. And the beauty of a rare edition or of a richly manufactured volume is like that of a painting or a statue.

But the soul of a book "can" be separate from its body. A book is more like the score of a piece of music than it is like a painting. No great musician confuses a symphony with the printed sheets of music. Arturo Toscanini reveres Brahms, but Toscanini's score of the G minor Symphony is so thoroughly marked up that no one but the maestro himself can read it. The reason why a great conductor makes notations on his musical scores -- marks them up again and again each time he returns to study them--is the reason why you should mark your books. If your respect for magnificent binding or typography gets in the way, buy yourself a cheap edition and pay your respects to the author.

Why is marking up a book indispensable to reading? First, it keeps you awake. (And I don't mean merely conscious; I mean awake.) In the second place; reading, if it is active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The marked book is usually the thought-through book. Finally, writing helps you remember the thoughts you had, or the thoughts the author expressed. Let me develop these three points.

If reading is to accomplish anything more than passing time, it must be active. You can't let your eyes glide across the lines of a book and come up with an understanding of what you have read. Now an ordinary piece of light fiction, like, say, "Gone With the Wind," doesn't require the most active kind of reading. The books you read for pleasure can be read in a state of relaxation, and nothing is lost. But a great book, rich in ideas and beauty, a book that raises and tries to answer great fundamental questions, demands the most active reading of which you are capable. You don't absorb the ideas of John Dewey the way you absorb the crooning of Mr. Vallee. You have to reach for them. That you cannot do while you're asleep.

If, when you've finished reading a book, the pages are filled with your notes, you know that you read actively. The most famous "active" reader of great books I know is President Hutchins, of the University of Chicago. He also has the hardest schedule of business activities of any man I know. He invariably reads with a pencil, and sometimes, when he picks up a book and pencil in the evening, he finds himself, instead of making intelligent notes, drawing what he calls 'caviar factories' on the margins. When that happens, he puts the book down. He knows he's too tired to read, and he's just wasting time.

But, you may ask, why is writing necessary? Well, the physical act of writing, with your own hand, brings words and sentences more sharply before your mind and preserves them better in your memory. To set down your reaction to important words and sentences you have read, and the questions they have raised in your mind, is to preserve those reactions and sharpen those questions.

Even if you wrote on a scratch pad, and threw the paper away when you had finished writing, your grasp of the book would be surer. But you don't have to throw the paper away. The margins (top as bottom, and well as side), the end-papers, the very space between the lines, are all available. They aren't sacred. And, best of all, your marks and notes become an integral part of the book and stay there forever. You can pick up the book the following week or year, and there are all your points of agreement, disagreement, doubt, and inquiry. It's like resuming an interrupted conversation with the advantage of being able to pick up where you left off.

And that is exactly what reading a book should be: a conversation between you and the author. Presumably he knows more about the subject than you do; naturally, you'll have the proper humility as you approach him. But don't let anybody tell you that a reader is supposed to be solely on the receiving end. Understanding is a two-way operation; learning doesn't consist in being an empty receptacle. The learner has to question himself and question the teacher. He even has to argue with the teacher, once he understands what the teacher is saying. And marking a book is literally an expression of differences, or agreements of opinion, with the author.

There are all kinds of devices for marking a book intelligently and fruitfully. Here's the way I do it:

- **Underlining (or highlighting)**: of major points, of important or forceful statements.
- **Vertical lines at the margin**: to emphasize a statement already underlined.
- **Star, asterisk, or other doo-dad at the margin**: to be used sparingly, to emphasize the ten or twenty most important statements in the book. (You may want to fold the bottom corner of each page on which you use such marks. It won't hurt the sturdy paper on which most modern books are printed, and you will be able take the book off the shelf at any time and, by opening it at the folded-corner page, refresh your recollection of the book.)
- **Numbers in the margin**: to indicate the sequence of points the author makes in developing a single argument.
- **Numbers of other pages in the margin**: to indicate where else in the book the author made points relevant to the point marked; to tie up the ideas in a book, which, though they may be separated by many pages, belong together.
- **Circling or highlighting of key words or phrases.**
- **Writing in the margin, or at the top or bottom of the page, for the sake of**: recording questions (and perhaps answers) which a passage raised in your mind; reducing a complicated discussion to a simple statement; recording the sequence of major points right through the books. I use the end-papers at the back of the book to make a personal index of the author's points in the order of their appearance.

The front end-papers are to me the most important. Some people reserve them for a fancy bookplate. I reserve them for fancy thinking. After I have finished reading the book and making my personal index on the back end-papers, I turn to the front and try to outline the book, not page by page or point by point (I've already done that at the back), but as an integrated structure, with a basic unity and an order of parts. This outline is, to me, the measure of my understanding of the work.

If you're a die-hard anti-book-marker, you may object that the margins, the space between the lines, and the end-papers don't give you room enough. All right. How about using a scratch pad slightly smaller than the page-size of the book -- so that the edges of the sheets won't protrude? Make your index, outlines and even your notes on the pad, and then insert these sheets permanently inside the front and back covers of the book.

Or, you may say that this business of marking books is going to slow up your reading. It probably will. That's one of the reasons for doing it. Most of us have been taken in by the notion that speed of reading is a measure of our intelligence. There is no such thing as the right speed for intelligent reading. Some things should be read quickly and effortlessly and some should be read slowly and even laboriously. The sign of intelligence in reading is the ability to read different things differently according to their worth. In the case of good books, the point is not to see how many of them you can get through, but rather how many can get through you -- how many you can make your own. A few friends are better than a thousand acquaintances. If this be your aim, as it should be, you will not be impatient if it takes more time and effort to read a great book than it does a newspaper.

You may have one final objection to marking books. You can't lend them to your friends because nobody else can read them without being distracted by your notes. Furthermore, you won't want to lend them because a marked copy is kind of an intellectual diary, and lending it is almost like giving your mind away.

If your friend wishes to read your *Plutarch's Lives*, *Shakespeare*, or *The Federalist Papers*, tell him gently but firmly, to buy a copy. You will lend him your car or your coat -- but your books are as much a part of you as your head or your heart.

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

OKAY, SO HERE'S THE DEAL: let's say, purely hypothetically, you're reading a book about an average sixteen-year-old kid in the summer of 1968. The kid - let's call him Kip - who hopes his acne clears up before he gets drafted, is on his way to the A&P. His bike is a one-speed with a coaster brake and therefore deeply humiliating, and riding it to run an errand for his mother makes it even worse. Along the way he has a couple of disturbing experiences, including a minorly unpleasant encounter with a German shepherd, topped off in the supermarket parking lot where he sees the girl of his dreams, Karen, laughing and horsing around in Tony Vauxhall's brand-new Barracuda. Now Kip hates Tony already because he has a name like Vauxhall and not like Smith, which Kip thinks is pretty lame as a name to follow Kip, and because the 'Cuda is bright green and goes approximately the speed of light, and also because Tony has never had to work a day in his life. So Karen, who is laughing and having a great time, turns and sees Kip, who has recently asked her out, and she keeps laughing. (She could stop laughing and it wouldn't matter to us, since we're considering this structurally. In the story we're inventing here, though, she keeps laughing.) Kip goes on into the store to buy the loaf of Wonder Bread that his mother told him to pick up, and 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 for him in this one-horse burg where the only thing that matters is how much money your old man has. Either that or Kip has a vision of St. Abillard (any saint will do, but our imaginary author picked a comparatively obscure one), whose face appears on one of the red, yellow, or blue balloons. For our purposes, the nature of the decision doesn't matter anymore than whether Karen keeps laughing or which color balloon manifests the saint.

What just happened here?

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

In other words, a quest just happened.

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

True. But consider the quest. Of what does it consist? A knight, a dangerous road, a Holy Grail (whatever one of those may be), at least one dragon, one evil knight, one princess. Sound about right? That's a list I can live with: a knight (named Kip), a dangerous road (nasty German shepherds), a Holy Grail (one form of which is a loaf of Wonder Bread), at least one dragon (trust me, a '68 'Cuda could definitely breathe fire), one evil knight (Tony), one princess (who can either keep laughing or stop).

Seems like a bit of a stretch.

On the surface, sure. But let's think structurally. The quest consists of five things: (a) a quester, (b) a place to go, (c) a stated reason to go there, (d) challenges and trials en route, and (e) a real reason to go there. Item (a) is easy; a quester is just a person who goes on a quest, whether or not he knows it's a quest. In fact, usually he doesn't know. Items (b) and (c) should be considered together: someone tells our protagonist, our hero, who need not look very heroic, to go somewhere and do something. Go in search of the Holy Grail. Go to the store for bread. Go to Vegas and whack a guy. Tasks of varying nobility, to be sure, but structurally all the same. Go there, do that. Note that I said the stated reason for the quest. That's because of item (e).

The real reason for a quest never involves the stated reason. In fact, more often than not, the quester fails at the stated task. So why do they go and why do we care? They go because of the stated task, mistakenly believing that it is their 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. That's why questers are so often young, inexperienced, immature, sheltered. Forty-five-year-old men either have self-knowledge or they're never going to get it, while your average sixteen-to-seventeen-year-old kid is likely to have a long way to go in the self-knowledge department.

Let's look at a real example. When I teach the late-twentieth-century novel, I always begin with the greatest quest novel of the last century: Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* (1965). Beginning readers can find the novel mystifying, irritating, and highly peculiar. True enough, there is a good bit of cartoonish strangeness in the novel, which can mask the basic quest structure. On the other hand, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century) and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen* (1596), two of the great quest narratives from early English literature, also have what modern readers must consider cartoonish elements. It's really only a matter of whether we're talking *Classics Illustrated* or *Zap Comics*. So here's the setup in *The Crying of Lot 49*:

- 1) Our quester: a young woman, not very happy in her marriage or her life, not too old to learn, not too assertive where men are concerned.
- 2) A place to go: in order to carry out her duties, she must drive to Southern California from her home near San Francisco. Eventually she will travel back and forth between the two, and between her past (a husband with a disintegrating personality and a fondness for LSD, an insane ex-Nazi psychotherapist) and her future (highly unclear).
- 3) A stated reason to go there: she has been made executor of the will of her former lover, a fabulously wealthy and eccentric businessman and stamp collector.
- 4) Challenges and trials: our heroine meets lots of really strange, scary, and occasionally truly dangerous people. She goes on a nightlong excursion through the world of the outcasts and the dispossessed of San Francisco; enters her therapist's office to talk him out of his psychotic shooting rampage (the dangerous enclosure known in the study of traditional quest romances as "Chapel Perilous" ); involves herself in what may be a centuries-old postal conspiracy.
- 5) The real reason to go: did I mention that her name is Oedipa? Oedipa Maas, actually. She's named for the great tragic character from Sophocles' drama *Oedipus the King* (ca. 425 B.C.), whose real calamity is that he doesn't know himself. In Pynchon's novel the heroine's resources, really her crutches - and they all happen to be male - are stripped away one by one, shown to be false or unreliable, until she reaches the point where she either must break down, reduced to a little fetal ball, or stand straight and rely on herself. And to do that, she first must find the self on whom she can rely. Which she does, after considerable struggle. Gives up on men, Tupperware parties, easy answers. Plunges ahead into the great mystery of the ending. Acquires, dare we say, self-knowledge? Of course we dare.

Still...

You don't believe me. Then why does the stated goal fade away? We hear less and less about the will and the estate as the story goes on, and even the surrogate goal, the mystery of the postal conspiracy,

remains unresolved. At the end of the novel, she's about to witness an auction of some rare forged stamps, and the answer to the mystery may appear during the auction. We doubt it, though, given what's gone before. Mostly, we don't even care. Now we know, as she does, that she can carry on, that discovering that men can't be counted on doesn't mean the world ends, that she's a whole person.

So there, in fifty words or more, is why professors of literature typically think *The Crying of Lot 49* is a terrific little book. It does look a bit weird at first glance, experimental and super-hip, but once you get the hang of it, you see that it follows the conventions of a quest tale. So does *Huck Finn*. *The Lord of the Rings*. *North by Northwest*. *Star Wars*. And most other stories of someone going somewhere and doing something, especially if the going and the doing wasn't his 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, a certain condition always obtains, I apologize. "Always" and "never" are not words that have much meaning in literary study. 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. If literature seems to be too comfortably patriarchal, a novelist like the late Angela Carter or a poet like the contemporary Eavan Boland will come along and upend things just to remind readers and writers of the falseness of our established assumptions. If readers start to pigeonhole African-American writing, as was beginning to happen in the 1960s and 1970s, a trickster like Ishmael Reed will come along who refuses to fit in any pigeonhole we could create. Let's consider journeys. Sometimes the quest fails or is not taken up by the protagonist. Moreover, is 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. That said, 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.

## 7 - ...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. Samuel L. Jackson's character in *Pulp Fiction*, in between all the swearwords (or that one swearword all those times) is a Vesuvius of biblical language, one steady burst of apocalyptic rhetoric and imagery. His linguistic behavior suggests that at some time Quentin Tarantino, the writer-director, was in contact with the Good Book, despite all his Bad Language. Why is that James Dean film called *East of Eden*? Because the author of the novel on which the film is based, John Steinbeck, knew his Book of Genesis. To be east of Eden, as we shall see, is to be in a fallen world, which is the only kind we know and certainly the only kind there could be in a James Dean film.

The devil, as the old saying goes, can quote Scripture. So can writers. Even those who aren't religious or don't live within the Judeo-Christian tradition may work something in from Job or Matthew or the Psalms. That may explain all those gardens, serpents, tongues of flame, and voices from whirlwinds.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), four white men ride up to the house in Ohio where the escaped slave Sethe has been living with her small children. In a fit of determination to "save" her children from slavery, she tries to kill them, succeeding only with her two-year-old daughter, known later as *Beloved*. No one, neither ex-slave nor free white, can believe or understand her action, and that incomprehension saves her life and rescues her remaining children from slavery. Does her violent frenzy make sense? No. It's irrational, excessive, disproportionate. They all agree on that. On the other hand, there's something about it that, to us, makes sense. The characters all see four white men from slave country riding up the road. We see, and Sethe intuits, that what's coming in the front gate is the Apocalypse. When the Four Horsemen come, it's the Last Day, the time for Judgment. Morrison's color scheme isn't quite that of St. John's original - it's hard to come up with a green horse - but we know them, not least because she actually calls them "the four horsemen." Not riders, not men on horses, not equestrians. Horsemen. That's pretty unambiguous. Moreover, one of them stays mounted with a rifle slung across his lap. That looks a lot like the fourth horseman, the one who in Revelation rides the pale (or green) horse and whose name is Death. In *Pale Rider* Clint Eastwood actually has a character speak the relevant passage so we don't miss the point (although the unnamed stranger in an Eastwood western is pretty much always Death), but here Morrison does the same with a three-word phrase and a pose. Unmistakable.

So when the Apocalypse comes riding up your lane, what will you do?

And that is why Sethe reacts as she does.

Morrison is American, of course, and raised in the Protestant tradition, but the Bible is nonsectarian. James Joyce, an Irish Catholic, uses biblical parallels with considerable frequency. I often teach his story "Araby" (1914), a lovely little gem about the loss of innocence. Another way of saying "loss of innocence," of course, is "the Fall." Adam and Eve, the garden, the serpent, the forbidden fruit. Every story about the loss of innocence is really about someone's private reenactment of the fall from grace, since we experience it not collectively but individually and subjectively. Here's the setup: a young boy - eleven, twelve, thirteen years old, right in there - who has previously experienced life as safe, uncomplicated, and limited to attending school and playing cowboys and Indians in the Dublin

streets with his friends, discovers girls. Or specifically, one girl, his friend Mangan's sister. Neither the sister nor our young hero has a name, so his situation is made slightly generic, which is useful. Being in early adolescence, the narrator has no way of dealing with the object of his desire, or even the wherewithal to recognize what he feels as desire. After all, his culture does all it can to keep boys and girls separate and pure, and his reading has described relations between the sexes in only the most general and chaste of terms. He promises to try to buy her something from a bazaar, the Araby of the title, to which she can't go (significantly, because of a religious retreat being put on by her convent school). After many delays and frustrations, he finally arrives at the bazaar just as it's closing. Most of the stalls are closed, but he finally finds one where a young woman and two young men are flirting in ways that are not very appealing to our young swain, and she can scarcely be bothered to ask what he wants. Daunted, he says he wants nothing, then turns away, his eyes blinded by tears of frustration and humiliation. He suddenly sees that his feelings are no loftier than theirs, that he's been a fool, that he's been running this errand on behalf of an ordinary girl who's probably never given him a single thought.

Wait a minute. Innocence maybe. But the Fall?

Sure. Innocence, then its loss. What more do you need?

Something biblical. A serpent, an apple, at least a garden.

Sorry, no garden, no apple. The bazaar takes place inside. But there are two great jars standing by the booth, Joyce says, like Eastern guards. And those guards are as biblical as it gets: "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life." That would be Genesis 3:24 for those of you keeping score. As we all know, there's nothing like a flaming sword to separate you from something, and in this case that something is a former innocence, whether of Eden or of childhood. The thing about loss-of-innocence stories, the reason they hit so hard, is that they're so final. You can never go back. That's why the boy's eyes sting with blinding tears - it's that flaming sword.

Maybe a writer doesn't want enriching motifs, characters, themes, or plots, but just needs a title. The Bible is full of possible titles. I mentioned East of Eden before. Tim Parks has a novel called Tongues of Flame. Faulkner has Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down, Moses. Okay, that last one's from a spiritual, but it's biblical in its basis. Let's suppose you want to write a novel about hopelessness and infertility and the sense that the future no longer exists. You might turn to Ecclesiastes for a passage that reminds us that every night is followed by a new day, that life is an endless cycle of life, death, and renewal, in which one generation succeeds another until the end of time. You might regard that outlook with a certain irony and borrow a phrase from it to express that irony - how the certainty that the earth and humanity will renew themselves, a certainty that has governed human assumptions since earliest times, has just been shredded by four years in which Western civilization tried with some success to destroy itself. You just might if you were a modernist and had lived through the horror that was the Great War. At least that's what Hemingway did, borrowing his title from that biblical passage: *The Sun Also Rises*. Great book, perfect title.

More common than titles are situations and quotations. Poetry is absolutely full of Scripture. Some of that is perfectly obvious. John Milton took most of his subject matter and a great deal of material for his great works from you-know-where: *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes*. Moreover, our early literature in English is frequently about, and nearly always informed by, religion. Those questing knights in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Faerie Queen* are searching on behalf of their religion whether they know it or not (and they generally do know). *Beowulf* is largely about the

coming of Christianity into the old paganism of northern Germanic society – after being about a hero overcoming a villain. Grendel, the monster, is descended from the line of Cain, we’re told. Aren’t all villains? Even Chaucer’s pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* (1384), while neither they nor their tales are inevitably holy, are making an Easter pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral, and much of their talk invokes the Bible and religious teaching. John Donne was an Anglican minister, Jonathan Swift the dean of the Church of Ireland, Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet American Puritans (Taylor a minister). Ralph Waldo Emerson was a Unitarian minister for a spell, while Gerard Manley Hopkins was a Catholic priest. One can barely read Donne or Malory or Hawthorne or Rossetti without running into quotations, plots, characters, whole stories drawn from the Bible. Suffice it to say that every writer prior to sometime in the middle of the twentieth century was solidly instructed in religion.

Even today a great many writers have more than a nodding acquaintance with the faith of their ancestors. In the century just ended, there are modern religious and spiritual poets like T. S. Eliot and Geoffrey Hill or Adrienne Rich and Allen Ginsberg, whose work is shot through with biblical language and imagery. The dive-bomber in Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (1942) looks very like a dove, offering salvation from the bomber’s fire through the redemption of pentecostal fires. He borrows the figure of Christ joining the disciples on the road to Emmaus in *The Waste Land* (1922), uses the Christmas story in “Journey of the Magi” (1927), offers a fairly idiosyncratic sort of Lenten consciousness in “Ash-Wednesday” (1930). Hill has wrestled with matters of the spirit in the fallen modern world throughout his career, so it is hardly surprising to find biblical themes and images in works such as “The Pentecost Castle” or *Canaan* (1996). Rich, for her part, addresses the earlier poet Robinson Jeffers in “Yom Kippur, 1984,” in which she considers the implications of the Day of Atonement, and matters of Judaism appear in her poetry with some frequency. Ginsberg, who never met a religion he didn’t like (he sometimes described himself as a “Buddhist Jew” ), employs material from Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and virtually every world faith.

Not all uses of religion are straight, of course. Many modern and postmodern texts are essentially ironic, in which the allusions to biblical sources are used not to heighten continuities between the religious tradition and the contemporary moment but to illustrate a disparity or disruption. Needless to say, such uses of irony can cause trouble. When Salman Rushdie wrote *The Satanic Verses* (1988), he caused his characters to parody (in order to show their wickedness, among other things) certain events and persons from the Koran and the life of the Prophet. He knew not everyone would understand his ironic version of a holy text; what he could not imagine was that he could be so far misunderstood as to induce a fatwa, a sentence of death, to be issued against him. In modern literature, many Christ figures (which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 14) are somewhat less than Christlike, a disparity that does not inevitably go down well with religious conservatives. Quite often, though, ironic parallels are lighter, more comic in their outcome and not so likely to offend. In Eudora Welty’s masterful story “Why I Live at the P.O.” (1941), the narrator is engaged in a sibling rivalry with her younger sister, who has come home after leaving under suspicious if not actually disgraceful circumstances. The narrator, Sister, is outraged at having to cook two chickens to feed five people and a small child just because her “spoiled” sister has come home. What Sister can’t see, but we can, is that those two fowl are really a fattened calf. It may not be a grand feast by traditional standards, but it is a feast, as called for upon the return of the Prodigal Son, even if the son turns out to be a daughter. Like the brothers in the parable, Sister is irritated and envious that the child who left, and ostensibly used up her “share” of familial goodwill, is instantly welcomed, her sins so quickly forgiven.

Then there are all those names, those Jacobs and Jonahs and Rebeccas and Josephs and Marys and Stephens and at least one Hagar. The naming of a character is a serious piece of business in a novel or play. A name has to sound right for a character – Oil Can Harry, Jay Gatsby, Beetle Bailey – but it also

has to carry whatever message the writer want to convey about the character or the story. In *Song of Solomon* (1977), Toni Morrison's main family chooses names by allowing the family Bible to fall open, then pointing without looking at the text; whatever proper noun the finger points to, there's the name. That's how you get a girl child in one generation named Pilate and one in the next named First Corinthians. Morrison uses this naming practice to identify features of the family and the community. What else can you possibly use - the atlas? Is there any city or hamlet or river in the world that tells us what we're told by "Pilate" ? In this case, the insight is not into the character so named, for no one could be less like Pontius Pilate than the wise, generous, giving Pilate Dead. Rather, her manner of naming tells us a great deal about the society that would lead a man, Pilate's father, to have absolute faith in the efficacy of a book he cannot read, so much so that he is guided by a principle of blind selection.

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 a biblical allusion. I use something I think of as the "resonance test." If I hear something going on in a text that seems to be beyond the scope of the story's or poem's immediate dimensions, if it resonates outside itself, I start looking for allusions to older and bigger texts. Here's how it works.

At the end of James Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" (1957), the narrator sends a drink up to the bandstand as a gesture of solidarity and acceptance to his brilliantly talented but wayward brother, Sonny, who takes a sip and, as he launches into the next song, sets the drink on the piano, where it shimmers "like the very cup of trembling." I lived for a good while not knowing where that phrase came from, although to the extent I thought about it, I was pretty sure. The story is so rich and full, the pain and redemption so compelling, the language so wonderful throughout, I didn't need to dwell on the last line for several readings. Still, there was something happening there - a kind of resonance, a sense that there's something meaningful beyond the simple meaning of the words. Peter Frampton says that E major is the great rock chord; all you have to do to set off pandemonium in a concert is to stand onstage alone and strike a big, fat, full E major. Everybody in the arena knows what that chord promises. That sensation happens in reading, too. When I feel that resonance, that "fat chord" that feels heavy yet sparkles with promise or portent, it almost always means the phrase, or whatever, is borrowed from somewhere else and promises special significance. More often than not, particularly if the borrowing feels different in tone and weight from the rest of the prose, that somewhere is the Bible. Then it's a matter of figuring out where and what it means. It helps that I know that Baldwin was a preacher's son, that his most famous novel is called *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952), that the story already displays a strong Cain-and-Abel element when the narrator initially denies his responsibility toward Sonny, so my scriptural hunch was pretty strong. Happily, in the case of "Sonny's Blues," the story is so heavily anthologized that it's almost impossible not to find the answer - the phrase comes from Isaiah 51:17. The passage speaks of the cup of the Lord's fury, and the context has to do with sons who have lost their way, who are afflicted, who may yet succumb to desolation and destruction. The ending of the story is therefore made even more provisional and uncertain by the quote from Isaiah. Sonny may make it or he may not. He may relapse into addiction and trouble with the law. Beyond that, though, there is the broader sense of the residents of Harlem, where the story is set, and by extension of black America, as afflicted, as having drunk from that cup of trembling. There is hope in Baldwin's last paragraph, but it is hope tempered by knowledge of terrible dangers.

Is my reading greatly enhanced by this knowledge? Perhaps not greatly. Something subtle happens there, but no thunder and lightning. The meaning doesn't move in the opposite direction or shift

radically; if it did, that would be self-defeating, since so many readers would not get the allusion. I think it's more that the ending picks up a little greater weight from the association with Isaiah, a greater impact, pathos even. Oh, I think, it isn't just a twentieth-century problem, this business of brothers having trouble with each other and of young men stumbling and falling; it's been going on since forever. Most of the great tribulations to which human beings are subject are detailed in Scripture. No jazz, no heroin, no rehab centers, maybe, but trouble very much of the kind Sonny has: the troubled spirit that lies behind the outward modern manifestations of heroin and prison. The weariness and resentment and guilt of the brother, his sense of failure at having broken the promise to his dying mother to protect Sonny - the Bible knows all about that, too.

This depth is what the biblical dimension adds to the story of Sonny and his brother. We no longer see merely the sad and sordid modern story of a jazz musician and his algebra-teacher brother. Instead the story resonates with the richness of distant antecedents, with the power of accumulated myth. The story ceases to be locked in the middle of the twentieth century and becomes timeless and archetypal, speaking of the tensions and difficulties that exist always and everywhere between brothers, with all their caring and pain and guilt and pride and love. And that story never grows old.

## 9 - It's Greek to Me

IN THESE LAST THREE CHAPTERS we've talked about three sorts of myth: Shakespearean, biblical, and folk/fairy tale. The connection of religion and myth sometimes causes trouble in class when someone takes myth to mean "untrue" and finds it hard to unite that meaning with deeply held religious beliefs. That's not what I mean by "myth," though. Rather, what I'm suggesting is the shaping and sustaining power of story and symbol. Whether one believes that the story of Adam and Eve is true, literally or figuratively, matters, but not in this context. Here, in this activity of reading and understanding literature, we're chiefly concerned with how that story functions as material for literary creators, the way in which it can inform a story or poem, and how it is perceived by the reader. All three of these mythologies work as sources of material, of correspondences, of depth for the modern writer (and every writer is modern - even John Dryden was not archaic when he was writing), and provided they're recognizable to the reader, they enrich and enhance the reading experience. Of the three, biblical myth probably covers the greatest range of human situations, encompassing all ages of life including the next life, all relationships whether personal or governmental, and all phases of the individual's experience, physical, sexual, psychological, spiritual. Still, both the worlds of Shakespeare and of fairy and folk tales provide fairly complete coverage as well.

What we mean in speaking of "myth" in general is story, the ability of story to explain ourselves to ourselves in ways that physics, philosophy, mathematics, chemistry - all very highly useful and informative in their own right - can't. That explanation takes the shape of stories that are deeply ingrained in our group memory, that shape our culture and are in turn shaped by it, that constitute a way of seeing by which we read the world and, ultimately, ourselves. Let's say it this way: myth is a body of story that matters.

Every community has its own body of story that matters. Nineteenth-century composer Richard Wagner went back to the Germanic myths for the material for his operas, and whether the results are good or bad in either historic or musical terms, the impulse to work with his tribal myths is completely understandable. The late twentieth century witnessed a great surge of Native American writing, much of which went back to tribal myth for material, for imagery, for theme, as in the case of Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman," Louise Erdrich's Kashpaw/Nanapush novels, and Gerald Vizenor's peculiar Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles. When Toni Morrison introduces human flight into Song of Solomon, many readers, white readers especially, take her to be referring to Icarus, whereas what she really has in mind, she has said, is the myth of the flying Africans, a story that matters to her community, her tribe. On one level, there's not much difference between Silko's project and Wagner's; he too is simply going back to the myths of his tribe. We sometimes forget that people in an age of top hats and stiff collars had tribes, but we do so at our peril. In all these cases, what the artist is doing is reaching back for stories that matter to him and his community - for myth.

In European and Euro-American cultures, of course, there's another source of myth. Let me rephrase that: MYTH. When most of us think myth, we mean the northern shores of the Mediterranean between two and three thousand years ago. We mean Greece and Rome. Greek and Roman myth is so much a part of the fabric of our consciousness, of our unconscious really, that we scarcely notice. You doubt me? In the town where I live, the college teams are known as the Spartans. Our high school? The Trojans. In my state we have a Troy (one of whose high schools is Athens - and they say there are no comedians in education), an Ithaca, a Sparta, a Romulus, a Remus, and a Rome. These communities are scattered around the state and date from different periods of settlement. Now if a town in the center of Michigan, a fair distance from anything that can be called Aegean or Ionian (although it's not very far

from the town of Ionia), can be named Ithaca, it suggests that Greek myth has had pretty good staying power.

Let's go back to Toni Morrison for a moment. I'm always slightly amazed that Icarus gets all the ink. It was his father, Daedalus, who crafted the wings, who knew how to get off Crete and safely reach the mainland, and who in fact flew to safety. Icarus, the kid, the daredevil, failed to follow his father's advice and plunged to his death. His fall remains a source of enduring fascination for us and for our literature and art. In it we see so much: the parental attempt to save the child and the grief at having failed, the cure that proves as deadly as the ailment, the youthful exuberance that leads to self-destruction, the clash between sober, adult wisdom and adolescent recklessness, and of course the terror involved in that headlong descent into the sea. Absolutely none of this has anything to do with Morrison and her flying Africans, so it's little wonder that she's a bit mystified by this response of her readers. But it's a story and a pattern that is so deeply burrowed into our consciousness that readers may almost automatically consider it whenever flying or falling is invoked. Clearly it doesn't fit the situation in *Song of Solomon*. But it does apply in other works. In 1558 Pieter Brueghel painted a wonderful picture, *Landscape with Fall of Icarus*. In the foreground we see a plowman and his ox, just beyond him a shepherd and his flock, and at sea a merchant ship sailing placidly along; this is a scene of utter ordinariness and tranquillity. Only in the lower right corner of the painting is there anything even remotely suggestive of trouble: a pair of legs askew as they disappear into the water. That's our boy. He really doesn't have much of a presence in the frame, but his presence makes all the difference. Without the pathos of the doomed boy, we have a picture of farming and merchant shipping with no narrative or thematic power. I teach, with some regularity, two great poems based on that painting, W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1940) and William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with Fall of Icarus" (1962). They're wonderful poems, very different from each other in tone, style, and form, but in essential agreement about how the world goes on even in the face of our private tragedies. Each artist alters what he finds in the painting. Brueghel introduces the plowman and the ship, neither of which appears in the version that comes to us from the Greeks. And Williams and Auden find, in their turn, slightly different elements to emphasize in the painting. Williams's poem stresses the pictorial elements of the painting, trying to capture the scene while sneaking in the thematic elements. Even his arrangement of the poem on the page, narrow and highly vertical, recalls the body plummeting from the sky. Auden's poem, on the other hand, is a meditation on the private nature of suffering and the way in which the larger world takes no interest in our private disasters. It is astonishing and pleasing to discover that the painting can occasion these two very different responses. Beyond them, readers find their own messages in all this. As someone who was a teenager in the sixties, I am reminded by the fate of Icarus of all those kids who bought muscle cars with names like GTO and 442 and Charger and Barracuda. All the driver education and solid parental advice in the world can't overcome the allure of that kind of power, and sadly, in too many cases those young drivers shared the fate of Icarus. My students, somewhat younger than I am, will inevitably draw other parallels. Still, it all goes back to the myth: the boy, the wings, the unscheduled dive.

So that's one way classical myth can work: overt subject matter for poems and paintings and operas and novels. What else can myth do?

Here's a thought. Let's say you wanted to write an epic poem about a community of poor fishermen in the Caribbean. If this was a place you came from, and you knew these people like you know your own family, you'd want to depict the jealousies and resentments and adventure and danger, as well as capturing their dignity and their life in a way that conveys all that has escaped the notice of tourists and white property owners. You could, I suppose, try being really, really earnest, portraying the characters as very serious and sober, making them noble by virtue of their goodness. But I bet that

wouldn't work. What you'd wind up with instead would probably be very stiff and artificial, and artificiality is never noble. Besides, these folks aren't saints. They make a lot of mistakes: they're petty, envious, lustful, occasionally greedy as well as courageous, elegant, powerful, knowledgeable, profound. And you want noble, after all, not Tonto – there's no Lone Ranger here. Alternatively, you might try grafting their story onto some older story of rivalry and violence, a story where even the victor is ultimately doomed, a story where, despite occasional personal shortcomings, the characters have an unmistakable nobility. You could give your characters names like Helen, Philoctetes, Hector, and Achilles. At least that's what Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott does in his *Omeros* (1990). Those names are drawn, of course, from *The Iliad*, although Walcott uses elements – parallels, persons, and situations – of both it and *The Odyssey* in his epic.

The question we will inevitably ask is, Why?

Why should someone in the late twentieth century draw on a story that was passed along orally from the twelfth through the eighth century B.C. and not written down until maybe two or three hundred years later? Why should someone try to compare modern fishermen with these legendary heroes, many of whom were descended from gods? Well for starters, Homer's legendary heroes were farmers and fishermen. Besides, aren't we all descended from gods? Walcott reminds us by this parallel of the potential for greatness that resides in all of us, no matter how humble our worldly circumstances.

That's one answer. The other is that the situations match up more closely than we might expect. The plot of *The Iliad* is not particularly divine or global. Those who have never read it assume mistakenly that it is the story of the Trojan War. It is not. It is the story of a single, rather lengthy action: the wrath of Achilles. Achilles becomes angry with his leader, Agamemnon, withdraws his support from the Greeks, only rejoining the battle when the consequences of his action have destroyed his best friend, Patroclus. At this point he turns his wrath against the Trojans and in particular their greatest hero, Hector, whom he eventually kills. His reason for such anger? Agamemnon has taken his war prize. Trivial? It gets worse. The prize is a woman. Agamemnon, forced by divine order and by public sentiment to return his concubine to her father, retaliates against the person who most publicly sided against him, Achilles, by taking his concubine, Briseis. Is that petty enough? Is that noble? No Helen, no judgment of Paris, no Trojan horse. At its core, it's the story of a man who goes berserk because his stolen war bride is confiscated, acted out against a background of wholesale slaughter, the whole of which is taking place because another man, Menelaus (brother of Agamemnon) has had his wife stolen by Paris, half brother of Hector. That's how Hector winds up having to carry the hopes for salvation of all Troy on his shoulders.

And yet somehow, through the centuries, this story dominated by the theft of two women has come to epitomize ideals of heroism and loyalty, sacrifice and loss. Hector is more stubbornly heroic in his doomed enterprise than anyone you've ever seen. Achilles' grief at the loss of his beloved friend is truly heartbreaking. The big duels – between Hector and Ajax, between Diomedes and Paris, between Hector and Patroclus, between Hector and Achilles – are genuinely exciting and suspenseful, their outcomes sources of grand celebration and dismay. No wonder so many modern writers have often borrowed from and emulated Homer.

And when did that begin?

Almost immediately. Virgil, who died in 19 B.C., patterned his Aeneas on the Homeric heroes. If Achilles did it or Odysseus went there, so does Aeneas. Why? It's what heroes do. Aeneas goes to the underworld. Why? Odysseus went there. He kills a giant from the enemy camp in a final climactic battle. Why? Achilles did. And so on. The whole thing is less derivative than it sounds and not without

humor and irony. Aeneas and his followers are survivors of Troy, so here we have this Trojan hero acting out the patterns set down by his enemies. Moreover, when these Trojans sail past Ithaca, home to Odysseus, they jeer and curse the agent of their destruction. On the whole, though, Virgil has him undertake these actions because Homer had already defined what it means to be a hero.

Back to Walcott. Almost exactly two thousand years after Virgil, Walcott has his heroes perform actions that we can recognize as symbolic reenactments of those in Homer. Sometimes it's a bit of a stretch, since we can't have a lot of battlefield duels out in the fishing boats. Nor can he call his Helen "the face that launched a thousand dinghies." Lacks grandeur, that phrase. What he can do, though, is place them in situations where their nobility and their courage are put to the test, while reminding us that they are acting out some of the most basic, most primal patterns known to humans, exactly as Homer did all those centuries before. The need to protect one's family: Hector. The need to maintain one's dignity: Achilles. The determination to remain faithful and to have faith: Penelope. The struggle to return home: Odysseus. Homer gives us four great struggles of the human being: with nature, with the divine, with other humans, and with ourselves. What is there, after all, against which we need to prove ourselves but those four things?

In our modern world, of course, parallels may be ironized, that is, turned on their head for purposes of irony. How many of us would see the comedy of three escaped convicts as parallel to the wanderings of Odysseus? Still, that's what the brothers Joel and Ethan Coen give us in their 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* It's about trying to get home, isn't it? Or this, the most famous example: a single day in Dublin in 1904, on which a young man decides on his future and an older man wanders the city, eventually returning home to his wife in the small hours of the next morning. The book has only one overt clue that this all might have something to do with Homer, its one-word title: *Ulysses* (1922). As we now know, James Joyce envisioned every one of the eighteen episodes of the novel as a parallel to some incident or situation in *The Odyssey*. There's an episode in a newspaper office, for instance, which parallels Odysseus's visit to Aeolus, the god of the winds, but the parallel may seem pretty tenuous. To be sure, newspapermen are a windy group and there are a lot of rhetorical flourishes in the episode, to say nothing of the fact that a gust of wind does zip through at one point. Still, we can see it as resembling the Homeric original only if we understand that resemblance in terms of a funhouse mirror, full of distortion and goofy correspondences - if we understand it, in other words, as an ironic parallel. The fact that it's ironic makes the parallel - and the Aeolus episode - such fun. Joyce is less interested than Walcott in investing his characters with classical nobility, although finally they do take on something of that quality. After watching poor old Leopold Bloom stroll around Dublin all day and half the night, running into no end of trouble and recalling great heartbreak in his life, we may well come to feel he is noble in his own way. His nobility, however, is not that of Odysseus.

Greek and Roman myth, of course, is more than Homer. The transformations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* show up in all sorts of later works, not least in Franz Kafka's story of a man who wakes up one morning to find he's changed into an enormous beetle. He called it "The Metamorphosis." Indiana Jones may look like pure Hollywood, but the intrepid searcher after fabulous treasure goes back to Apollonius and *The Argonautica*, the story of Jason and the Argonauts. Something a bit homier? Sophocles' plays of Oedipus and his doomed clan show up over and over again in all sorts of variations. There is, in fact, no form of dysfunctional family or no personal disintegration of character for which there is not a Greek or Roman model. Not for nothing do the names of Greek tragic characters figure in Freud's theories. The wronged woman gone violent in her grief and madness? Would you like Aeneas and Dido or Jason and Medea? And as in every good early religion, they had an explanation for natural phenomena, from the change of seasons (Demeter and Persephone and Hades) to why the nightingale sounds the way it does (Philomena and Tereus). Happily for us, most of it got written down, often in

several versions, so that we have access to this wonderful body of story. And because writers and readers share knowledge of a big portion of this body of story, this mythology, when writers use it, we readers recognize it, sometimes to its full extent, sometimes only dimly or only because we know the Looney Tunes version. That recognition makes our experience of literature richer, deeper, more meaningful, so that our own modern stories also matter, also share in the power of myth.

Oh, did I forget to say? That title of Walcott's, *Omeros*? In the local dialect, it means Homer. Naturally.

## 10 - It's More Than Just Rain or Snow

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT. What, you've heard that one? Right, Snoopy. And Charles Schulz had Snoopy write it because it was a cliché, and had been one for a very long time, way back when your favorite beagle decided to become a writer. This one we know: Edward Bulwer-Lytton, celebrated Victorian popular novelist, actually did write, "It was a dark and stormy night." In fact, he began a novel with it, and not a very good novel, either. And now you know everything you need to know about dark and stormy nights. Except for one thing.

Why?

You wondered that, too, didn't you? Why would a writer want the wind howling and the rain bucketing down, want the manor house or the cottage or the weary traveler lashed and battered?

You may say that every story needs a setting and that weather is part of the setting. That is true, by the way, but it isn't the whole deal. There's much more to it. Here's what I think: weather is never just weather. It's never just rain. And that goes for snow, sun, warmth, cold, and probably sleet, although the incidence of sleet in my reading is too rare to generalize.

So what's special about rain? Ever since we crawled up on the land, the water, it seems to us, has been trying to reclaim us. Periodically floods come and try to drag us back into the water, pulling down our improvements while they're at it. You know the story of Noah: lots of rain, major flood, ark, cubits, dove, olive branch, rainbow. I think that biblical tale must have been the most comforting of all to ancient humans. The rainbow, by which God told Noah that no matter how angry he got, he would never try to wipe us out completely, must have come as a great relief.

We in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world have a fair chunk of mythology invested in rain and its most major by-product. Clearly rain features in other mythologies as well, but for now let this be our cornerstone. Drowning is one of our deepest fears (being land creatures, after all), and the drowning of everything and everybody just magnifies that fear. Rain prompts ancestral memories of the most profound sort. So water in great volume speaks to us at a very basic level of our being. And at times Noah is what it signifies. Certainly when D. H. Lawrence has the flood go crashing through the family homestead in *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (1930), he's thinking of Noah's flood, the big eraser that destroys but also allows a brand-new start.

Rain, though, can do a lot more. That dark and stormy evening (and I suspect that before general illumination by streetlight and neon all stormy evenings were pretty darned dark) has worlds of atmosphere and mood. Thomas Hardy, a considerably better Victorian writer than Edward B.-L., has a delightful story called "The Three Strangers" (1883) in which a condemned man (escaped), a hangman, and the escapee's brother all converge on a shepherd's house during a christening party. The hangman doesn't recognize his quarry (nor do the members of the party), but the brother does, and runs away, leading to a manhunt and general hilarity, all of which is taking place on a, well, dark and stormy night. Hardy doesn't call it that, but he has great fun describing, in his ironic and detached tone, the rain lashing down on hapless wayfarers, forcing them to seek shelter where they can; hence the appearance of our three gentlemen callers. Now the Bible is never very far from Hardy's thoughts, but I daresay he has no idea of Noah when he's writing about this storm. So why does he bring rain into it?

First of all, as a plot device. The rain forces these men together in very uncomfortable (for the condemned man and the brother) circumstances. I occasionally disparage plot, but we should never

discount its importance in authorial decision-making. Second, atmospheric. Rain can be more mysterious, murkier, more isolating than most other weather conditions. Fog is good, too, of course. Then there is the misery factor. Given the choice between alternatives, Hardy will always go for making his characters more miserable, and rain has a higher wretchedness quotient than almost any other element of our environment. With a little rain and a bit of wind, you can die of hypothermia on the Fourth of July. Needless to say, Hardy loves rain. And finally there is the democratic element. Rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. Condemned man and hangman are thrown into a bond of sorts because rain has forced each of them to seek shelter. Rain can do other things as well, but these are the reasons, it seems to me, that Hardy has chosen a nice, malicious rainstorm for his story.

What other things? For one, it's clean. One of the paradoxes of rain is how clean it is coming down and how much mud it can make when it lands. So if you want a character to be cleansed, symbolically, let him walk through the rain to get somewhere. He can be quite transformed when he gets there. He may also have a cold, but that's another matter. He can be less angry, less confused, more repentant, whatever you want. The stain that was upon him – figuratively – can be removed. On the other hand, if he falls down, he'll be covered in mud and therefore more stained than before. You can have it either way, or both ways if you're really good. The problem with cleansing, though, is the problem with wishes: you have to be careful what you wish for, or for that matter what you want cleansed. Sometimes it backfires. In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison gives her poor jilted lover, Hagar, an encounter with cleansing rain. Having been thrown over by her longtime lover (and cousin – it's very awkward), Milkman, for a more “presentable” love interest (with looks and especially hair nearer the “white” ideal), Hagar spends a desperate day buying clothes and accessories, visiting hair and nail salons, and generally turning herself into a simulacrum of the woman she thinks Milkman wants. After spending all her money and psychic energy in this mad plunge into a fantasy image, she is caught out in a rainstorm that ruins her clothes, her packages, and her coiffure. She is left with her despised, kinky “black” hair and her self-loathing. Rather than washing away some taint, the rain cleanses her of illusions and the false ideal of beauty. The experience, of course, destroys her, and she soon dies of a broken heart and rain. So much for the salutary effects of cleansing rains.

On the other hand, rain is also restorative. This is chiefly because of its association with spring, but Noah once again comes into play here. Rain can bring the world back to life, to new growth, to the return of the green world. Of course, novelists being what they are, they generally use this function ironically. In the ending of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Hemingway, having killed off Frederic Henry's lover during childbirth, sends the grieving protagonist out of the hospital into, you guessed it, rain. It might be ironic enough to die during childbirth, which is also associated with spring, but the rain, which we might properly expect to be life-giving, further heightens the irony. It's hard to get irony too high for Hemingway. So, too, with Joyce's “The Dead.” Near the ending, Gretta Conroy tells her husband about the great love of her life, the long-dead Michael Furey, a consumptive boy who stood outside her window in the rain and died a week later. One might argue that this is simply verisimilitude: if the story is set in the west of Ireland, it almost requires rain. No doubt there is justice in this view. But at the same time, Joyce knowingly plays off our expectations of rain as an agent of new life and restoration because he also knows that we have another, less literary set of associations for rain: the source of chills, colds, pneumonia, death. These come together and clash intriguingly in the image of the boy dying for love: youth, death, replenishment, desolation – they're all rattling around in the figure of poor Michael Furey in the rain. Joyce likes his irony about as high as Hemingway's.

Rain is the principal element of spring. April showers do in fact bring May flowers. Spring is the season not only of renewal but of hope, of new awakenings. Now if you're a modernist poet and therefore given to irony (notice that I've not yet alluded to modernism without having recourse to irony?), you

might stand that association on its head and begin your poem with a line like “April is the cruellest month,” which is exactly what T. S. Eliot does in *The Waste Land*. In that poem, he plays off our cultural expectations of spring and rain and fertility; better, readers don’t even have to ask if he is doing it deliberately, since he very thoughtfully provides notes telling us that he’s being deliberate. He even tells us which study of romance he’s using: Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). What Weston talks about in her book is the Fisher King mythology, of which the Arthurian legends are just one part. The central figure in this set of myths – the Fisher King figure – represents the hero as fixer: something in society is broken, perhaps beyond repair, but a hero emerges to put things right. Since natural and agricultural fertility is so important to our ability to feed and sustain ourselves, much of the material Weston deals with has to do with wastelands and the attempts to restore lost fertility; needless to say, rain figures prominently. Following Weston’s lead, Eliot emphasizes the absence of rain from the beginning of his poem. On the other hand, water generally is a mixed medium in his text, the river Thames being polluted and a scene of corruption, complete with a slimy-bellied rat on the bank. Moreover, the rain never quite arrives. We’re told at the end that rain is coming, but that’s not the same as rain actually hitting the ground around us. So then, it isn’t quite happening, and we can’t be sure of its effect when it does fall, if it does, but its absence occupies a major space in the poem.

Rain mixes with sun to create rainbows. We mentioned this one before, but it merits our consideration. While we may have minor associations with pots of gold and leprechauns, the main function of the image of the rainbow is to symbolize divine promise, peace between heaven and earth. God promised Noah with the rainbow never again to flood the whole earth. No writer in the West can employ a rainbow without being aware of its signifying aspect, its biblical function. Lawrence called one of his best novels *The Rainbow* (1916); it has, as you would guess, a certain amount of flood imagery, along with all the associations that imagery conveys. When you read about a rainbow, as in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “*The Fish*” (1947), where she closes with the sudden vision that “everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow,” you just know there’s some element of this divine pact between human, nature, and God. Of course she lets the fish go. In fact, of any interpretation a reader will ever come up with, the rainbow probably forms the most obvious set of connections. Rainbows are sufficiently uncommon and gaudy that they’re pretty hard to miss, and their meaning runs as deep in our culture as anything you care to name. Once you can figure out rainbows, you can do rain and all the rest.

Fog, for instance. It almost always signals some sort of confusion. Dickens uses a miasma, a literal and figurative fog, for the Court of Chancery, the English version of American probate court where estates are sorted out and wills contested, in *Bleak House* (1853). Henry Green uses a heavy fog to gridlock London and strand his wealthy young travelers in a hotel in *Party Going* (1939). In each case, the fog is mental and ethical as well as physical. In almost any case I can think of, authors use fog to suggest that people can’t see clearly, that matters under consideration are murky.

And snow? It can mean as much as rain. Different things, though. Snow is clean, stark, severe, warm (as an insulating blanket, paradoxically), inhospitable, inviting, playful, suffocating, filthy (after enough time has elapsed). You can do just about anything you want with snow. In “*The Pedersen Kid*” (1968), William H. Gass has death arrive on the heels of a monster blizzard. In his poem “*The Snow Man*” (1923), Wallace Stevens uses snow to indicate inhuman, abstract thought, particularly thought concerned with nothingness, “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is,” as he puts it. Very chilling image, that. And in “*The Dead*,” Joyce takes his hero to a moment of discovery; Gabriel, who sees himself as superior to other people, has undergone an evening in which he is broken down little by little, until he can look out at the snow, which is “general all over Ireland,” and suddenly realize that snow, like death, is the great unifier, that it falls, in the beautiful closing image, “upon all the living and the dead.”

This will all come up again when we talk about seasons. There are many more possibilities for weather, of course, more than we could cover in a whole book. For now, though, one does well to remember, as one starts reading a poem or story, to check the weather.

## 11 - ...More Than It's Gonna Hurt You: Concerning Violence

CONSIDER. Sethe is an escaped slave, and her children were all born in slave-owning Kentucky; their escape to Ohio is like the Israelites' escape from Egypt in Exodus. Except that this time Pharaoh shows up on the doorstep threatening to drag them back across the Red Sea. So Sethe decides to save her children from slavery by killing them, succeeding with only one of them.

Later, when that murdered child, the title character of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, makes her ghostly return, she's more than simply the child lost to violence, sacrificed to the revulsion of the escaped slave toward her former state. Instead she is one of, in the words of the epigraph to the novel, the "sixty million and more" Africans and African-descended slaves who died in captivity and forced marches on the continent or in the middle passage or on the plantations made possible by their captive labor or in attempts to escape a system that should have been unthinkable – as unthinkable as, for instance, a mother seeing no other means of rescuing her child except infanticide. *Beloved* is in fact representative of the horrors to which a whole race was subjected.

Violence is one of the most personal and even intimate acts between human beings, but it can also be cultural and societal in its implications. It can be symbolic, thematic, biblical, Shakespearean, Romantic, allegorical, transcendent. Violence in real life just is. If someone punches you in the nose in a supermarket parking lot, it's simply aggression. It doesn't contain meaning beyond the act itself. Violence in literature, though, while it is literal, is usually also something else. That same punch in the nose may be a metaphor.

Robert Frost has a poem, "Out, Out – " (1916), about a momentary lapse of attention and the terrible act of violence that ensues. A farm boy working with the buzz saw looks up at the call to dinner, and the saw, which has been full of menace as it "snarl[s] and rattle[s]" along, seizes the moment, as if it has a mind of its own, to take off the boy's hand. Now the first thing we have to acknowledge about this masterpiece is that it is absolutely real. Only a person who has been around the ceaseless danger of farm machinery could have written the poem, with all its careful attention to the details of the way death lurks in everyday tasks. If that's all we get from the poem, fine, the poem will in one sense have done its job. Yet Frost is insisting on more in the poem than a cautionary tale of child labor and power tools. The literal violence encodes a broader point about the essentially hostile or at least uncaring relationship we have with the universe. Our lives and deaths – the boy dies of blood loss and shock – are as nothing to the universe, of which the best that can be said is that it is indifferent, though it may be actively interested in our demise. The title of the poem is taken from *Macbeth*, "Out, out, brief candle," suggesting the brevity not merely of a teenager's life but of any human existence, particularly in cosmic terms. The smallness and fragility of our lives is met with the cold indifference not only of the distant stars and planets, which we can rightly think of as virtually eternal in contrast to ourselves, but of the more immediate "outer" world of the farm itself, of the inhumanity of machinery which wounds or kills indiscriminately. This is not John Milton's "Lycidas" (1637), not a classical elegy in which all nature weeps. This nature shows not the slightest ripple of interest. Frost uses the violence here, then, to emphasize our status as orphans: parentless, frightened, and alone as we face our mortality in a cold and silent universe.

Violence is everywhere in literature. Anna Karenina throws herself under the train, Emma Bovary solves her problem with poison, D. H. Lawrence's characters are always engaging in physical violence toward one another, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus is beaten by soldiers, Faulkner's Colonel Sartoris becomes a greater local legend when he guns down two carpetbaggers in the streets of Jefferson, and Wile E. Coyote holds up his little "Yikes" sign before he plunges into the void as his latest gambit to

catch the Road Runner fails. Even writers as noted for the absence of action as Virginia Woolf and Anton Chekhov routinely resort to killing off characters. For all these deaths and maimings to amount to something deeper than the violence of the Road Runner cartoon, the violence has to have some meaning beyond mere mayhem.

Let's think about two categories of violence in literature: the specific injury that authors cause characters to visit on one another or on themselves, and the narrative violence that causes characters harm in general. The first would include the usual range of behavior – shootings, stabbings, garrottings, drownings, poisonings, bludgeonings, bombings, hit-and-run accidents, starvations, you name it. By the second, authorial violence, I mean the death and suffering authors introduce into their work in the interest of plot advancement or thematic development and for which they, not their characters, are responsible. Frost's buzz-saw accident would be such an example, as would Little Nell on her deathbed in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) and the death of Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Is it fair to compare them? I mean, do death by consumption or heart disease really fall into the same universe as a stabbing?

Sure. Different but the same. Different: no guilty party exists in the narrative (unless you count the author, who is present everywhere and nowhere). Same: does it really matter to the dead person? Or this: writers kill off characters for the same set of reasons – make action happen, cause plot complications, end plot complications, put other characters under stress.

And that's not enough reason for violence to exist?

With some exceptions, the most prominent being mystery novels. Figure at least three corpses for a two-hundred-page mystery, sometimes many more. How significant do those deaths feel? Very nearly meaningless. In fact, aside from the necessities of plot, we scarcely notice the deaths in a detective novel; the author goes out of her way, more often than not, to make the victim sufficiently unpleasant that we scarcely regret his passing, and we may even feel a sort of relief. Now the rest of the novel will be devoted to solving this murder, so clearly it is important on some level. But the death lacks gravitas. There's no weight, no resonance, no sense of something larger at work. What mysteries generally have in common is a lack of density. What they offer in terms of emotional satisfaction – the problem solved, the question answered, the guilty punished, the victim avenged – they lack in weightiness. And I say this as a person who generally loves the genre and who has read hundreds of mysteries.

So where does this alleged weight come from?

Not alleged. Felt. We sense greater weight or depth in works when there is something happening beyond the surface. In mysteries, whatever layering there may be elsewhere, the murders live on the narrative surface. It's in the nature of the genre that since the act itself is buried under layers of misdirection and obfuscation, it cannot support layers of meaning or signification. On the other hand, "literary" fiction and drama and poetry are chiefly about those other layers. In that fictive universe, violence is symbolic action. If we only understand *Beloved* on the surface level, Sethe's act of killing her daughter becomes so repugnant that sympathy for her is nearly impossible. If we lived next to her, for instance, one of us would have to move. But her action carries symbolic significance; we understand it not only as the literal action of a single, momentarily deranged woman but as an action that speaks for the experience of a race at a certain horrific moment in history, as a gesture explained by whip scars on her back that take the form of a tree, as the product of the sort of terrible choice that

only characters in our great mythic stories – a Jocasta, a Dido, a Medea – are driven to make. Sethe isn't a mere woman next door but a mythic creature, one of the great tragic heroines.

I suggested earlier that Lawrence's characters manage to commit a phenomenal amount of violence toward each other. Here are just a couple of examples. In *Women in Love* Gudrun Brangwen and Gerald Crich meet after each of them has made separate displays of violent will. In front of the Brangwen sisters, Gerald holds a terrified mare at a grade crossing, spurring her until her flanks bleed. Ursula is outraged and indignant, but Gudrun is so caught up in this display of masculine power (and the language Lawrence uses is very much that of a rape) that she swoons. He later sees her engaging in eurythmics – a pre-“Great War version of disco – in front of some highly dangerous Highland cattle. When Gerald stops her to explain the peril she has created for herself, she slaps him hard. This is, mind, their very first meeting. So he says (more or less), I see you've struck the first blow. Her response? “And I shall strike the last.” Very tender. Their relationship pretty much follows from that initial note, with violent clashes of will and ego, violent sex, needy and pathetic visitations, and eventually hatred and resentment. Technically, I suppose, she's right, since she does strike the last blow. The last time we see them, though, her eyes are bulging out as he strangles her, until suddenly he stops, overcome by revulsion, and skis off to his own death in the highest reaches of the Alps. Too weird? Want the other example? In his exquisite novella “The Fox,” Lawrence creates one of the oddest triangles in literature. Banford and March are two women running a farm, and the only reason their relationship stops short of being openly lesbian must be because of censorship concerns, Lawrence already having had quite enough works banned by that time. Into this curious ménage a young soldier, Henry Grenfel, wanders, and as he works on the farm, a relationship develops between him and March. When the difficulties of a three-way set of competing interests become insurmountable, Henry chops down a tree which twists, falls, and crushes poor, difficult Banford. Problem solved. Of course, the death gives rise to issues which could scuttle the newly freed relationship, but who can worry about such details?

Lawrence, being Lawrence, uses these violent episodes in heavily symbolic ways. His clashes between Gerald and Gudrun, for instance, have as much to do with deficiencies in the capitalist social system and modern values as with personality shortcomings of the participants. Gerald is both an individual and someone corrupted by the values of industry (Lawrence identifies him as a “captain of industry” ), while Gudrun loses much of her initial humanism through association with the “corrupt” sort of modern artists. And the murder by tree in “The Fox” isn't about interpersonal hostility, although that antipathy is present in the story. Rather, Banford's demise figures the sexual tensions and gender-role confusion of modern society as Lawrence sees it, a world in which the essential qualities of men and women have been lost in the demands of technology and the excessive emphasis on intellect over instinct. We know that these tensions exist, because while Banford (Jill) and March (Ellen or Nellie) sometimes call each other by their Christian names, the text insists on their surnames without using “Miss,” thereby emphasizing their masculine tendencies, while Henry is simply Henry or the young man. Only by radically changing the interpersonal sexual dynamic can something like Lawrentian order be restored. There is also the mythic dimension of this violence. Gerald in *Women in Love* is repeatedly described as a young god, tall and fair and beautiful, while Gudrun is named for a minor Norse goddess. Their clash, then, automatically follows mythic patterns. Similarly, the young soldier comes striding onto the makeshift farm as a fertility god, fairly screaming virility. Lawrence shared with many of his contemporaries a fascination with ancient myths, particularly those of the wasteland and various fertility cults. For fertility to be restored to the little wasteland of the failing farm, the potent male and the fertile female must be paired off, and any blocking element, including any females with competing romantic interests, must be sacrificed.

William Faulkner's violence emanates from a slightly different wellspring, yet the results are not entirely different. I know of creative writing teachers who feel Faulkner is the single greatest danger to budding fiction writers. So alluring is his penchant for violence that the imitation Faulknerian story will have a rape, three cases of incest, a stabbing, two shootings, and a suicide by drowning, all in two thousand words. And indeed, there is a great deal of violence of all sorts in his fictional Yoknapatawpha County. In the story "Barn Burning" (1939), young Sarty Snopes watches as his father, a serial arsonist, hires out to a wealthy plantation owner, Major de Spain, only to attempt to burn the major's barn in a fit of class resentment. When Sarty (whose full name is Colonel Sartoris Snopes) attempts to intercede, Major de Spain rides down Ab, the father, and Sarty's elder brother, and the last we hear of them is a series of shots from the major's pistol, leaving Sarty sobbing in the dust. The arson and the shootings here are, of course, literal and need to be understood in that light before we go looking for any further significance. But with Faulkner, the violence is also historically conditioned. Class warfare, racism and the inheritance of slavery (at one point Ab says that slave sweat must not have made the de Spain mansion white enough and that therefore white sweat - his - is evidently called for), impotent rage at having lost the Civil War, all figure in the violence of a Faulkner story. In *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Ike McCaslin discovers while reading through plantation ledgers that his grandfather had sired a daughter by one of his slaves, Eunice, and then, not scrupling at incest or recognizing the humanity in his slaves that would make his act incest, got that daughter, Tomasina, pregnant. Eunice's response was to kill herself. That act is personal and literal, but it is also a powerful metaphor of the horrors of slavery and the outcomes when people's capacity for self-determination is stripped away utterly. The slave woman has no say in how her body or her daughter's has been used, nor is any avenue open for her to express her outrage; the only escape permitted to her is death. Slavery allows its victims no decision-making power over any aspect of their lives, including the decision to live. The lone exception, the only power they have, is that they may choose to die. And so she does. Even then, old Carothers McCaslin's only comment is to ask whoever heard of a black person drowning herself, clearly astonished that such a response is possible in a slave. That Eunice's suicide takes place in a novel that draws its title from a spiritual, in which Moses is asked to "go down" into Egypt to "set my people free," is no accident. If Moses should fail to appear, it may fall to the captive race to take what actions they can to liberate themselves. Faulknerian violence quite often expresses such historical conditions at the same time that it draws on mythic or biblical parallels. Not for nothing does he call one novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which a rebellious, difficult son repudiates his birthright and destroys himself. *Light in August* (1932) features a character named Joe Christmas who suffers emasculation at the novel's end; while neither his behavior nor his particular wound is very obviously Christlike, his life and death have to do with the possibility of redemption. Of course, things change when irony comes in, but that's another matter.

Thus far we've been speaking of character-on-character violence. So what about violence without agency, where writers simply dispose of their characters? Well, it depends. Accidents do happen in real life, of course. So do illnesses. But when they happen in literature they're not really accidents. They're accidents only on the inside of the novel - on the outside they're planned, plotted, and executed by somebody, with malice aforethought. And we know who that somebody is. I can think of two novels from the 1980s that involve characters floating down to earth after a jetliner explosion. Fay Weldon, in *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1988), and Salman Rushdie, in *The Satanic Verses*, may have slightly different purposes in introducing such massive violence into their story lines and then having some characters survive. We can be fairly sure, however, that they do mean something - several somethings - by the graceful falls to earth that their characters undergo. The little girl in Weldon's novel occupies what amounts to a state of grace in an otherwise corrupt adult world; the easy descent of the airliner's tail section proves a lovely, gentle corollary to this quality in the child. Rushdie's two characters, on the other hand, experience their descent as a fall not from innocence to experience but

from an already corrupt life into an existence as demons. So, too, with illness. We'll talk later about what heart disease means in a story, or tuberculosis or cancer or AIDS. The question always is, what does misfortune really tell us?

It's nearly impossible to generalize about the meanings of violence, except that there are generally more than one, and its range of possibilities is far larger than with something like rain or snow. Authors rarely introduce violence straightforwardly, to perform only its one appointed task, so we ask questions. What does this type of misfortune represent thematically? What famous or mythic death does this one resemble? Why this sort of violence and not some other? The answers may have to do with psychological dilemmas, with spiritual crises, with historical or social or political concerns. Almost never, though, are they cut-and-paste, but they do exist, and if you put your mind to it, you can usually come up with some possibilities. Violence is everywhere in literature. We'd lose most of Shakespeare without it, and Homer and Ovid and Marlowe (both Christopher and Philip), much of Milton, Lawrence, Twain, Dickens, Frost, Tolkien, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Saul Bellow, and on and on. I guess Jane Austen wouldn't be too much affected, but relying on her would leave our reading a little thin. It seems, then, that there's no option for us but to accept it and figure out what it means.

## 12 - Is That a Symbol?

SURE IT IS.

That's one of the most common questions in class, and that's the answer I generally give. Is that a symbol? Sure, why not. It's the next question where things get hairy: what does it mean, what does it stand for? When someone asks about meaning, I usually come back with something clever, like "Well, what do you think?" Everyone thinks I'm either being a wise guy or ducking responsibility, but neither is the case. Seriously, what do you think it stands for, because that's probably what it does. At least for you.

Here's the problem with symbols: people expect them to mean something. Not just any something, but one something in particular. Exactly. Maximum. You know what? It doesn't work like that. Oh, sure, there are some symbols that work straightforwardly: a white flag means, I give up, don't shoot. Or it means, We come in peace. See? Even in a fairly clear-cut case we can't pin down a single meaning, although they're pretty close. So some symbols do have a relatively limited range of meanings, but in general a symbol can't be reduced to standing for only one thing.

If they can, it's not symbolism, it's allegory. Here's how allegory works: things stand for other things on a one-for-one basis. Back in 1678, John Bunyan wrote an allegory called *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In it, the main character, Christian, is trying to journey to the Celestial City, while along the way he encounters such distractions as the Slough of Despond, the Primrose Path, Vanity Fair, and the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Other characters have names like Faithful, Evangelist, and the Giant Despair. Their names indicate their qualities, and in the case of Despair, his size as well. Allegories have one mission to accomplish – convey a certain message, in this case, the quest of the devout Christian to reach heaven. If there is ambiguity or a lack of clarity regarding that one-to-one correspondence between the emblem – the figurative construct – and the thing it represents, then the allegory fails because the message is blurred. Such simplicity of purpose has its advantages. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) is popular among many readers precisely because it's relatively easy to figure out what it all means. Orwell is desperate for us to get the point, not a point. Revolutions inevitably fail, he tells us, because those who come to power are corrupted by it and reject the values and principles they initially embraced.

Symbols, though, generally don't work so neatly. The thing referred to is likely not reducible to a single statement but will more probably involve a range of possible meanings and interpretations.

Consider the problem of the cave. In his masterful novel *A Passage to India* (1924), E. M. Forster has as his central incident a possible assault in a cave. All through the first half of the work the Marabar Caves hover over the story; they keep being referred to, they're out there, remarkable in some ill-defined way, mysterious. Our independent and progressive heroine, Adela Quested (does that name strike you as symbolic at all?), wishes to see them, so Dr. Aziz, an educated Indian physician, arranges an outing. The caves turn out to be not quite as advertised: isolated in a barren wasteland, unadorned, strange, uncanny. Mrs. Moore, Adela's mother-in-law-to-be, has a very nasty experience in the first of the caves, when she suddenly feels oppressively crowded and physically threatened by the others who have joined her. Adela notices that all sound is reduced to a hollow booming noise, so that a voice or a footfall or the striking of a match results in this booming negation. Mrs. Moore, understandably, has had enough of caves, so Adela does a bit of poking around on her own. In one of the caves she suddenly becomes alarmed, believing that, well, something is going on. When next we see her she has fled the scene, running and falling down the hillside to collapse into the arms of the racist English

community she so vehemently criticized before. Badly bruised and scraped and poked by cactus spines, she is in shock and utterly convinced that she was assaulted in the cave and that Aziz must have been her assailant.

Was that cave symbolic? You bet.

Of what?

That, I fear, is another matter. We want it to mean something, don't we? More than that, we want it to mean some thing, one thing for all of us and for all time. That would be easy, convenient, manageable for us. But that handiness would result in a net loss: the novel would cease to be what it is, a network of meanings and significations that permits a nearly limitless range of possible interpretations. The meaning of the cave isn't lying on the surface of the novel. Rather, it waits somewhere deeper, and part of what it requires of us is to bring something of ourselves to the encounter. If we want to figure out what a symbol might mean, we have to use a variety of tools on it: questions, experience, preexisting knowledge. What else is Forster doing with caves? What are other outcomes in the text, or uses of caves in general that we can recall? What else can we bring to bear on this cave that might yield up meaning? So here we go.

Caves in general. First, consider our past. Our earliest ancestors, or those who had weather issues, lived in caves. Some of them left us some pretty nifty drawings, while others left behind piles of bones and spots charred from that great discovery, fire. But the point here might be (no guarantees, of course) that the cave, on some level, suggests a connection to the most basic and primitive elements in our natures. At the far end of the spectrum, we might be reminded of Plato, who in the "Parable of the Cave" section of *The Republic* (fifth century B.C.) gives us an image of the cave as consciousness and perception. Each of these predecessors might provide possible meanings for our situation. The security and shelter suggested by some Neolithic memory of caves probably won't work here, but something along the lines of Plato's cave interior may: perhaps this cave experience has something to do with Adela getting in touch with the deepest levels of her consciousness and perhaps being frightened by what she finds there.

Now, Forster's use of the caves. The locals cannot explain or describe the caves. Aziz, a grand promoter of them, must finally admit he knows nothing of them, having never visited the site, while Professor Godbole, who has seen them, describes their effect only in terms of what does not cause it. To each of the characters' questions - are they picturesque? are they historically significant? - he offers a cryptic "No." To his Western audience, and even to Aziz, this set of responses is not helpful. Godbole's message might be that the caves must be experienced before they can be understood or that every person's caves are different. Such a position might be borne out by the example of Mrs. Moore's unpleasant encounter in a different cave. Throughout the early portions of the novel, she has been impatient with other people and resentful of having them - their views, their assumptions, their physical presence - forced on her. One of the ironies of her Indian experience is that in a landscape so vast, the psychological space is so small; she came all this way and can't get away from life, England, people, death closing in on her. When she gets inside the cave, a crush of people threatens her; the jostling and brushing seem overtly hostile in the dark enclosure. Something unidentified but unpleasant - she can't tell if it belongs to a bat or an infant, but it's organic and not nice - rubs across her mouth. Her heartbeat becomes oppressive and she can't breathe, so she flees the cave as quickly as she can and takes a good while to calm down. In her case, the cave seems to force her into contact with her deepest personal fears and anxieties: other people, ungovernable sensations, children and fecundity. There is also the suggestion that India itself threatens her, since all the people aside from Adele and

herself in the cave are Indians. While she has tried to be Indian, to be comfortable and understanding of the “natives” in ways other members of the ruling British have not been, she can hardly be said to have mastered the Indian experience. So it may be that what she runs into in the darkness is the fraudulence of her attempt to “be Indian.”

On the other hand, maybe she doesn't have an encounter with Something at all. Perhaps what she meets in the cave is instead Nothingness, albeit some years before Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and the existentialists of the 1950s and 1960s articulate the dichotomy between, in Sartre's terms, Being and Nothingness. Could it be that what she finds in the cave isn't death necessarily but the experience of the Void? I think it quite possible, if by no means certain.

So what does Adela's cave stand for? She has, or seems to have, all of the responses that Mrs. Moore does, although hers are different. As a virgin on the edge of spinsterhood who has been shipped halfway around the world to marry a man she doesn't love, she has some very understandable anxieties about matrimony and sex. In fact, her last conversation before entering the cave is with Aziz regarding his own married life, and her questions are probing and even inappropriate. Perhaps this conversation brings on her hallucination, if that is what it is, or perhaps it provokes Aziz or some third party (their guide, for instance) into whatever he does, if anyone does anything.

For Adela, the horror of her cave experience and its booming echo ride roughshod over her soul until she recants her testimony against Aziz during his trial. Once the mayhem dies down and she is safely away from the Indians who have hated her and the English who now hate her, she announces that the echo has stopped. What does this suggest? The cave may bring on or point up a variety of inauthentic experience (another existential concept) - that is, Adela is confronted by the hypocrisy of her life and her reasons for coming to India or agreeing to marry Ronnie, her fiancé, by her failure to take responsibility for her own existence. Or it may represent a breach of the truth (in a more traditional philosophical tradition) or a confrontation with terrors she has denied and can only exorcise by facing them. Or something else. For Aziz, too, the caves speak through their aftermath - of the perfidy of the English, of the falseness of his subservience, of his need to assert responsibility for his own life. It may be that Adela does panic in the face of Nothingness, only recovering herself when she takes responsibility by recanting in the witness box. Perhaps it's all about nothing more than her own self-doubts, her own psychological or spiritual difficulties. Perhaps it is racial in some way.

The only thing we are sure of about the cave as symbol is that it keeps its secrets. That sounds as if I'm punting, but I'm not. What the cave symbolizes will be determined to a large extent by how the individual reader engages the text. Every reader's experience of every work is unique, largely because each person will emphasize various elements to differing degrees, and those differences will cause certain features of the text to become more or less pronounced. We bring an individual history to our reading, a mix of previous readings, to be sure, but also a history that includes, but is not limited to, educational attainment, gender, race, class, faith, social involvement, and philosophical inclination. These factors will inevitably influence what we understand in our reading, and nowhere is this individuality clearer than in the matter of symbolism.

The problem of symbolic meaning is further compounded when we look at a number of writers emphasizing various, distinct elements for a given symbol. As an example, let's consider three rivers. Mark Twain gives us the Mississippi, Hart Crane the Hudson-East-Mississippi/generic-American, and T. S. Eliot the Thames. All three are American writers, all from the Midwest (two from Missouri, no less). Do you suppose there's any chance of their rivers standing for the same thing? In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Twain sends Huck and the escaped slave Jim down the Mississippi on a raft.

The river is a little bit of everything in the novel. At the beginning it floods, killing livestock and people, including Huck's father. Jim is using the river to escape to freedom, but his "escape" is paradoxical since it carries him deeper and deeper into slave territory. The river is both danger and safety, since the relative isolation from land and detection is offset by the perils of river travel on a makeshift conveyance. On a personal level, the river/raft provides the platform on which Huck, a white boy, can get to know Jim not as a slave but as a man. And of course the river is really a road, and the raft trip a quest that results in Huck growing to maturity and understanding. He knows himself well enough at the end that he will never return to childhood and Hannibal and bossy women, so he lights out for the Territories.

Now take Hart Crane's poem sequence *The Bridge* (1930), which plays with rivers and bridges throughout. He begins with the East River, spanned by the Brooklyn Bridge. From there the river grows into the Hudson and on into the Mississippi, which for Crane metonymically represents all American rivers. Interesting things begin happening in the poem. The bridge connects the two pieces of land cut off from one another by the river, while it has the effect of bisecting the stream. The river meanwhile does separate the land on a horizontal axis but connects along a vertical axis, making it possible for people at one end to travel to the other. The Mississippi becomes of central symbolic importance for Crane because of its immense length, bringing the northernmost and southernmost parts of the nation together while making it virtually impossible to move from east to west without some means of traversing the river. His meanings are quite different from those of Twain. Together the river and the bridge constitute an image of total connection.

And Eliot? Eliot uses the River Thames prominently in *The Waste Land*, written in the immediate aftermath of World War I and of a more personal breakdown. His river carries the detritus of a dying civilization and features, among other things, a rat trailing along the bank; the river is slimy, dirty, its famous bridge falling down (in nursery rhyme form), abandoned by its nymphs. The river is shorn of grandeur, grace, and divinity. In the poem's past, Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester carry on their dalliance on the water, but their modern counterparts are merely sordid and seedy. Clearly Eliot's river is symbolic; equally clearly it symbolizes things having to do with the corruption of modern life and collapse of Western civilization which do not come into play with either Twain or Crane. Of course, Eliot's work is heavily ironic, and as we'll discuss later, everything changes when irony climbs aboard.

You will have noticed in these last pages that I assert meaning for these uses of caves and symbols with considerable authority, and indeed I have a pretty strong grasp of what they mean - for me. The authority I bring to these readings is that of my own background and experience. I incline, for instance, toward a reading of *The Waste Land* based on its historical context (a historicist reading, if you will) in which the poem cannot be divorced from the recent war and its aftermath, but not everyone comes at the poem from that angle. Others may approach it chiefly in formal terms or on biographical grounds, as a response to violent personal and marital upheaval. These and many other approaches are not only valid but produce readings of considerable insight; in fact, I have learned a great deal not only about the poem but about my own shortcomings from alternative approaches. One of the pleasures of literary scholarship lies in encountering different and even conflicting interpretations, since the great work allows for a considerable range of possible interpretations. Under no circumstances, in other words, should you take my pronouncements on these works as definitive.

The other problem with symbols is that many readers expect them to be objects and images rather than events or actions. Action can also be symbolic. Robert Frost is probably the champion of the symbolic action, although his uses of it are so sly that resolutely literal readers can miss the symbolic

level entirely. In his poem "Mowing" (1913), for instance, the activity of mowing a field with a scythe (which, mercifully, you and I will never have to do) is first and foremost just what it is, a description of sweeping a field clean of standing hay one stroke at a time. We also notice, though, that mowing carries weight beyond its immediate context, seeming to stand in for labor generally, or for the solitary business of living one's life, or for something else beyond itself. Similarly, the speaker's account of his recent actions in "After Apple Picking" (1914) suggests a point in life as well as a point in the season, and the memory of picking, from the lingering sense of the swaying ladder and the imprint of the rung on his foot soles to the impression of apples on his retinas, suggests the wear and tear of the activity of living on the psyche. Again, the nonsymbolic thinker can see this as a beautiful evocation of an autumnal moment, which it is and pleurably so, but there is more than just that going on. It may be a little more obvious with the moment of decision in his "The Road Not Taken" (1916), which is why it is the universal graduation poem, but symbolic action can also be found in poem after poem, from the terrible accident in "Out, Out - " to climbing in "Birches" (1916).

So, what are you to do? You can't simply say, Well, it's a river, so it means x, or apple picking, so it means y. On the other hand, you can say this could sometimes mean x or y or even z, so let's keep that in mind to see which one, if either, happens here. Any past experience of literary rivers or labor may be helpful as well. Then you start breaking down the work at hand into manageable pieces. Associate freely, brainstorm, take notes. Then you can organize your thoughts, grouping them together under headings, rejecting or accepting different ideas or meanings as they seem to apply. Ask questions of the text: what's the writer doing with this image, this object, this act; what possibilities are suggested by the movement of the narrative or the lyric; and most important, what does it feel like it's doing? Reading literature is a highly intellectual activity, but it also involves affect and instinct to a large degree. Much of what we think about literature, we feel first. Having instincts, though, doesn't automatically mean they work at their highest level. Dogs are instinctual swimmers, but not every pup hits the water understanding what to do with that instinct. Reading is like that, too. The more you exercise the symbolic imagination, the better and quicker it works. We tend to give writers all the credit, but reading is also an event of the imagination; our creativity, our inventiveness, encounters that of the writer, and in that meeting we puzzle out what she means, what we understand her to mean, what uses we can put her writing to. Imagination isn't fantasy. That is to say, we can't simply invent meaning without the writer, or if we can, we ought not to hold her to it. Rather, a reader's imagination is the act of one creative intelligence engaging another.

So engage that other creative intelligence. Listen to your instincts. Pay attention to what you feel about the text. It probably means something.

## 19 - Geography Matters...

LET'S GO ON VACATION. You say okay and then ask your first question, which is...Who's paying? Which month? Can we get time off? No. None of those.

Where?

That's the one. Mountains or beaches, St. Paul or St. Croix, canoeing or sailing, the Mall of America or the National Mall. You know you have to ask because otherwise I might take you to some little trout stream twenty-seven miles from a dirt road when you really want to watch the sun go down from a white sand beach.

Writers have to ask that question, too, so we readers should consider its implications. In a sense, every story or poem is a vacation, and every writer has to ask, every time, Where is this one taking place? For some, it's not that tough. William Faulkner often said he set the majority of his work on his "little postage stamp of ground," his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. After a few novels, he knew that ground so intimately he didn't even have to think about it anymore. Thomas Hardy did the same thing with his mythic Wessex, the southwest corner of England - Devon and Dorset and Wiltshire. And we feel that those novels and stories couldn't be set anywhere but where they are, that those characters couldn't say the things they say if they were uprooted and planted in, say, Minnesota or Scotland. They'd say different things and perform different acts. Most writers, though, are less tied to one place than Faulkner or Hardy, so they have to give it some thought.

And we readers have to give their decisions some thought as well. What does it mean to the novel that its landscape is high or low, steep or shallow, flat or sunken? Why did this character die on a mountaintop, that one on the savanna? Why is this poem on the prairie? Why does Auden like limestone so much? What, in other words, does geography mean to a work of literature?

Would everything be too much?

Okay, not in every work, but frequently. In fact, more often than you think. Just think about the stories that really stay with you: where would they be without geography. The Old Man and the Sea can only take place in the Caribbean, of course, but more particularly in and around Cuba. The place brings with it history, interaction between American and Cuban culture, corruption, poverty, fishing, and of course baseball. Any boy and any older man might, I guess, take a raft trip down a river. It could happen. But a boy, Huck Finn, and an older man, the escaped slave Jim, and their raft could only make the story we know as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by being on that particular river, the Mississippi, traveling through that particular landscape and those particular communities, at a given moment in history. It matters when they reach Cairo and the Ohio empties into the big river; it matters when they reach the Deep South, because Jim is running away in the worst possible direction. The great threat to a slave was that he might be sold down the river, where things got progressively worse the farther south you went, and he's floating straight into the teeth of the monster.

And that's geography?

Sure, what else?

I don't know. Economics? Politics? History?

So what's geography, then?

I usually think of hills, creeks, deserts, beaches, degrees latitude. Stuff like that.

Precisely. Geography: hills, etc. Stuff: economics, politics, history. Why didn't Napoleon conquer Russia? Geography. He ran into two forces he couldn't overcome: a ferocious Russian winter and a people whose toughness and tenacity in defending their homeland matched the merciless elements. And that savagery, like the weather, is a product of the place they come from. It takes a really tough people to overcome not merely one Russian winter but hundreds of them. Anthony Burgess has a novel about the Russian winter defeating the French emperor, *Napoleon Symphony* (1974), in which he brings to life, better than anyone, that geography and that weather: the vastness of it, the emptiness, the hostility to the invading (and then, retreating) troops, the total absence of any possibility of comfort or safety or solace.

So what's geography? Rivers, hills, valleys, buttes, steppes, glaciers, swamps, mountains, prairies, chasms, seas, islands, people. In poetry and fiction, it may be mostly people. Robert Frost routinely objected to being called a nature poet, since by his count he only had three or four poems without a person in them. Literary geography is typically about humans inhabiting spaces, and at the same time the spaces that inhabit humans. Who can say how much of us comes from our physical surroundings? Writers can, at least in their own works, for their own purposes. When Huck meets the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords or sees the duke and the dauphin tarred and feathered by the townspeople, he sees geography in action. Geography is setting, but it's also (or can be) psychology, attitude, finance, industry - anything that place can forge in the people who live there.

Geography in literature can also be more. It can be revelatory of virtually any element in the work. Theme? Sure. Symbol? No problem. Plot? Without a doubt.

In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," the narrator spends the opening pages describing a landscape and a day as bleak as any in literature. We want to get to the titular house, of course, to meet the last, appalling members of the Usher clan, but Poe doesn't want us there before he's prepared us. He treats us to "a singularly dreary tract of country," to "a few rank sedges" and "white trunks of decayed trees," to "the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn," so that we're ready for the "bleak walls" of the house with its "vacant eye-like windows" and its "barely perceptible fissure" zigzagging its way down the wall right down to "the sullen waters of the tarn." Never perhaps have landscape and architecture and weather (it's a particularly dingy afternoon) merged as neatly with mood and tone to set a story in motion. We are nervous and dismayed by this description even before anything has happened, so of course when things do begin happening, when we meet Roderick Usher, one of the creepiest characters to ever grace the pages of a story, he can't give us the creeps because we already have them. But he sure can make them worse, and he does. Actually, the scariest thing Poe could do to us is to put a perfectly normal human specimen in that setting, where no one could remain safe. And that's one thing landscape and place - geography - can do for a story.

Geography can also define or even develop character. Take the case of two contemporary novels. In Barbara Kingsolver's *Bean Trees* (1988), the main character and narrator reaches late adolescence in rural Kentucky and realizes she has no options in that world. That condition is more than social; it grows out of the land. Living is hard in tobacco country, where the soil yields poor crops and hardly anyone makes much of a go of things, where the horizon is always short, blocked by mountains. The narrator feels her figurative horizons are also circumscribed by what seem like local certainties: early pregnancy and an unsatisfactory marriage to a man who will probably die young. She decides to get away, driving a 1955 Volkswagen to Tucson. On her way she changes her name from Marietta (or Missy)

to Taylor Greer. As you know by now, there's rebirth when there's a renaming, right? Out west she meets new people, encounters a completely alien but inviting landscape, becomes the de facto mother of a three-year-old Native American girl she calls Turtle, and finds herself involved in the shelter movement for Central American refugees. She wouldn't have done any of these things in claustrophobic old Pittman, Kentucky. What she discovers in the West are big horizons, clear air, brilliant sunshine, and open possibilities. She goes, in other words, from a closed to an open environment, and she seizes the opportunities for growth and development. Another character in another novel might find the heat oppressive, the sun destructive, and space vacant, but she wouldn't be Taylor Greer. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead grows up without ever learning who he really is until he leaves his Michigan home and travels back to the family home country in eastern Pennsylvania and Virginia. In the hills and hollows (not unlike the ones Taylor Greer must flee to breathe) he finds a sense of roots, a sense of responsibility and justice, a capacity for atonement, and a generosity of spirit he never knew before. He loses nearly everything of his associated with the modern world in the process - Chevrolet, fine clothes, watch, shoes - but they prove to be the currency with which he buys his real worth. At one point direct contact with the earth (he's sitting on the ground and leaning back against a tree) provides him with an intuition that saves his life. He responds just in time to ward off a murderous attack. He could have done none of those things had he stayed in his familiar geography; only by leaving "home" and traveling to his real home can he find his real self.

It's not too much to say, I think, that geography can be character. Take Tim O'Brien's Vietnam masterpiece, *Going After Cacciato*. The main character, Paul Berlin, admits that the American soldiers don't really know the land, don't understand what they're up against. And it's a forbidding place: dry or wet, but always hot, full of microbe-filled water and leeches the size of snakes, rice paddies and mountains and shell craters. And tunnels. The tunnels turn the land itself into the enemy, since the land hides the Vietcong fighters only to deliver them virtually anywhere, producing surprise attacks and sudden death. The resulting terror gives the land a face of menace in the minds of the young Americans. When one of their number is killed by a sniper, they order the destruction of the nearby village, then sit on a hill and watch as shell after shell, alternating high explosives and incendiary white phosphorus, pulverize the village. A cockroach couldn't survive. Why do they do it? It isn't a military target, only a village. Did the bullet come from the village? Not exactly, although the shooter was either a VC villager or a soldier sheltered by the village. Is he still there? No, the place is deserted when they look for revenge. You could make the claim that they go after the community of people who housed the enemy, and certainly there's an element of that. But the real target is the physical village - as place, as center of mystery and threat, as alien environment, as generic home of potential enemies and uncertain friends. The squad pours its fear and anger at the land into this one small, representative piece of it: if they can't overcome the larger geography, they can at least express their rage against the smaller.

Geography can also, and frequently does, play quite a specific plot role in a literary work. In E. M. Forster's early novels, English tourists find ways of making mischief, usually unwittingly and not always comically, when they travel to the Mediterranean. In *A Room with a View* (1908), for instance, Lucy Honeychurch travels to Florence, where she sheds much of her racially inherited stiffness while losing her heart to George Emerson, the freethinking son of an elderly radical. She finds what looks like scandal only to ultimately discover freedom, and a big part of that freedom stems from the passionate, fiery nature of the Italian city. Much of the comedy in the novel grows out of Lucy's battle to reconcile what she "knows" is right with what she feels to be right for her. Nor is she alone in her struggles: most of the other characters stumble into awkwardness of one sort or another. Forster's later masterpiece, *A Passage to India*, focuses on other types of mayhem growing from English misbehavior as the rulers of India and from very confused feelings that beset recent arrivals on the subcontinent. Even our best

intentions, he seems to suggest, can have disastrous consequences in an alien environment. Half a century after Forster's lightweight comedies of folly in Italy, Lawrence Durrell reveals an entire culture of libertines and spies in his beautiful tetralogy, *The Alexandria Quartet*. His northern European characters displaced to Egypt exhibit every sort of kink, sexual and otherwise, from the old sailor with a glass eye and a predilection for young boys to the incestuous Ludwig and Liza Pursewarden to nearly everyone's inability to be faithful to spouse or lover. Darley, the narrator of the first and fourth volumes, tells us that there are at least five genders (although he leaves specifying them to our imaginations) in Alexandria, then shows them to us at full throttle. One might suppose that the heat of an Egyptian summer would induce some lassitude in these already overheated northerners, but there's little evidence of that. Evidently an Englishman released from perpetual rain and fog is nearly unstoppable.

What separates the sexual behavior of Forster's characters from that of Durrell's, aside from time, is D. H. Lawrence. His works, culminating in the overwrought and infamous, if not always successful, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, opened the way for more sexual directness. Like many modern writers, he sent his characters south in search of trouble, but curiously, that trouble was not typically sexual, since he, being quite advanced, could get his people in sexual trouble right in the midst of inhibited Britain. Instead, when his travelers find sunshine in the south, they also encounter curious and sometimes dangerous political and philosophical ideas. *Crypto-fascism in Australia in Kangaroo* (1923). *Psychosexual male bonding in Aaron's Rod* (1922). The return of the old Mexican blood religion in *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). Desire and power in his little novella *The Woman Who Rode Away* (1928). What Lawrence does, really, is employ geography as a metaphor for the psyche - when his characters go south, they are really digging deep into their subconscious, delving into that region of darkest fears and desires. Maybe it takes a kid from a mining town in Nottinghamshire, which Lawrence was, to recognize the allure of the sunny south.

Of course, this is not exclusive to Lawrence. Thomas Mann, a German, sends his elderly writer to Venice to die (in *Death in Venice*, 1912), but not before discovering a nasty streak of pederasty and narcissism in himself. Joseph Conrad, England's greatest Polish writer, sends his characters into hearts of darkness (as he calls one tale of a trip into Africa) to discover the darkness in their own hearts. In *Lord Jim* (1900), the main character has his romantic dreams shattered during his first experience in the Indian Ocean, and is symbolically buried in Southeast Asia until he rises, redeemed through love and belief in himself, only to be killed. In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the narrator, Marlow, travels up the Congo River and observes the near-total disintegration of the European psyche in Kurtz, who has been in-country so long that he has become unrecognizable.

Okay, so here's the general rule: whether it's Italy or Greece or Africa or Malaysia or Vietnam, when writers send characters south, it's so they can run amok. The effects can be tragic or comic, but they generally follow the same pattern. We might add, if we're being generous, that they run amok because they are having direct, raw encounters with the subconscious. Conrad's visionaries, Lawrence's searchers, Hemingway's hunters, Kerouac's hipsters, Paul Bowles's down-and-outers and seekers, Forster's tourists, Durrell's libertines - all head south, in more senses than one. But do they fall under the influence of warmer climes, or do those welcoming latitudes express something that's already been trying to make its way out? The answer to that question is as variable as the writer - and the reader.

Now most of this has had to do with fairly specific places, but types of places also come into play. Theodore Roethke has a wonderful poem, "In Praise of Prairie" (1941), about, well, prairies. Do you know how few poems there are of any quality about prairies? No, his isn't quite the only one. It's not a landscape that's inevitably viewed as "poetic." Yet somehow Roethke, the greatest poet ever to come from Saginaw, Michigan, finds beauty in that perfectly horizontal surface, where horizons run away

from the eye and a drainage ditch is a chasm. Beyond this one poem, though, the experience of being a flatlander informs his work in obvious ways, as in his poems about this uniquely American/Canadian open, flat agricultural space, in the sequence *The Far Field* (1964), for instance, but in less subtle ways as well. His voice has a naive sincerity in it, a quiet, even tone, and his vision is of a vast nature. Flat ground is as important to Roethke's psyche, and therefore to his poetry, as the steep terrain of the English Lake District famously was to William Wordsworth. As readers, we need to consider Roethke's midwesternness as a major element in the making and shaping of his poems..

Seamus Heaney, who in "Bogland" (1969) actually offers a rejoinder to Roethke in which he acknowledges that Northern Ireland has to get by without prairies, probably couldn't be a poet at all without a landscape filled with bogs and turf. His imagination runs through history, digging its way down into the past to unlock clues to political and historical difficulties, in much the same way the turf-cutters carve their way downward through progressively older layers of peat, where they sometimes come upon messages from the past - skeletons of the extinct giant Irish elk, rounds of cheese or butter, Neolithic quern stones, two-thousand-year-old bodies. He makes use of these finds, of course, but he also finds his own truths by digging through the past. If we read Heaney's poetry without understanding the geography of his imagination, we risk misunderstanding what he's all about.

For the last couple of centuries, since Wordsworth and the Romantic poets, the sublime landscape - the dramatic and breathtaking vista - has been idealized, sometimes to the point of cliché. Needless to say, vast and sudden mountains - the geographic features we find most spectacular and dramatic - figure prominently in such views. When, in the middle of the twentieth century, W. H. Auden writes "In Praise of Limestone" (1951), he is directly attacking poetic assumptions of the sublime. But he's also writing about places we can call home: the flat or gently rolling ground of limestone country, with its fertile fields and abundant groundwater, with its occasional subterranean caves, and most important with its non-sublime but also nonthreatening vistas. We can live there, he says. The Matterhorn and Mont Blanc, those emblems of the Romantic sublime, may not be for human habitation, but limestone country is. In this case, geography becomes not only a way by which the poet expresses his psyche but also a conveyor of theme. Auden argues for a humanity-friendly poetry, challenging certain inhuman ideas that have dominated poetic thinking for a goodly period before he came along.

It doesn't matter which prairie, which bog, which mountain range, which chalk down or limestone field we envision. The poets are being fairly generic in these instances.

Hills and valleys have a logic of their own. Why did Jack and Jill go up the hill? Sure, sure, a pail of water, probably orders from a parent. But wasn't the real reason so Jack could break his crown and Jill come tumbling after? That's what it usually is in literature. Who's up and who's down? Just what do up and down mean?

First, think about what there is down low or up high. Low: swamps, crowds, fog, darkness, fields, heat, unpleasantness, people, life, death. High: snow, ice, purity, thin air, clear views, isolation, life, death. Some of these, you will notice, appear on both lists, and you can make either environment work for you if you're a real writer. Like Hemingway. In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936), he contrasts the leopard, dead and preserved in the snow on the peak, with the writer dying of gangrene down on the plain. The leopard's death is clean, cold, pure, while the writer's death is ugly, unpleasant, horrible. The final result may be the same, but one is so much less wholesome than the other.

D. H. Lawrence offers the contrasting view in *Women in Love*. The four main characters, tired of the muck and confusion of life in near-sea-level England, opt for a holiday in the Tyrol. At first the alpine environment seems clean and uncluttered, but as time goes on they - and we - begin to realize that it's

also inhuman. The two with the most humanity, Birkin and Ursula, decide to head back downhill to more hospitable climes, while Gerald and Gudrun stay. Their mutual hostility grows to the point where Gerald attempts to murder Gudrun and, deciding the act isn't worth the effort, skis off higher and higher until, only yards from the very top of the mountains, he collapses and dies of, for want of a better term, a broken soul.

So, high or low, near or far, north or south, east or west, the places of poems and fiction really matter. It isn't just setting, that hoary old English class topic. It's place and space and shape that bring us to ideas and psychology and history and dynamism. It's enough to make you read a map.

## 20 - ...So Does Season

HERE'S MY FAVORITE SNIPPET OF POETRY:

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold:  
Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.*

As you know, that's Shakespeare's sonnet 73, your constant bedside reading. I like it for a lot of reasons. First, it just sounds wonderful - say it out loud a couple of times and you'll start to hear how the words play off each other. Then there's the rhythm. I often recite it in class when I'm explaining meter and scansion - how the stressed and unstressed syllables function in lines of poetry. But the thing that really works here, and in the next ten lines, is the meaning: the speaker is seriously feeling his age here and making us feel it, too, with those boughs shaking in the cold winds, those last faded leaves still hanging, if barely, in the canopy, those empty limbs that formerly were so full of life and song. His leaves, his hair, have mostly departed, we can surmise, and his appendages are less resolute than formerly, and of course, he's entered a quieter period than his youth had been. November in the bones; it makes my joints ache just to think about it.

Now to the nuts and bolts: Shakespeare didn't invent this metaphor. This fall/middle-age cliché was pretty creaky in the knees long before he got hold of it. What he does, brilliantly, is to invest it with a specificity and a continuity that force us to really see not only the thing he describes - the end of autumn and the coming of winter - but the thing he's really talking about, namely the speaker's standing on the edge of old age. And of course he, being himself, pulls this off time and again in his poems and plays. "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" he asks. "Thou art more lovely and more temperate." What beloved could turn her back on that one? When King Lear is raging in his old man's madness, he's doing it in a winter storm. When the young lovers escape to the enchanted woods to sort out their romantic difficulties and thereby take their proper places in the adult world, it is a midsummer night.

Nor is the issue always age. Happiness and dissatisfaction have their seasons. A thoroughly unpleasant king, Richard III, rails against his situation by saying, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "Now is the winter of our discontent, / Made glorious summer by this son of York." Even if we don't know what he means by that, we know from his tone what he feels and we're pretty sure it doesn't say anything good about this son (with its play on "sun" ) of York's future. Elsewhere he speaks of seasons as having each their appropriate emotions, as in the song from Cymbeline, with its "Fear no more the heat o' th' sun, / Nor the furious winter's rages." Summer is passion and love; winter, anger and hatred. The Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that to everything there is a season. Henry VI, Part II gives us the Shakespearean formula for the same thing, although a bit more mixed, "Sometimes hath the brightest day a cloud, / And after summer evermore succeeds / Barren winter, with his wrathful nipping cold; / So cares and joys abound, as seasons fleet." Even his titles tell us seasons matter with him: A Winter's Tale, Twelfth Night (that is, the last of the twelve days of Christmas), A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Of course, seasons aren't the private playground of our greatest writer. We sometimes treat old Will as if he's the beginning, middle, and end of literature, but he's not. He began some things, continued others, and ended a few, but that's not the same at all. A few other writers have also had something to say about the seasons in connection with the human experience.

Take Henry James, for instance. He wants to write a story in which the youth, enthusiasm, and lack of decorum that mark the still comparatively new American republic come into contact with the stuffy and emotionless and rule-bound world that is Europe. He must overcome an initial problem: nobody wants to read about geopolitical entities in conflict. So he needs people, and he comes up with a pair of real beauties. One is a girl, American, young, fresh, direct, open, naive, flirtatious, maybe a little too much of each; the other is a man, also American but long resident in Europe, slightly older, jaded, worldly, emotionally closed, indirect, even surreptitious, totally dependent on the good opinion of others. She's all spring and sunshine; he's all frosty stiffness. Names, you ask. Daisy Miller and Frederic Winterbourne. Really, it's just too perfect. And obvious. You wonder why we don't feel our intelligence has been insulted. Well, for one thing, he sort of slips the names in, and then the emphasis is really on her surname, which is beyond ordinary, and her hometown, which is Schenectady, for crying out loud. We get so involved with those aspects that the first name seems to us merely a quaint holdover from the old days, which weren't old to James. In any case, once you pay attention to the name game, you pretty much know things will end badly, since daisies can't flourish in winter, and things do. On one level, everything we need to know is there in those two names, and the rest of the novella pretty much acts as a gloss on these two telling names.

Nor are the seasons the exclusive property of high culture. The Mamas & the Papas, expressing dissatisfaction with winter, gray skies, and brown leaves, do some "California dreamin'" as they wish their way back to the land of perpetual summer. Simon & Garfunkel cover much the same unhappy ground in "A Hazy Shade of Winter." The Beach Boys made a very lucrative career out of happy-summer-land with all those surfing and cruising songs. Head for the beach with your surfboard and your Chevy convertible in a Michigan January and see what that gets you. Bob Seger, who is from Michigan, goes nostalgic for that first summer of freedom and sexual initiation in "Night Moves." All the great poets know how to use the seasons.

For about as long as anyone's been writing anything, the seasons have stood for the same set of meanings. Maybe it's hardwired into us that spring has to do with childhood and youth, summer with adulthood and romance and fulfillment and passion, autumn with decline and middle age and tiredness but also harvest, winter with old age and resentment and death. This pattern is so deeply ingrained in our cultural experience that we don't even have to stop and think about it. Think about it we should, though, since once we know the pattern is in play, we can start looking at variation and nuance.

W. H. Auden, in his great elegy "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" (1940), emphasizes the coldness of the day Yeats died. Auden had the great good fortune that it happened to be true; Yeats died on January 31, 1939. In the poem rivers are frozen, snow falls, the mercury settles to the bottom of thermometers and won't budge - everything unpleasant winter has to offer, Auden finds it for his poem. Now, the traditional elegy, the pastoral elegy, has historically been written for a young man, a friend of the poet, often a poet himself, who died much too young. Typically the elegy turns him into a shepherd taken from his pasture (hence the pastoral part) at the height of spring or summer, and all nature, which should be rejoicing in its fullness, instead is sent into mourning for this beloved youth. Auden, an accomplished ironist and realist, turns this pattern around in memorializing not a youngster but a man, born at the end of the American Civil War and dead on the eve of World War II, whose life and career were very long, who had made it to his own winter and who died in the heart of meteorological winter. That mood in the poem is made colder and more desolate by Yeats's death, but also by our expectations of what we might call "the season of the elegy." Such a tactic requires a very great, very skilled poet; fortunately, Auden was one.

Sometimes the season isn't mentioned specifically or immediately, and this can make the matter a bit trickier. Robert Frost doesn't come right out and say, in "After Apple Picking," that it's now October

twenty-ninth or November umpteenth, but the fact that he's finished his apple picking informs us we're in autumn. After all, winesaps and pippins don't ripen in March. Our first response may not be, "Oh, here's another poem about fall," although, in fact, this may be the most autumnal poem in the world. Frost expands on the seasonal implications with time of day (late evening), mood (very tired), tone (almost elegiac), and point of view (backward-looking). He speaks of the overwhelming sense of both tiredness and completion, of bringing in a huge harvest that surpassed even his hopes, of being on a ladder so long that the sense of its swaying will stay with him even after he falls into bed the way a fishing bobber, watched all day, will imprint itself on the visual sense of eyes closed for sleep.

So harvest, and not only of apples, is one element of autumn. When our writers speak of harvests, we know it can refer not only to agricultural but also to personal harvests, the results of our endeavors, whether over the course of a growing season or a life. St. Paul tells us that we will reap whatever it is that we sow. The notion is so logical, and has been with us so long, that it has become a largely unstated assumption: we reap the rewards and punishments of our conduct. Frost's crop is abundant, suggesting he has done something right, but the effort has worn him out. This, too, is part of autumn. As we gather in our harvest, we find we have used up a certain measure of our energies, that in truth we're not as young as we used to be.

Not only has something come before, in other words, but something else is coming. Frost speaks in the poem not only of the coming night and his well-earned sleep but of the longer night that is winter and the longer sleep of the woodchuck. Now this reference to hibernation certainly fits with the seasonal nature of the discussion, but that longer sleep also suggests a longer sleep, the big sleep, as Raymond Chandler called it. The ancient Romans named the first month of our calendar after Janus, the god of two faces, the month of January looking back into the year gone by and forward into the one to come. For Frost, though, such a dual gaze applies equally well to the autumn and the harvest season.

Every writer can make these modifications in his or her use of the seasons, and the variation produced keeps seasonal symbolism fresh and interesting. Will she play it straight or use spring ironically? Will summer be warm and rich and liberating or hot and dusty and stifling? Will autumn find us toting up our accomplishments or winding down, arriving at wisdom and peace or being shaken by those November winds? The seasons are always the same in literature and yet always different. What we learn, finally, as readers is that we don't look for a shorthand in seasonal use – summer means x, winter y minus x – but a set of patterns that can be employed in a host of ways, some of them straightforward, others ironic or subversive. We know those patterns because they have been with us for so long.

How long?

Very long. I mentioned before that Shakespeare didn't invent this fall/middle age connection. It predates him by a bit. Say, a few thousand years. Nearly every early mythology, at least those originating in temperate zones where seasons change, had a story to explain that seasonal change. My guess is that the first thing they had to account for was the fact that when the sun disappeared over the hill or into the sea at night, the disappearance was only temporary; Apollo would drive his sun chariot across the sky again the next morning. About the time the community had a handle on this cosmic mystery, though, the next item on the agenda, or next but one, was probably the matter of spring following winter, the days growing shorter but then growing longer again. This, too, required explanation, and pretty soon the story had priests to carry it on. If they were Greek, they would come up with something like this:

Once upon, etc., there's a beautiful young girl, so stunningly attractive that her beauty is a byword not only on earth but in the land of the dead, where the ruler, Hades, learns of her. And Hades decides he

has to have this young beauty, whose name is Persephone, so he comes up to earth just long enough to kidnap her and spirit her away to the underworld, which confusingly enough is also called Hades. Ordinarily the theft of even a beautiful young girl by a god would go unchecked, but this particular girl is the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and fertility (a happy combination), who goes instantly and permanently into mourning, leaving the earth in perpetual winter. Hades doesn't care, because like most gods he's very selfish, and he has what he wants. And Demeter doesn't care, because in her selfishness she can't see beyond her own grief. Fortunately, the other gods do notice that animals and people are dying for lack of food, so they ask Demeter for help. She travels down to Hades (the place) and deals with Hades (the god), and there's a mysterious transaction involving a pomegranate and twelve seeds, of which only six get eaten, in most versions by Persephone although sometimes by Hades, who then discovers he's been tricked. Those six uneaten seeds mean she gets to return to earth for six months of every year, during which time her mother, Demeter, is so happy that she lets the world grow and be fertile, only plunging it back into winter when her daughter has to return to the underworld. Hades, of course, spends six months of every twelve sulking, but he realizes that even a god can't beat pomegranate seeds, so he goes along with the plan. Thus spring always follows winter, and we humans aren't buried in perpetual winter (no, not even in Duluth), and the olives ripen every year.

Now, if the tellers of the tale were Celts or Picts or Mongols or Cheyenne, they'd be telling a different version of this tale, but the basic impulse - we need a story to explain this phenomenon to ourselves - would remain constant.

Death and rebirth, growth and harvest and death, year after year. The Greeks held their dramatic festivals, which featured almost entirely tragedy, at the beginning of spring. The idea was to purge all the built-up bad feeling of winter from the populace (and to instruct them in right conduct toward the gods) so that no negativity would attach to the growing season and thereby endanger the harvest. Comedy was the genre of fall, once the harvest was in and celebrations and laughter were appropriate. Something of the same phenomenon shows itself in more modern religious practice. Part of the immense satisfaction of the Christian story is that the two great celebrations, Christmas and Easter, coincide with dates of great seasonal anxiety. The story of the birth of Jesus, and of hope, is placed almost on the shortest, and therefore most dismal (preelectric) day of the year. All saturnalia celebrate the same thing: well, at least this is as far as the sun will run away from us, and now the days will start getting longer and, eventually, warmer. The Crucifixion and Resurrection come very near the spring equinox, the death of winter and beginning of renewed life. There is evidence in the Bible that the Crucifixion did in fact take place at that point in the calendar, although not that the birth took place anywhere near December 25. But that may be beside the point, because from an emotional standpoint, and quite apart from the religious significance of the events for Christians, both holidays derive much of their power from their proximity in the calendar year to moments on which we humans place great emphasis.

So it is with books and poems. We read the seasons in them almost without being conscious of the many associations we bring to that reading. When Shakespeare compares his beloved to a summer's day, we know instinctively, even before he catalogs her advantages, that this is way more flattering than being compared to, say, January eleventh. When Dylan Thomas recalls his enchanted childhood summers in "Fern Hill" (1946), we know something more is afoot than simply school being out. In fact, our responses are so deeply ingrained that seasonal associations are among the easiest for the writer to upend and use ironically. T. S. Eliot knows what we generally think of spring, so when he makes April "the cruellest month" and says we were happier buried under winter snows than we are having the earth warm up and start nature's (and our) juices flowing again, he knows that line of thought will bring us up short. And he's right.

Seasons can work magic on us, and writers can work magic with seasons. When Rod Stewart wants to say, in "Maggie May," that he's hanging around too long and wasting his youth on this older woman, he makes it late September. When Anita Brookner, in her finest novel, *Hotel du Lac* (1984), sends her heroine off to a resort to recover from a romantic indiscretion and to meditate on the way youth and life have passed her by, what point in the calendar does she choose?

Late September?

Excellent. So Shakespeare and Ecclesiastes and Rod Stewart and Anita Brookner. You know, I think we might be onto something here.

## 21 - Marked for Greatness

QUASIMODO IS A HUNCHBACK. So is Richard III (Shakespeare's, not history's). Mary Shelley's better-known creation, not Victor Frankenstein, but his monster, is a man of parts. Oedipus has damaged feet. And Grendel – well, he is another monster. All characters who are as famous for their shape as for their behavior. Their shapes tell us something, and probably very different somethings, about them or other people in the story.

First, the obvious but nonetheless necessary observation: in real life, when people have any physical mark or imperfection, it means nothing thematically, metaphorically, or spiritually. Well, a scar on your cheek might tell us something if you got it as a member of a dueling fraternity at Heidelberg, and certain self-inflicted marks – Grateful Dead tattoos for instance – might say something about your musical tastes. But by and large a short leg is just a short leg, and scoliosis is just scoliosis.

But put that scoliosis on Richard III and, voilà, you have something else entirely. Richard, as morally and spiritually twisted as his back, is one of the most completely repugnant figures in all of literature. And while it might strike us as cruel and unjust to equate physical deformity with character or moral deformity, it seemed not only acceptable to the Elizabethans but almost inevitable. Shakespeare is very much a product of his time in suggesting that one's proximity to or distance from God is manifested in external signs. The Puritans, only a few years after him, saw failure in business – ruined crops, bankruptcy, financial mismanagement, even disease in one's herd – as clear evidence of God's displeasure and therefore of moral shortcomings. Evidently the story of Job didn't play in Plymouth.

Right. The Elizabethans and Jacobean weren't politically correct. So now what? you ask. Meaning, what about four centuries later?

Things have changed pretty dramatically in terms of equating scars or deformities with moral shortcomings or divine displeasure, but in literature we continue to understand physical imperfection in symbolic terms. It has to do with being different, really. Sameness doesn't present us with metaphorical possibilities, whereas difference – from the average, the typical, the expected – is always rich with possibility.

Vladimir Propp, in his landmark study of folktales back in the 1920s, *Morphology of the Folktale*, separates the story of the folk quester into thirty or so separate steps. One of the initial steps is that the hero is marked in some way. He may be scarred or lamed or wounded or painted or born with a short leg, but he bears some mark that sets him apart. The tales Propp looks at go back hundreds of years and have scores of variants, and while they happen to be Slavic in origin, structurally they resemble the Germanic, Celtic, French, and Italian folktales better known in the West. Many of those tales continue to inform our understanding of how stories are told.

You doubt? How many stories do you know in which the hero is different from everyone else in some way, and how many times is that difference physically visible? Why does Harry Potter have a scar, where is it, how did he get it, and what does it resemble?

Consider the ways Toni Morrison marks her characters. One quester, our old friend Milkman Dead from *Song of Solomon*, bears an initial marking, one leg being shorter than the other. He spends much of his youth adopting ways of walking that will hide his deficiency, as he perceives it. Later he will be scarred twice, once on his cheek by a beer bottle in a fight in Shalimar, Virginia, and once on his hands when his former pal Guitar tries to garrote him and Milkman gets his hands up just in time. In *Beloved*,

Sethe has been whipped so severely in her past that she wears elaborate scars resembling a tree on her back. Her mother-in-law and mentor, Baby Suggs, has a bad hip. And Beloved herself is perfect, except for three scratches on her forehead; on the other hand, Beloved is something else again, not merely human. These character markings stand as indicators of the damage life inflicts. In the case of Sethe and Beloved, that life involves slavery, so the violence that marks them is of a very specific sort. But even the others bear signs illustrating the way life marks all who pass through it.

Beyond that, though, is another element: character differentiation. At the end of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the king blinds himself, which is very definitely a kind of marking – of atonement, guilt, and contrition – and one that he will wear throughout the subsequent play, *Oedipus at Colonus*. But he was marked much, much earlier. In fact, being good Greeks, we knew this before we arrived at the theater, just from the meaning of the name, *Oedipus* – “Wounded Foot.” If we were headed to the theater to watch a play called *Wounded Foot the King* (which is what that title means), we'd already know something was up. The oddity of the name, the way it calls attention to a physical problem, suggests that this aspect of his identity will come into play. Indeed, *Oedipus's* feet are damaged from the thong that was put through his Achilles tendons when, as an infant, he was sent away to die in the wilderness. His parents, fearing the terrible prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother, have him taken out to the country to be killed. Knowing how hard it will be for their servant to be the agent of death, they intend for the infant to be left on a mountain where he will perish of exposure. Just to be safe, they cause his feet to be lashed together so he doesn't get up and crawl away. Later his feet will become a piece of evidence proving that he is in fact the doomed infant. You might think that his mother, Jocasta, would be well advised either (a) never to remarry, or (b) to avoid marrying anyone with damaged ankles, but she chooses option (c) instead, thereby providing us with a plot. Quite lucky for Sophocles, if catastrophic for poor *Oedipus*. His scars speak of his personal history, which of course is hidden from him until it is revealed during the course of the play. Moreover, they address the personality of his parents, especially Jocasta, who tried to elude the curse, and of *Oedipus* himself, who seems never to have inquired as to how he came to have these scars. This lack of inquisitiveness is diagnostic, since the basis of his downfall is his inability to know himself.

Something more modern? Sure. Ernest Hemingway. *The Sun Also Rises*. Modern enough? The novel, which deals with the generation that was damaged in so many ways by World War I, is an ironic reworking of the wasteland motif. Like T. S. Eliot's poetic masterpiece *The Waste Land*, it presents a society that has been rendered barren – spiritually, morally, intellectually, and sexually – by the war. Such a treatment is not at all surprising, given the death and destruction of millions of young, virile males. Traditionally, the wasteland myth concerns the struggle, the quest, to restore fertility. This quest is undertaken by or on behalf of the Fisher King, a character who exhibits physical damage in many versions. That's the original. Hemingway's Fisher King? Jake Barnes, newspaper correspondent and wounded war veteran. How do we know he's the Fisher King? He goes fishing. Actually, his fishing trip is quite extensive and, in its own way, restorative. It is also highly symbolic. And what, you ask, is the wound that makes him right for the role? This is tricky, since Jake, who narrates, never says. There's only one thing, though, that can make a grown man, looking at himself in the mirror, weep. In real life, Hemingway's own wound was in the upper thigh; in the novel, he moved it just north. Poor Jake, all the sexual desire and none of the ability to act upon it.

So what's going on here? Character differentiation, certainly. The missing member sets Jake apart from everyone else in the novel, or any other novel I know of, for that matter. It also sets up parallels to the operative wasteland myth. Perhaps a touch of Isis and Osiris thrown in; Osiris was torn apart, and the goddess Isis succeeded in reassembling him except for the part that makes Jake Barnes resemble him (the Osiris myth is an Egyptian fertility myth). Priestesses of Isis took human lovers as symbolical stand-ins for the damaged Osiris, not unlike the way Lady Brett Ashley in the novel takes

other lovers because she and Jake cannot consummate their passion. But chiefly, the injury is symbolic of the destruction of possibilities, spiritual as well as procreative, accomplished by the war. When millions of young men die in war, they take with them not merely reproductive possibilities but also tremendous intellectual, creative, and artistic resources. The war was, in short, the death of culture, or at least of a very great chunk of it. Moreover, those who survived, like Hemingway and his characters, were badly damaged from the experience. The Great War generation probably suffered greater psychic damage and spiritual displacement than any other in history. Hemingway captures that damage three times over: once in the Nick Adams stories culminating in "Big Two-Hearted River" (1925), where Nick goes off alone to Michigan's then remote Upper Peninsula on a fishing trip to repair his broken psyche after the horrors of his war experience; a second in Jake Barnes's war wound and the fractured festivities in Pamplona; and a third in Lieutenant Frederic Henry's separate peace, broken by his lover's death in childbirth in *A Farewell to Arms*. All three cover the same ground of mental damage, spiritual despair, the death of hope. Jake's wounding, then, is personal, historical, cultural, mythic. That's a lot of impact for one little piece of shrapnel.

In his *Alexandria Quartet*, Lawrence Durrell introduces numerous characters with disabilities and deformities of various sorts - two with eye patches (although one is faking it) and one with a glass eye, one with a harelip, one who contracts smallpox and is badly scarred, one whose hand, impaled by an accidental speargun shot, must be amputated to save her life, one who is deaf, and several with limbs missing. On one level, being Durrell characters, they are simply versions of the exotic. Yet collectively they come to represent something else: everyone, Durrell seems to be saying, is damaged in some way or other, and no matter how careful or fortunate we might seem to be, we don't get through life without being marked by the experience. Interestingly enough, his damaged characters are not particularly incommoded by their deficiencies. The harelipped Nahfouz becomes a celebrated mystic and preacher, while Clea, the painter, reports late in the final novel that her prosthetic hand can paint. The gift lies not in her hand, in other words, but in her heart, her mind, her soul.

What's Mary Shelley up to then? Her monster doesn't carry the specific historical baggage of a Jake Barnes, so what does his deformity represent? Let's look at where he comes from. Victor Frankenstein builds his spare-parts masterpiece not only out of a graveyard but also out of a specific historical situation. The industrial revolution was just starting up, and this new world would threaten everything people had known during the Enlightenment; at the same time, the new science and the new faith in science - including anatomical research, of course - imperiled many religious and philosophical tenets of English society in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Thanks to Hollywood, the monster looks like Boris Karloff or Lon Chaney and intimidates us by its sheer physical menace. But in the novel it's the idea of the monster that is frightening, or perhaps it's really the idea of the man, the scientist-sorcerer, forging an unholy alliance with dark knowledge that scares us. The monster represents, among other things, forbidden insights, a modern pact with the devil, the result of science without ethics. You don't need me to tell you this, naturally. Every time there's an advance in the state of knowledge, a movement into a brave new world (another literary reference, of course), some commentator or other informs us that we're closer to meeting a Frankenstein (meaning, of course, the monster).

The monster has several other possible frames of reference. The most obvious literary angle is the Faustian pact with the devil. We keep getting versions of Faust, from Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* to Goethe's *Faust* to Stephen Vincent Benét's *The Devil* and Daniel Webster to *Damned Yankees* to movie versions of *Bedazzled* (and, of course, Darth Vader's turn to the Dark Side) to bluesman Robert Johnson's stories of how he acquired his musical skill in a meeting with a mysterious stranger at a crossroads. The enduring appeal of this cautionary tale suggests how deeply embedded it is in our collective consciousness. Unlike other versions, however, Frankenstein involves no demonic

personage offering the damning bargain, so the cautionary being is the product (the monster) rather than the source (the devil) of the unholy act. In his deformity he projects the perils of man seeking to play God, perils that, as in other (noncomic) versions, consume the power seeker.

Beyond these cautionary elements, though, the real monster is Victor, the monster's maker. Or at least a portion of him. Romanticism gave us the notion, rampant throughout the nineteenth century and still with us in the twenty-first, of the dual nature of humanity, that in each of us, no matter how well made or socially groomed, a monstrous Other exists. The concept explains the fondness for doubles and self-contained Others in Victorian fiction: *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882), *The Master of Ballantrae*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Significantly, these last two also involve hideous Others, the portrait of Dorian that reveals his corruption and decay while he himself remains beautiful, and the monstrous Mr. Hyde, into whom the good doctor turns when he drinks the fateful elixir. What they share with Shelley's monster is the implication that within each of us, no matter how civilized, lurk elements that we'd really prefer not to acknowledge - the exact opposite of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or "Beauty and the Beast," where a hideous outer form hides the beauty of the inner person.

Are deformities and scars therefore always significant? Perhaps not. Perhaps sometimes a scar is simply a scar, a short leg or a hunchback merely that. But more often than not physical markings by their very nature call attention to themselves and signify some psychological or thematic point the writer wants to make. After all, it's easier to introduce characters without imperfections. You give a guy a limp in Chapter 2, he can't go sprinting after the train in Chapter 24. So if a writer brings up a physical problem or handicap or deficiency, he probably means something by it.

Now, go figure out Harry Potter's scar.

## 25 - Don't Read with Your Eyes

REMEMBER THE TWELFTH NIGHT party in Joyce's story "The Dead" that we looked at earlier? To a child of late-twentieth-century America (or early-twenty-first, for that matter), the meal is no big deal. Except for the goose. Not that many households in this country roast a goose for the holiday, or any holiday. But the rest looks pretty ordinary to us. A vase with stalks of celery, American apples and oranges on the sideboard, floury potatoes. Nothing very remarkable. Unless you live, as do the old ladies who provide the meal, in preelectrification Dublin, where it happens to be the sixth of January. So if you're going to understand the ladies, and the meal, and the story, you have to read through eyes that are not your own, eyes that, while not those of Aunts Kate and Julia, can take in the meaning of the meal they have provided. And those eyes did not grow up watching *Animaniacs*. The aunts have provided a meal beyond their limited means, in which they feed exotic and expensive produce to a substantial number of guests. Celery does not grow in Ireland in January, and the fruit is from America and therefore quite expensive. They have gone to considerable expense on Epiphany, the second most important day of the Christmas season, the day the Christ child was revealed to the wise men. In addition to its religious significance, the evening is also the old ladies' one big extravagance of the year, the party by which they cling to a fading gentility and memories of greater comfort as members of the middle class. We cannot understand their anxiety over the success of this gathering unless we see how important it is in their lives.

Or take this situation. James Baldwin's wonderful short story "Sonny's Blues" deals with a rather uptight math teacher in Harlem in the 1950s whose brother serves time in prison for heroin possession. At the end of the story there's a scene we looked at in an earlier chapter, where the brother, Sonny, has returned to playing in a club and the math teacher, our narrator, goes to hear him for the first time ever. There's been a lot of tension throughout the story since the two don't comprehend each other and the math teacher really can't fathom the troubles that drive Sonny and his music and his drug problem. Nor does he understand jazz; the only jazz name he can come up with is Louis Armstrong, proving to Sonny that he's hopelessly square. As the brother sits listening to Sonny with the jazz combo, however, he begins to hear in this beautiful, troubled music the depths of feeling and suffering and joy that lie behind it. So he sends an offering, a scotch and milk, that indicates understanding and brotherhood; Sonny sips, sets the drink back on the piano, and acknowledges the gift, which shimmers like "the very cup of trembling," in the closing words of the story. It's deep and emotional and biblical, with a resonance that very few stories ever achieve - about as close to perfection as we're likely to encounter. Now here's where the business of interpretation gets interesting. At my school, there are sociology/social work classes on substance abuse. And two or three times I've had a recent student in said substance abuse classes show up at discussions of "Sonny's Blues," very earnestly saying something like, "You should never give alcohol to a recovering addict." Perfectly true, I'm sure. In this context, though, not helpful. This story was published in 1957, using the best information Baldwin had at that time, and it is meant as a study of relations between brothers, not as a treatise on addiction. It's about redemption, not recovery. If you read it as the latter, that is, if you don't adjust your eyes and mind to transport you from contemporary reality to Baldwin's 1957, whatever the ending has to offer will be pretty well lost on you.

We all have our own blind spots, and that's normal. We expect a certain amount of verisimilitude, of faithfulness to the world we know, in what we watch and what we read. On the other hand, a too rigid insistence on the fictive world corresponding on all points to the world we know can be terribly limiting not only to our enjoyment but to our understanding of literary works. So how much is too much? What can we reasonably demand of our reading?

That's up to you. But I'll tell you what I think, and what I try to do. It seems to me that if we want to get the most out of our reading, as far as is reasonable, we have to try to take the works as they were intended to be taken. The formula I generally offer is this: don't read with your eyes. What I really mean is, don't read only from your own fixed position in the Year of Our Lord two thousand and some. Instead try to find a reading perspective that allows for sympathy with the historical moment of the story, that understands the text as having been written against its own social, historical, cultural, and personal background. There are dangers in this, and I'll return to them. I also need to acknowledge here that there is a different model of professional reading, deconstruction, that pushes skepticism and doubt to its extreme, questioning nearly everything in the story or poem at hand, to deconstruct the work and show how the author is not really in charge of his materials. The goal of these deconstructive readings is to demonstrate how the work is controlled and reduced by the values and prejudices of its own time. As you will have discerned, this is an approach with which I have limited sympathy. At the end of the day, I prefer to like the works I analyze. But that's another story.

Let's return for a moment to Baldwin's math teacher and Sonny's addiction. The comment about giving alcohol to an addict betrays a certain mind-set about social problems as well as a unique history of artistic and popular culture experiences on the part of the reader that are at odds with the story's own goals. "Sonny's Blues" is about redemption, but not the one students have been conditioned to expect. So much of our popular culture - daytime talk shows, made-for-television movies, magazine articles - leads us to think in terms of identifying a problem, such as addiction, and seeking a simple, direct solution. In its place, such thinking makes perfect sense. On the other hand, Baldwin is only slightly interested in Sonny's addiction in and of itself; what he really cares about is the brother's emotional turmoil. Everything in the story points to this interest. The point of view (the brother's), the depth of detail about the brother's life relative to Sonny's, the direct access to the brother's thoughts, all remind us this is about the narrator and not the jazzman. Most tellingly, it is the brother who is removed from his world, taken out of his comfort zone, when he follows Sonny to meet with other musicians and then to hear Sonny play. If you want to put pressure on a character to cause him to change or crumble, take him away from home, make him inhabit an alien world. For the middle-class math teacher, the world of jazz might as well be Neptune.

Here's why this business of the reader's perspective matters. This story falls into that very large category that I call "last-chance-for-change" stories. Not a terribly scientific name, I'll grant, but that's what they are. Here's how they work: the character - sufficiently old to have experienced a number of opportunities to grow, to reform, to get it right, but of course he never has - is presented with one more chance, one last opportunity to educate himself in this most important area (and it varies with the story) where up to now he has remained stunted. The reason he's older is just the opposite of why the quester is typically younger: his possibilities for growth are limited and time is running out. In other words, there is a time imperative, a sort of urgency as the sands run out. And then the situation in which he finds himself needs to be compelling. Our guy? He's never understood or sympathized with his brother, even to the point of not visiting him in prison. When the narrator's daughter dies and Sonny writes a caring letter of sympathy, he makes the narrator (I'm sorry he doesn't have a name) feel even greater guilt. Now that Sonny is out of prison and not using heroin, the narrator has a chance to get to know his younger, troubled brother as he never has before. If he can't do that this time, he never will. And this leads us to the point of the last-chance-for-change story, which is always the same: can this person be saved? This is the question Baldwin is asking in the story, but he's not asking it about Sonny. In fact (such is the heartlessness of authors), for the question to really matter to us in terms of the narrator, Sonny's own future must be very cloudy. Whether he can do the one thing in the world he's good at and not be drawn back into the addiction that is rife within the jazz community, we cannot know. Our doubts on his behalf add to the urgency of the narrator's growth; anyone can love and understand a reformed junkie, but one who may not be reformed, who admits the perils are still there

for him, offers real difficulties. Now if we read the story through the filter of daytime talk shows and social work classes, we not only miss the focus of the story, we misunderstand it at its most basic level. Sonny's trouble is interesting, of course, but it's merely the hook to draw us in; the real issues the story raises all concern the narrator/brother. If we see it as Sonny's story, the resolution will be profoundly dissatisfying. If we understand it as the brother's, it works beautifully.

And this is a fairly recent story. How much harder to understand the mind-set behind, say, *Moby-Dick*. *The Last of the Mohicans*. *The Iliad*. All that violence. A diet that is almost purely carnivorous. Blood sacrifices. Looting. Multiple gods. Concubines. Those readers who have been raised in a monotheistic culture (which is all of us, whatever our religious persuasion or lack thereof, who live within the Western tradition) might have a little trouble with the piety of the Greeks, whose chief implement of religious practice is the carving knife. Indeed, the very setup of the epic, in which Achilles throws a fit and withdraws from the war because his sex slave has been taken from him, does not engage our sympathies as it would have those of the ancient Greek audience. For that matter, his "redemption," in which he proves he's back on track by slaughtering every Trojan in sight, strikes us as distinctly barbaric. So what can this "great work" and its spirituality, sexual politics, code of machismo, and overwrought violence teach us? Plenty, if we're willing to read with the eyes of a Greek. A really, really old Greek. Achilles destroys the thing he holds most dear, his lifelong friend Patroclus, and dooms himself to an early death by allowing excessive pride to overrule his judgment. Even great men must learn to bend. Anger is unbecoming. One day our destiny will come for us, and even the gods can't stop it. There are lots of useful lessons in *The Iliad*, but while it may at times read like an episode of *The Jerry Springer Show*, we'll miss most of them if we read it through the lens of our own popular culture.

Now, about that danger I mentioned earlier. Too much acceptance of the author's viewpoint can lead to difficulties. Do we have to accept the values of a three-thousand-year-old blood culture as depicted in the Homeric epics? Absolutely not. I think we should frown on the wanton destruction of societies, on the enslavement of conquered peoples, on keeping concubines, on wholesale slaughter. At the same time, though, we need to understand that the Mycenaean Greeks did not. So if we would understand *The Iliad* (and it is worth understanding), we have to accept those values for those characters. Must we accept the novel that is full of racial hatred, that vilifies persons of African or Asian or Jewish ancestry? Of course not. Is *The Merchant of Venice* anti-Semitic? Probably. More or less so than its historical moment? Much less, I should think. Shylock, while hardly a glowing picture of the Jew, is at least given reasons for being as he is, is invested with a kind of humanity that many nonfiction tracts of the Elizabethan period do not credit Jews with having. Shakespeare does not blame him for the Crucifixion, nor does he recommend burning Jews at the stake (as was happening in the century of the play's composition in other parts of Europe). So accept the play or reject it? Do as you see fit. What I would suggest is that we see Shylock's villainy in the context of the difficult and complex situation Shakespeare creates for him, see if he makes sense as an individual and not merely as a type or representative of a hated group, see if the play works independently of whatever bigotry might lie behind it or if it requires that bigotry to function as art. For me, if it must rely on hatred in order to function, it has to go. I don't see *Merchant* working only or even primarily as a product of bigotry, and I will go on reading it, although there are many works by Shakespeare that I like better and return to more regularly. Each reader or viewer must decide this one for himself. The one thing I find unacceptable is to reject it, or any work, sight unseen.

Let's take, briefly, a more recent and more troubling example. The Cantos of Ezra Pound have some marvelous passages, but they also contain some very ugly views of Jewish culture and Jewish people. More to the point, they are the product of a man who was capable of being much more anti-Semitic than he is in the poems, as he proved in his wartime broadcasts on Italian radio. I sort of weaseled my

way around the issue with Shakespeare, claiming that he was somewhat less bigoted than his time; I can make no such claim for Pound. Moreover, that he made such statements at precisely the time that millions of Jews were being put to death by the Nazis only compounds our sense of outrage toward him. Nor can we write it off as insanity, which is what the defense counsel did at his trial for treason (he was charged with broadcasting for the enemy). So what about the poetry? Well, you decide. I know Jewish readers who still read Pound and claim to gain something from the experience, others who refuse to have anything to do with him, and still others who read him but rant against him all the while. Nor does one have to be Jewish. I do still read Pound, some. I find much that is astonishing, beautiful, haunting, powerful. Very much worthwhile. I also find, with some regularity, myself asking, How could someone so talented be so blind, so arrogant, so bigoted? The answer is, I don't know. The more time I spend with him, the more I'm astonished by his capacity for folly. It's unfortunate that genius was harnessed to someone who may not have worn it well. I find the Cantos, for all its brilliance, a very flawed masterpiece; flawed for reasons other than the anti-Semitism, but certainly more flawed because of it. It remains one of the half dozen or so most important works in my field of specialization, however, so I can't turn my back on it even if I want to. I've been telling you earlier in this chapter that you generally want to adopt the worldview the work requests of its audience. Sometimes, though, as in the case of Pound and his Cantos, the work asks too much.

Now here is where I envy you. If you are a professor, you have to deal with some pretty unsavory characters and some questionable works. If you only want to read like one, you can walk away whenever you want to.

## Appendix Reading List

I'VE TOSSED BOOK AND POEM TITLES at you, sometimes at a dizzying pace. I remember that sense of disorientation from my very early undergraduate days (it took me years to figure out “Alain Robbe-Grillet” from the passing references one of my first professors was wont to make). The result can be intoxicating, in which case you go on to study more literature, or infuriating, in which case you blame the authors and works you never heard of for making you feel dumb. Never feel dumb. Not knowing who or what is ignorance, which is no sin; ignorance is simply the measure of what you haven't got to yet. I find more works and writers every day that I haven't got to, haven't even heard of.

What I offer here is a list of items mentioned throughout the book, plus some others I probably should have mentioned, or would have if I had more essays to write. In any event, what all these works have in common is that a reader can learn a lot from them. I have learned a lot from them. As with the rest of this book, there is very little order or method to them. You won't, if you read these, magically acquire culture or education or any of those scary abstractions; nor do I claim for them (in general) that they are better than works I have not chosen, that The Iliad is better than Metamorphoses or that Charles Dickens is better than George Eliot. In fact, I have strong opinions about literary merit, but that's not what we're about here. All I would claim for these works is that if you read them, you will become more learned. That's the deal. We're in the learning business. I am, and if you've read this far, so are you. Education is mostly about institutions and getting tickets stamped; learning is what we do for ourselves. When we're lucky, they go together. If I had to choose, I'd take learning.

Oh, there's another thing that will happen if you read the works on this list: you will have a good time, mostly. I promise. Hey, I can't guarantee that everyone will like everything or that my taste is your taste. What I can guarantee is that these works are entertaining. Classics aren't classic because they're old, they're classic because they're great stories or great poems, because they're beautiful or entertaining or exciting or funny or all of the above. And the newer works, the ones that aren't classics? They may grow to that status or they may not. But for now they're engaging, thought-provoking, maddening, fun. We speak, as I've said before, of literary works, but in fact literature is chiefly play. If you read novels and plays and stories and poems and you're not having fun, somebody is doing something wrong. If a novel seems like an ordeal, quit; you're not getting paid to read it, are you? And you surely won't get fired if you don't read it. So enjoy.

### Primary Works

W. H. Auden, “MusÉE des Beaux Arts” (1940), “In Praise of Limestone” (1951). The first is a meditation on human suffering, based on a Pieter Brueghel painting. The second is a great poem extolling the virtues of gentle landscapes and those of us who live there. There's a lot more great Auden where those came from.

James Baldwin, “Sonny's Blues” (1957). Heroin and jazz and sibling rivalry and promises to dead parents and grief and guilt and redemption. All in twenty pages.

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1954). What if there's a road but characters don't travel it? Would that mean something?

Beowulf (eighth century A.D.). I happen to like Seamus Heaney's translation, which was published in 2000, but any translation will give you the thrill of this heroic epic.

T. Coraghessan Boyle, *Water Music* (1981), "The Overcoat II" (1985), *World's End* (1987). Savage comedy, scorching satire, astonishing narrative riffs.

Anita Brookner, *Hotel du Lac* (1984). Don't let the French title fool you; it's really in English, a lovely little novel about growing older and heartbreak and painfully bought wisdom.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Carroll may have been a mathematician in real life, but he understood the imagination and the illogic of dreams as well as any writer we've ever had. Brilliant, loopy fun.

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), *Nights at the Circus* (1984), *Wise Children* (1992). Subversiveness in narrative can be a good thing. Carter upends the expectations of patriarchal society.

Raymond Carver, "Cathedral" (1981). One of the most perfectly realized short stories ever, this is the tale of a guy who doesn't get it but learns to. This one has several of our favorite elements: blindness, communion, physical contact. Carver pretty much perfected the minimalist/realist short story, and most of his are worth a look.

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (1384). You'll have to read this one in a modern translation unless you've had training in Middle English, but it's wonderful in any language. Funny, heartbreaking, warm, ironic, everything a diverse group of people traveling together and telling stories are likely to be.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900). No one looked longer or harder into the human soul than Conrad, who found truth in extreme situations and alien landscapes.

Robert Coover, "The Gingerbread House" (1969). A short, ingenious reworking of "Hansel and Gretel."

Hart Crane, *The Bridge* (1930). A great American poem sequence, centered around the Brooklyn Bridge and the great national rivers.

Colin Dexter, *The Remorseful Day* (1999). Really, any of the Morse mysteries is a good choice. Dexter is great at representing loneliness and longing in his detective, and it culminates, naturally, in heart trouble.

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1853), *Great Expectations* (1861). Dickens is the most humane writer you'll ever read. He believes in people, even with all their faults, and he slings a great story, with the most memorable characters you'll meet anywhere.

E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (1975). Race relations and the clash of historical forces, all in a deceptively simple, almost cartoonish narrative.

Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (Justine, Balthazar, Mountolive, Clea) (1957-60). A brilliant realization of passion, intrigue, friendship, espionage, comedy, and pathos, in some of the most seductive prose in modern fiction. What happens when Europeans go to Egypt.

T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917), *The Waste Land* (1922). Eliot more than any other person changed the face of modern poetry. Formal experimentation, spiritual searching, social commentary.

Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (1986). The first of a number of novels set on a North Dakota Chippewa reservation, told as a series of linked short stories. Passion, pain, despair, hope, and courage run through all her books.

William Faulkner, *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Difficult but rewarding books that mix social history, modern psychology, and classical myths in narrative styles that can come from no one else.

Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1999). A comic tale of modern womanhood, replete with dieting, dating, angst, and self-help - and an intertextual companion to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (1741). The original Fielding/Jones comic novel. Any book about growing up that can still be funny after more than 250 years is doing something right.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), "Babylon Revisited" (1931). If modern American literature consisted of only one novel, and if that novel were *Gatsby*, it might be enough. What does the green light mean? What does *Gatsby's* dream represent? And what about the ash heaps and the eyes on the billboard?

Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (1915). The greatest novel about heart trouble ever written.

E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), *A Passage to India* (1924). Questions of geography, north and south, west and east, the caves of consciousness.

John Fowles, *The Magus* (1966), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Literature can be play, a game, and in Fowles it often is. In the first of these, a young egoist seems to be the audience for a series of private performances aimed at improving him. In the second, a man must choose between two women, but really between two ways of living his life. That's Fowles: always multiple levels going on. He also writes the most wonderful, evocative, seductive prose anywhere.

Robert Frost, "After Apple Picking," "The Woodpile," "Out, Out - " "Mowing" (1913)"16). Read all of him. I can't imagine poetry without him.

William H. Gass, "The Pedersen Kid," "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" (both 1968). These stories make clever use of landscape and weather and are wildly inventive - have you ever thought of high school basketball as a religious experience?

Henry Green, *Blindness* (1926), *Living* (1929), *Party Going* (1939), *Loving* (1945). The first of these really does deal with blindness in its metaphorical as well as literal meanings, and *Party Going* has travelers stranded in fog, so that's kind of like blindness. *Loving* is a kind of reworked fairy tale, beginning with "Once upon" and ending with "ever after"; who could resist. *Living*, aside from being a fabulous novel about all the classes involved with a British factory, is the only book I know in which "a," "an," and "the" hardly ever appear. It's a bizarre and wonderful stylistic experiment. Almost no one has read or even heard of Green, and that's too bad.

Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (1929). The first truly mythic American detective novel. And don't miss the film version.

Thomas Hardy, "The Three Strangers" (1883), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). You'll believe landscape and weather are characters after reading Hardy. You'll certainly believe that the universe is not indifferent to our suffering but takes an active hand in it.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), "The Man of Adamant" (1837), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). Hawthorne is perhaps the best American writer at exploring our symbolic consciousness, at finding the ways we displace suspicion and loneliness and envy. He just happens to use the Puritans to do it, but it's never really about Puritans.

Seamus Heaney, "Bogland" (1969), "Clearances" (1986), *North* (1975). One of our truly great poets, powerful on history and politics.

Ernest Hemingway, the stories from *In Our Time* (1925), especially "Big Two-Hearted River," "Indian Camp," and "The Battler," *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936), *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).

Homer, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* (ca. eighth century B.C.). The second of these is probably more accessible to modern readers, but they're both great. Every time I teach *The Iliad* I have students say, I had no idea this was such a great story.

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Scary, scary. Is it demonic possession or madness, and if the latter, on whose part? In any case, it's about the way humans consume each other, as is, in a very different way, his "Daisy Miller" (1878).

James Joyce, *Dubliners* (1914), *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916). First, the stories in *Dubliners*, of which I've made liberal use of two. "Araby" has so much going on in it in just a few pages: initiation, experience of the Fall, sight and blindness imagery, quest, sexual desire, generational hostility. "The Dead" is just about the most complete experience it's possible to have with a short story. Small wonder Joyce left stories behind after he wrote it: what could he do after that? As for *Portrait*, it's a great story of growth and development. Plus it has a child take a dunk in a cesspool (a "square ditch" in the parlance of the novel) and one of the most harrowing sermons ever committed to paper. Falls, rises, salvation and damnation, Oedipal conflicts, the search for self, all the things that make novels of childhood and adolescence so rewarding.

Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis" (1915), "A Hunger Artist" (1924), *The Trial* (1925). In the strange world of Kafka, characters are subjected to unreal occurrences that come to define and ultimately destroy them. It's much funnier than that sounds, though.

Barbara Kingsolver, *The Bean Trees* (1988), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998). Her novels resonate with the strength of primal patterns. Taylor Greer takes one of the great road trips into a new life in the first of these novels.

D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *Women in Love* (1920), "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" (1922), "The Fox" (1923), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (1930), "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1932). The king of symbolic thinking.

Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur* (late fifteenth century). Very old language, but writers and filmmakers continue to borrow from him. A great story.

Iris Murdoch, *A Severed Head* (1961), *The Unicorn* (1963), *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), *The Green Knight* (1992). Murdoch's novels follow familiar literary patterns, as the title of *The Green Knight* would suggest. Her imagination is symbolic, her logic ruthlessly rational (she was a trained philosopher, after all).

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1958). Yes, that one. No, it isn't a porn novel. But it is about things we might wish didn't exist, and it does have one of literature's creepier main characters. Who thinks he's normal.

Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (1978), *The Things They Carried* (1990). Besides being perhaps the two finest novels to come out of the Vietnam War, O'Brien's books give us lots of fodder for thought. A road trip of some eight thousand statute miles, to Paris no less, site of the peace talks. A beautiful native guide leading our white hero west. Alice in Wonderland parallels. Hemingway parallels. Symbolic implications enough to keep you busy for a month at your in-laws'.

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Mystery of the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), "The Raven" (1845), "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846). Poe gives us one of the first really free plays of the subconscious in fiction. His stories (and poems, for that matter) have the logic of our nightmares, the terror of thoughts we can't suppress or control, half a century and more before Sigmund Freud. He also gives us the first real detective story ("Rue Morgue"), becoming the model for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, and all who came after.

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965). My students sometimes struggle with this short novel, but they're usually too serious. If you go into it knowing it's cartoonish and very much from the sixties, you'll have a great time.

Theodore Roethke, "In Praise of Prairie" (1941), *The Far Field* (1964).

William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Take your pick. Here's mine: *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Henry V*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Tempest*, *A Winter's Tale*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*. And then there are the sonnets. Read all of them you can. Hey, they're only fourteen lines long. I particularly like sonnet 73, but there are lots of wonderful sonnets in there.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818). The monster isn't simply monstrous. He says something about his creator and about the society in which Victor Frankenstein lives.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century). Not for beginners, I think. At least it wasn't for me when I was a beginner. Still, I learned to really enjoy young Gawain and his adventure. You might, too.

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone* (fifth century B.C.). These plays constitute a trilogy dealing with a doomed family. The first (which is the first really great detective story in Western literature) is about blindness and vision, the second about traveling on the road and the place where all roads end, and the third a meditation on power, loyalty to the state, and personal morality. These plays, now over twenty-four hundred years old, never go out of style.

Sir Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queen* (1596). Spenser may take some work and a fair bit of patience. But you'll come to love the Redcrosse Knight.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889). Stevenson does fascinating things with the possibilities of the divided self (the one with a good and an evil side), which was a subject of fascination in the nineteenth century.

Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897). What, you need a reason?

Dylan Thomas, "Fern Hill" (1946). A beautiful evocation of childhood/summer/life and everything that lives and dies.

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Poor Huck has come under attack in recent decades, and yes, it does have that racist word in it (not surprising in a work depicting a racist society), but Huck Finn also has more sheer humanity than any three books I can think of. And it's one of the great road/buddy stories of all time, even if the road is soggy.

Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982). Tyler has a number of wonderful novels, including *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), but this one really works for my money.

John Updike, "A&P" (1962). I don't really use his story when I create my quest to the grocery, but his is a great little story.

Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (1990). The exploits of a Caribbean fishing community, paralleling events from Homer's two great epics. Fascinating stuff.

Fay Weldon, *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1988). A delightful novel, comic and sad and magical, with just the right lightness of touch.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Explorations of consciousness, family dynamics, and modern life in luminous, subtle prose.

William Butler Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1892), "Easter 1916" (1916), "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1917). Or any of a hundred others. A medievalist professor of mine once said that he believed Yeats was the greatest poet in the English language. If we could only have one, he'd be my choice.

### **Fairy Tales We Can't Live Without**

"Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," "Hansel and Gretel," "Rapunzel," "Rumpelstiltskin." See also later uses of these tales in Angela Carter and Robert Coover.

### **Movies to Read**

*Citizen Kane* (1941). I'm not sure this is a film to watch, but you sure can read it.

*The Gold Rush* (1925), *Modern Times* (1936). Charlie Chaplin is the greatest film comedian ever. Accept no substitutes. His little tramp is a great invention.

*Notorious* (1946), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960). Somebody's always copying Hitchcock. Meet the original.

O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000) Not only a reworking of The Odyssey but an excellent road/buddy film with a great American sound track.

Pale Rider (1985). Clint Eastwood's fullest treatment of his mythic avenging-angel hero.

Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1984), Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (1989). Great quest stories. You know when you're searching for the Lost Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail that you're dealing with quests. Take away Indy's leather jacket, fedora, and whip and give him chain mail, helmet, and lance and see if he doesn't look considerably like Sir Gawain.

Shane (1953). Without which, no Pale Rider.

Stagecoach (1939). Its handling of Native Americans doesn't wear well, but this is a great story of sin and redemption and second chances. And chase scenes.

Star Wars (1977), The Empire Strikes Back (1981), Return of the Jedi (1983). George Lucas is a great student of Joseph Campbell's theories of the hero (in, among other works, The Hero with a Thousand Faces), and the trilogy does a great job of showing us types of heroes and villains. If you know the Arthurian legends, so much the better. Personally I don't care if you learn anything about all that from the films or not; they're so much fun you deserve to see them. Repeatedly.

Tom Jones (1963). The Tony Richardson film starring Albert Finney - accept no substitutes. This has the one and only eating scene I've ever seen that can make me blush. The film, and Henry Fielding's eighteenth-century novel, have much to recommend them beyond that one scene. The story of the Rake's Progress - the growth and development of the bad boy - is a classic, and this one is very funny.

## **Secondary Sources**

There are a great many books that will help you become a better reader and interpreter of literature. These suggestions are brief, arbitrary, and highly incomplete.

M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (1957). As the name suggests, this is not a book to read but one to refer to. Abrams covers hundreds of literary terms, movements, and concepts, and the book has been a standard for decades.

John Ciardi, How Does a Poem Mean? (1961). Since it first appeared, Ciardi's book has taught tens of thousands of us how to think about the special way poems convey what they have to say. As a poet himself and a translator of Dante, he knew something about the subject.

E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel. Although it was published in 1927, this book remains a great discussion of the novel and its constituent elements by one of its outstanding practitioners.

Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (1957). You've been getting watered-down Frye throughout this book. You might find the original interesting. Frye is one of the first critics to conceive of literature as a single, organically related whole, with an overarching framework by which we can understand it. Even when you don't agree with him, he's a fascinating, humane thinker.

William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970). Another primarily theoretical work, this book discusses how we work on fiction and how it works on us. Gass introduces the term “metafiction” here.

David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (1992). Lodge, an important postmodern British novelist and critic, wrote the essays in this collection in a newspaper column. They’re fascinating, brief, easy to comprehend, and filled with really fine illustrative examples.

Robert Pinsky, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (2000). The former American poet laureate can make you want to fall in love with poetry even if you didn’t know you wanted to. He also provides valuable insights into understanding poetry.

Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. Another important reference book. If you want to know something about poetry, look in here.

### **Master Class**

If you want to put together the total reading experience, here you go. These works will give you a chance to use all your newfound skills and come up with inventive and insightful ways of seeing them. Once you learn what these four novels can teach you, you won’t need more advice. There’s nothing exclusive to these four, by the way. Any of perhaps a hundred novels, long poems, and plays could let you apply the whole panoply of newly acquired skills. I just happen to love these.

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861). Life, death, love, hate, dashed hopes, revenge, bitterness, redemption, suffering, graveyards, fens, scary lawyers, criminals, crazy old women, cadaverous wedding cakes. This book has everything except spontaneous human combustion (that’s in *Bleak House* – really). Now, how can you not read it?

James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922). Don’t get me started. First, the obvious: *Ulysses* is not for beginners. When you feel you’ve become a graduate reader, go there. My undergraduates get through it, but they struggle, even with a good deal of help. Hey, it’s difficult. On the other hand, I feel, as do a lot of folks, that it’s the most rewarding read there is.

Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970). This novel should have a label: “Warning: Symbolism spoken here.” One character survives both the firing squad and a suicide attempt, and he fathers forty-seven sons by forty-seven women, all the sons bearing his name and all killed by his enemies on a single night. Do you think that means something?

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977). I’ve said so much throughout this book, there’s really nothing left, except read it.