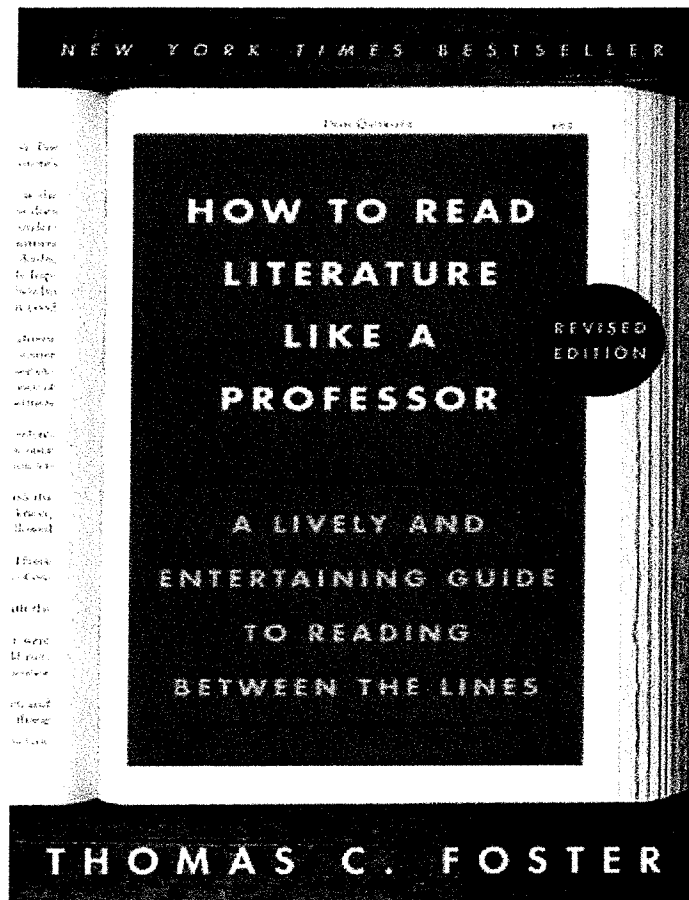


AP English Literature and Composition

Summer Assignment 2019: Appendix B

Excerpts from *How to Read Literature like a Professor* by
Thomas C. Foster



*for reading, note-taking, and applying to your two summer novels.

Foster, Thomas C. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines*. New York: Quill. 2003.

CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

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

What just happened here?

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

In other words, a quest just happened.

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

True. But think about it. What is a quest made of? A knight, a dangerous road, a Holy Grail, at least one dragon, one evil knight, one princess. Sounds

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

Seems like a bit of a stretch.

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

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

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

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

The real reason for the quest is *never* the same as the stated reason. In fact, more often than not, the quester fails at the stated task. (Frodo makes it all the way to Mount Doom, but does he throw the ring in the fire? No, he does not. Really—go read it again if you don't believe me.) So why do heroes go on these quests, and why do we care? They go because of the stated task, believing that it is 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.**

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

Or here's another example. You know the book, I'm sure: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1957).

Wait a minute. The Grinch is on a quest?

Sure. Here's the setup:

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

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

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

Let's think about journeys. Sometimes the quest fails or is not taken up by the protagonist. And 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. But still, when a character hits the road, we should start to pay attention, just to see if, you know, something's going on there.

Once you figure out quests, the rest is easy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

... Or the Bible

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

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

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

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

Some serious Bible stories turn comic in the hands of a modern writer. In Eudora Welty's story "Why I Live at the P.O." (1941), the narrator is in the grips of sibling rivalry. Her younger sister has just arrived back in her

family's town, daughter in tow. The narrator is outraged because she has to cook two chickens to feed five grown-ups and a small child just because her "spoiled" younger sister has come home. What Sister can't see, but we can, is that those two birds are really a fatted calf. It may not be the grandest feast ever cooked, but it definitely *is* a feast, and a feast is what you have to have when the Prodigal Son comes home. Even if the Prodigal Son turns out to be a daughter.

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

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

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

This might seem like the setup for many a fantasy novel. Children often make journeys to fantastic, magical places. There are often evil witches or other villains who need to be defeated. But when one of the children gives in to temptation and betrays the others to the witch; and when the savior offers his own life in return for the life of the traitor; and when two of the children stay awake to talk with the savior on the night before his death—you can start to see some parallels to the Bible, can't you? And when the savior is actually killed and then *comes back to life*, you know we're not just talking about Narnia, right?

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

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

Christ figures in your reading, this list may be helpful.

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

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

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

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

Out fishing by himself, the man hooks a big fish that takes him out far

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

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

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

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

Didn't Ernest Hemingway write a book like that?

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

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

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

CHAPTER NINE

It's Greek to Me

IN THESE LAST three chapters we've talked about three sorts of myths: Shakespearean, biblical, and folk or fairy tales. The connection between the Bible (or religion in general) and myth sometimes causes trouble. If you take "myth" to mean "untrue," you're going to be upset if somebody calls any part of religion a myth. But that's not what I mean by "myth."

When I say "myth," I mean something that helps explain us to ourselves in ways that physics, philosophy, mathematics, chemistry, can't. That explanation takes the form of stories that are a part of our group memory, things that everybody knows. These stories shape our culture, the way we live. And, in turn, the stories are shaped and changed by the lives we lead. They become a way of seeing the world and seeing 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. In European and European-American cultures, of course, there's a source for myth that almost everyone will recognize. When most of us think of myth, we think of Greece and Rome.

You don't believe me? In the town where I live, the sports teams at the college are the Spartans. Our high school teams are the Trojans. In my state we have a Troy, an Ithaca, a Sparta, a Romulus, a Remus, and a Rome. Now, if a town in the middle of Michigan can be called Ithaca, it suggests that Greek myths have some pretty good staying power.

Rick Riordan certainly thought so when he made his hero the son of a Greek god. Wading into *The Lightning Thief* (2005), you'll run into not just Percy's dad, Poseidon, but Zeus and Athena and Hades and the whole crowd on Mount Olympus. You'll also find more than a bit of Greek myth hiding inside J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1998). What guards the entrance to the place where the stone has been hidden? That's right, a three-headed dog. Any other three-headed dogs you know of? If you've read any Greek myths, you might remember that the underworld is

guarded by a three-headed dog named Cerberus. Only one living person ever got past Cerberus. His name was Orpheus, and he was the greatest musician of his time. He soothed Cerberus to sleep with his lyre (that's a bit like a harp, if you're interested) and went on to rescue his beloved, Eurydice, from the land of the dead. Or he tried to. Things didn't quite go as planned. But his story was there for J. K. Rowling when Harry and his friends needed to get past Fluffy.

Other myths stay in our minds as well. Like Icarus. I'm always a bit surprised, though, that Icarus gets all the attention. It was his father, Daedalus, who built the wings. The myth tells how Daedalus and Icarus have been imprisoned in a giant maze, the Labyrinth (which, ironically, Daedalus himself built). They know there is no way to escape by land or sea, so Daedalus builds, for himself and his son, two sets of wings made of reeds and wax. Daedalus flies safely to the mainland, but Icarus is too thrilled at the feel of flight to listen to his father's warnings. He flies higher . . . and higher . . . and higher . . . until the sun melts the wax in his wings. He falls, drowning in the sea.

The fall of Icarus remains deeply fascinating for us. We can see so much in it. There's the attempt of a parent to save a child and the grief of having failed. The solution that is as deadly as (or worse than) the problem it was trying to fix. The passion and enthusiasm that leads to self-destruction. The clash between the sober wisdom of adulthood and the recklessness of youth. And the terror involved in that headlong fall to the sea. It's a story that is so deeply part of our thinking that it comes to the reader's mind unbidden whenever somebody in a book flies or falls.

In 1558, Pieter Brueghel painted a wonderful picture, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Right at the front of the picture we can see a plowman with his ox. Just beyond him is a shepherd and his flock. At sea, a merchant ship sails calmly along. This is a scene of everyday activity. Everything is calm and ordinary. Except in the lower right corner of the painting, where you can see a pair of legs just about to disappear into the water.

That's our boy.

He really doesn't have much of a presence in the picture, but he still makes all the difference. Without those legs, without the sense of sadness and pity and helplessness they bring to the viewer, this is just a picture of farming and sailing without much to say for itself.

There are two great poems based on this piece of art. One is W. H.

Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1940) and the other is William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (1960). They're wonderful poems, each different from the other in tone, style, and form. But each has something to say about how the world goes on even in the face of our private tragedies.

Williams's poem talks about the visual elements of the painting, trying to capture the scene while sneaking in something about the theme. Even the way the poem looks on the page, tall and narrow, makes a reader think of the body plummeting from the sky.

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed

this was
Icarus drowning

Auden's poem, on the other hand, is a meditation on what suffering is, and why the outside world takes no interest in our private disasters.

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just
walking dully along . . .

It is astonishing and pleasing that the same painting can bring forth these two very different responses. Still, it all goes back to the myth: the boy, the wings, the unscheduled dive.

Greek and Roman myths, of course, are much more than Icarus. There are stories of doomed and desperate families (Oedipus, anyone?), bold searchers after treasure (Jason and the Argonauts), wronged women violent in their grief and madness. (Would you like Aeneas and Dido, or Jason and Medea?) There are stories of heroes, many of them the sons and daughters of gods. But these heroes did not always act in ways that are particularly divine.

Take *The Iliad*. Many people assume that *The Iliad* is the story of the Trojan War, the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. It's not, though. It's the story of the wrath of Achilles. In other words, the story of how Achilles got really mad, and what happened afterward.

Achilles becomes angry with his leader, Agamemnon, and decides to sit out the war. He refuses to fight until his best friend is killed by the Trojans. At this point he turns his anger against the Trojans' greatest hero, Hector. In the end Achilles kills Hector and the Greeks win the war.

Oh, the reason Achilles got so mad? Agamemnon took away his war prize, something Achilles himself had stolen from the Trojans. Pretty trivial, right? It gets worse. The prize is a woman. What Agamemnon takes away from Achilles is his slave, the woman he kidnapped.

Is that noble? Hardly. And yet, somehow, this story has come to stand for ideals of heroism and loyalty, sacrifice and loss.

Later, in *The Odyssey*, Homer gave us the trials and struggles of another

hero, Odysseus, as he tries to make his way home from the Trojan War. It's not easy; it takes him ten years. And his wife, Penelope, waits for him all that time.

Other writers don't always have their characters sulking when their kidnapped women are taken away from them, fighting bloody duels on the battlefield, or waiting a decade for their husbands to show up. But they *do* often show characters acting out of the same needs, desires, and patterns. The need to protect one's family: Hector. The need to maintain one's dignity: Achilles. The fight to return home: Odysseus. The determination to remain faithful and to keep hope alive: Penelope.

In two stories about legendary heroes behaving in very human ways, Homer gives us the four great struggles of the human being. No wonder so many writers have often borrowed from and imitated Homer and the other tales of Greek and Roman mythology.

Writers and readers share knowledge of these stories, this mythology. So when writers use it, we recognize it. Sometimes we understand exactly what the writer meant. Sometimes we only get a hint. Still, that recognition makes our experience of literature richer, deeper, more meaningful, so our own modern stories also matter. They also share in the power of myth.

CHAPTER TEN

It's More Than Just Rain or Snow or Springtime

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. It had been one for a very long time back when your favorite beagle decided to become a writer. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, a famous Victorian novelist, actually did begin a (bad) novel with "It was a dark and stormy night." 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 pouring down?

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 sleet too.

But let's think about rain for a moment.

Rain can be a plot device; it can make the characters seek shelter, get stranded or lost or stuck somewhere, waiting for it to end. This can be very handy for an author. Rain can also bring along tons of atmosphere. It's more mysterious, murkier, more isolating than most other weather conditions. (Fog is good too, of course.) Then there is the misery factor. Rain can make you more wretched than anything else you'll meet in the outside world. With a little rain and a bit of wind, you can die of hypothermia on the Fourth of July. And there's also something democratic about it. Rain falls on *everybody*. You can be rich or poor, guilty or innocent, male or female, young or old, powerful or weak, and it doesn't matter. Everybody gets wet.

What else can rain do? For one thing, it's clean. So if you want a character to be cleansed, let him walk through the rain to get somewhere. He can be quite transformed when he gets there. (He might also have a cold, but that's another matter.) He can be less angry, less confused, more sorry—

whatever you want.

Rain can also bring new life and hope. This is partly because we associate it with spring. (April showers do in fact bring May flowers.) But also think of the story of Noah. Lots of rain, major flood, ark, cubits, dove, olive branch, rainbow. This flood is the big eraser. It destroys life on earth but also allows a brand-new start. Rain can bring the world back to life.

So an author can use rain to do just about anything he or she wants. Other kinds of weather, too. Fog is good. It almost always means some kind of confusion. Authors use fog to suggest that people can't see clearly. Charles Dickens starts out *A Christmas Carol* with fog filling the streets of London—a good setting for Ebenezer Scrooge, who has lost his way and needs ghostly help to find it again.

Snow? It can mean as much as rain. Snow is clean, plain, warm (if it covers you like a blanket), threatening, inviting, playful, suffocating. You can do just about anything you want with snow.

But an author doesn't have a quick shower of rain, or a flurry or snow, or a flood or a blizzard, for no reason at all. Like I said, it's never just rain.

And it never just happens to be spring, or fall, or winter, either.

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.

(Oh, sorry, you need a translation? Try this: "If you look at me, you'll see a particular season. It's the season when only a few yellow leaves, or maybe none at all, are hanging on branches that are shaking in the wind, as if they're cold. Those branches are like bare and ruined balconies for choirs where, a while ago, sweet birds used to sing." But it sounds a lot better the way Shakespeare says it.)

That's Shakespeare's Sonnet 73. I like it for a lot of reasons. But the thing that really works here is the meaning. The speaker of the poem is seriously feeling his age, and making us feel it too. He's talking about getting old, and he's talking about a particular season: fall. 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. Fall = middle age was a cliché long before he got hold of it. What he does is *use* this old metaphor in a new way, getting so specific and detailed (yellow leaves, branches shivering in the wind, missing birds) that it forces us to really *see* two things. One is what he's actually describing: the end of autumn and the coming of winter. The other is the thing he's really talking about: standing on the edge of old age.

For as long as anyone's been writing, the seasons have stood for the same set of meanings. Maybe it's written into our brains that spring has to do with childhood and youth. Summer is adulthood and romance and passion and satisfaction. Autumn is failing health, weakness, and middle age and tiredness (but also harvest, which makes us think of eating our fill and having lots stored up for the winter). And then winter is old age and resentment and death.

Writers know that this is how we naturally think about the seasons, and they make use of that. When Shakespeare asks his beloved, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" we know without thinking about it that this is much more flattering than if he'd compared her to, say, January eleventh. The White Witch doesn't make it eternal spring in Narnia, does she? The idea is practically funny. She makes it always winter (and never Christmas) because, well, she's evil, and so she hates the very idea of new life, new growth, happiness, and forgiveness. It takes Aslan to bring all of those things. And, of course, the spring.

Or take Henry James. He wants to write a story in which America (youth, enthusiasm) comes into contact with Europe (stuffy, dull, bound by rules and traditions). So he comes up with a girl, American, young, fresh, direct, open, naive, and something of a flirt. And he comes up with a man, also American but who's lived for a long time in Europe. The man is slightly older, bored, worldly, shut off to his emotions. She's all spring and sunshine; he's all frosty stiffness. Names, you ask? *Daisy Miller* and Frederick *Winterbourne*. Really, it's just too perfect. Once you notice the names, you pretty much know things will end badly, since daisies can't survive in winter. And end badly they do.

Every writer can use the seasons, and every writer does so in a slightly different way. What readers learn, finally, is that it's not simple. We can't assume that "summer" means X and "fall" means Y. But writers know there's a set of patterns that can be used in different ways. Sometimes a writers uses

the patterns straight, and winter means what we expect it to mean—cold, death. Sometimes a writer turns our expectations around, and summer isn't warm and rich and happy; instead it's dusty and hot and miserable. The patterns are still the same, though, no matter how the writer uses them. And they've been around for a very long time.

So when you open up a book, check the weather, and the calendar too. If it's raining or snowing, if it's winter or summer, if the characters are shivering or sweating—it all matters.

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-World 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.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Is That a Symbol?

SURE IT IS.

That's one of the most common questions in class, and that's the answer I usually give. *Is that a symbol?* Sure, why not?

It's the next question where things get tricky. *What does it mean, what does it stand for?* I often come back with something clever, like "Well, what do you think?" Everybody thinks I'm making a joke or not doing my job, but neither one is true. Seriously, what do *you* think it stands for? Because that's probably what it does stand for. 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. Just one meaning. No more. You know what? It doesn't work like that.

Oh, sure, there are some symbols that work in a pretty simple manner. A white flag means "I give up, don't shoot!" So some symbols *do* have just one meaning. But most don't. Most have a range, a lot of different possible meanings.

Let's think about rivers.

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Mark 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 animals and people. So is the river a symbol of destruction and danger? But Jim is using the river to escape from slavery. So is the river—which flows freely, even overflows its banks—a symbol of freedom? But the river is carrying Jim and Huck south, deeper into slave territory. So does the river stand for slavery? Oppression? A fate you can't get away from?

The river is both danger and safety. It keeps Huck and Jim away from the people chasing them, and it also threatens to kill them. It also offers a place where Huck, a white boy, can get to know Jim, a black man, not as a slave but as a human being. And of course the river is really a road, and the journey is really a quest (remember, all trips are quests!) that allows Huck to grow up

and make important choices about himself and his life.

The only thing we can be sure about this river is that it means *something*. But it may mean something different for every reader. We tend to give writers all the credit, but reading is also an event of the imagination. The creativity of the reader meets that of the writer, and in that meeting we puzzle out what he means, or what we understand he means.

And so each reader's experience of *Huckleberry Finn* is different, because each reader is different. We all bring different things to each book—what we've read before, what we think about and care about, who we are. So each reader must decide for himself or herself what the river means, and each one will be right.

So what does the river actually stand for? What do *you* think?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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 from school?*

No. None of those.

Where?

That's the one. Mountains or beaches, cities or campgrounds, canoeing or sailing. You know you have to ask because if you don't, I might take you fishing on some little stream twenty-seven miles from a dirt road when what you really wanted was to head to the beach.

Writers have to ask that question, too. So we readers should think about it. In a sense, every story or poem is a vacation. And every writer has to ask, every time, "Where are we going?"

What does it mean to the novel that its landscape is high or low, steep or shallow, flat or uphill all the way? Why did this character die on a mountaintop, that one on the savanna? Why is this poem set on the prairie? What exactly does geography mean to a work of literature?

Would "everything" be too much?

Okay, not in every book, but often. In fact, more often than you think.

Any boy and any man could take a trip down any river. But Huck Finn and Jim could only make the story we know as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by being on one particular river, the Mississippi, traveling through that particular landscape and those particular towns and cities at one particular moment in history. It matters that they are going south, not north, because Jim is running away in the worst possible direction. It matters when they reach the town of Cairo and the Ohio empties into the Mississippi. If Jim had gotten off the raft at Cairo, he'd be a free man. But when the raft slips past Cairo in the fog, Jim is stuck traveling downstream and into the heart of slave territory.

Geography mattered to Laura Ingalls Wilder too. She tells us so. Look at

the titles of her books (1932–39): *Little House on the Prairie*. *Little House in the Big Woods*. *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. Each time, she's describing how one particular family lives in one particular place. And that place is the frontier, the very edge of what Wilder thinks of as civilization. If the Ingalls family didn't live on that edge, Wilder probably wouldn't have written down their adventures. The places made the stories happen.

And that's geography?

Sure, what else?

I don't know. History?

So what's geography, then?

I usually think of hills, creeks, deserts, beaches. Stuff like that. Stuff that shows on a map.

Exactly. Hills, etc. Rivers, hills, valleys, glaciers, swamps, mountains, prairies, seas, islands, *people*. The geography in books is usually about people living in particular spaces. How much do the places we live in make us into the people we are? Who can say? Writers, that's who.

Geography in literature can tell us a lot about almost any part of the book. 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 the bleakest landscape you ever saw. It's "a singularly dreary tract of country" with some "white trunks of decayed trees" and "a black and lurid tarn"—a pond without a ripple. By the time we get through all that, we're ready for the "bleak walls" of the house, with its "vacant eye-like windows" and the crack zigzagging right down its front. We're nervous and dismayed by all this description even before anything has happened. And that's one thing geography can do for a story.

Geography can also help us see what's going on inside a character. Especially when that geography changes. As it does when Harry Potter boards the Hogwarts Express at Platform 9¾. When the train leaves London, there are fields and sheep out the windows. Then it's "woods, twisting rivers, and dark green hills." A bit later there are mountains and forests. What ideas does that give you? The city, or the suburbs, where Harry lives with his aunt and uncle, is the place of Muggles—boring, stuffy, and above all, *not magical*. Getting to Hogwarts means heading into the wilderness, where things are wild, free, exciting, often dangerous, and magical as well. The geography tells you what's going to happen to Harry long before he figures it

out himself.

Or consider Mary Lennox of *The Secret Garden* (1911). Mary starts the book out in India. She doesn't like it there. It's hot, so hot that she feels sick and weak a lot of the time. She's bored and lonely. There are no other children around, and her parents can't be bothered with her. Her only companions are her Indian servants. They don't like her. (Why would they? She orders them around, slaps them, and calls them names.) She doesn't like them. In fact, she doesn't like herself, the person she is in India.

And then she comes to England. To one particular part of England—Yorkshire. She doesn't like it there either, at first. But the fresh, cool air gives her energy and strength. Spending time outside gives her new things to think about, so she's not bored anymore. She even begins to make some friends. She becomes a better person—happier, kinder, someone she can actually like. But she could not have become this person in India. Geography changed who she was and who she could become.

So near or far, high or low, north or south, east or west, the places of poems and fiction really matter. It isn't just setting. Place brings us to ideas, to the minds and hearts of the characters, to what the author is trying to say. It's enough to make you read a map.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Marked for Greatness

QUASIMODO IS A hunchback. Mary Shelley's creation (not Victor Frankenstein, but his monster) is a man of parts—literally. Oedipus has damaged feet. All are characters who are famous for their shapes as well as their behavior. Their shapes tell us something about them or about other people in the story.

First, it's obvious—or it should be obvious—that in real life, when people have any physical mark or scar or disability, it means nothing about who they are inside. In real life, a limp is just a limp.

In literature, it's often something else. In books, a physical flaw—a scar, a limp, an amputation, a twisted spine, an ugly face—can be a symbol. It has to do with being different, really. Being different on the outside is almost always a metaphor for being different on the inside.

In folktales or fairy tales, the hero is often marked in some way. He may be scarred or lamed, or wounded or born with a short leg, but he has some mark that sets him apart. You don't believe me? How many stories do you know in which the hero is different from everybody else in some way? And how many times is that difference something that can be seen? Why does Harry Potter have a scar, where is it, how did he get it, and what does it look like?

Oedipus is one of those marked heroes. One of the most famous characters from Greek myths, he is marked from childhood (just like Harry Potter). His marking isn't on his face, though; it's on his feet. If you were Greek and going to see Sophocles's famous play *Oedipus Rex*, you'd know this even before you got to the theater, because Oedipus's name means "wounded foot."

Oedipus's feet are damaged from the thong that was put through his Achilles tendons when he was sent away, as a baby, to die in the wilderness. His parents were frightened of the terrible prophecy that had been told about their baby, the prediction that he would grow up to kill his father and marry

his mother. So they sent a servant to leave the baby out in the wilderness where he would die. Just to be safe, they had his feet lashed together so that he couldn't crawl away. Oedipus survives, of course, and actually does grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. And in the end, his injured feet are part of the evidence that proves who he really is and what he has really done.

Oedipus's scars tell his story. Harry Potter's do also. Their marks don't only show us that these two heroes are not like anybody else; their marks also show us what has happened to them. Harry's scar is there because Voldemort killed his parents . . . and tried to do the same to him. Oedipus's feet are damaged because his parents tried to kill *him*. And it's these events that turn Harry and Oedipus into who they are. Neither one would have done what he did if he had not been scarred or marked in that particular way.

What about characters who aren't scarred or marked by events, but who are born (or built) in a way that catches our attention? What about Mary Shelley? Her monster is built out of spare parts from a graveyard. And he's built at a particular moment in history. The industrial revolution was starting up, and this new world was a threat to everything people had believed for centuries. New science (and a new faith in science) shook old ways of thinking and believing. The nameless monster Victor Frankenstein builds is frightening because he represents the things this science could produce: forbidden knowledge, the result of science without care, thought, or compassion. He *looks* deformed and monstrous because he *is* a terrifying warning of what this brand-new science can bring about if we're not careful with it.

So does a character who *looks* horrible always *act* horribly? Not necessarily. Sometimes it's the other way around. Quasimodo, in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831), was born ugly. His face is deformed; his back is twisted. They say he's the ugliest person in Paris. But this hideous outside hides a brave and generous soul. Hugo uses Quasimodo's ugliness to point out how much better, kinder, and gentler this monstrous-looking person is than the others around him. They *look* normal but act selfishly, cruelly, monstrously. Quasimodo *looks* like a monster but acts like a hero.

Are deformities and scars always meaningful? Perhaps not. Perhaps sometimes a scar is just a scar, an injured foot or a hunchback merely that. But more often a physical mark means that the author wants to call our attention to something about the character or something about the book. After

all, it's easier to create characters without imperfections. You give a guy a limp in Chapter Two, he can't go sprinting after the train in Chapter Twenty-four. So if a writer brings up a physical problem or a disability or a scar, he probably means something by it.