How to Read Literature Like a Professor (excerpt) By Thomas C. Foster

Common symbols

Is That a Symbol?

1. Yes. But figuring out what is tricky. You can only discuss possible meanings and interpretations.
2. There is no one definite meaning unless it's an allegory, where characters, events, places have a one-on-one correspondence symbolically to other things. (*Animal Farm*).
3. Actions, as well as objects and images, can be symbolic. i.e. "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost.
4. How to figure it out? Symbols are built on associations readers have, but also on emotional reactions. Pay attention to how you feel about a text.

What's in a name?

1. Sometimes clues to a character's personality or role in the text is hidden in plain sight
2. Examples: Luke Skywalker (he's a good pilot); Han Solo (he works best on his own); Voldemort (French for either flight from death" or "thief of death"); Benvolio and Malvolio (Italian for "good will" and "bad will")

Journeys = quests

3. Each quest needs a hero – someone who is pushed into it by circumstances, then learns / grows / evolves along the way.
4. The end goal is often not the point of the quest.

Meals = Communion

1. Whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion – an act of sharing and peace.
2. Conversely, refusing to share food means a rejection of that person
3. It's the most intimate non-sexual encounter possible.
4. A failed meal carries negative connotations.

Weather

Rain: fertility and life; Noah and the flood; drowning—one of our deepest fears

1. rain is clean—a form of purification, baptism, removing sin or a stain
2. rain is restorative—can bring a dying earth back to life
3. destructive as well—causes pneumonia, colds, etc.; hurricanes, etc.
4. Ironic use—"April is the cruelest month" (T.S. Eliot, "The Wasteland")
5. Rainbow—God's promise never to destroy the world again; hope; a promise of peace between heaven and earth
6. fog—almost always signals some sort of confusion; mental, ethical, physical "fog"; people can't see clearly

Snow

1. negatively—cold, stark, inhospitable, inhuman, nothingness, death
2. positively—clean, pure, playful

Violence

1. Violence can be symbolic, thematic, biblical, Shakespearean, Romantic, allegorical, or transcendent
2. Two categories of violence in literature:
   a. Character caused—shootings, stabbings, drowning, poisonings, bombings, hit and run, etc.
   b. Death and suffering for which the characters are not responsible. Accidents are not really accidents.
3. Violence is symbolic action, but hard to its generalize meaning.

Questions to ask:
1. What does this type of misfortune represent thematically?
2. What famous or mythic death does this one resemble?
3. Why this sort of violence and not some other?

If She Comes Up, It's Baptism

1. Baptism is symbolic death and rebirth as a new individual
2. Drowning is symbolic baptism, IF the character comes back up, symbolically reborn. But drowning on purpose can also represent a form of rebirth, a choosing to enter a new, different life, leaving an old one behind.
3. Traveling on water—rivers, oceans—can symbolically represent baptism. i.e. young man sails away from a known world, dies out of one existence, and comes back a new person, hence reborn. Rivers can also represent the River Styx, the mythological river separating the world from the Underworld, another form of transformation, passing from life into death.
4. Rain can by symbolic baptism as well—cleanses, washes.
5. Sometimes the water is symbolic too—the prairie has been compared to an ocean, walking in a blizzard across snow like walking on water, crossing a river from one existence to another (*Beloved*).
6. There's also rebirth/baptism implied when a character is renamed.

Geography Matters…

1. What represents home, family, love, security?
2. What represents wilderness, danger, confusion? i.e. tunnels, labyrinths, jungles.
3. Geography can represent the human psyche (*Heart of Darkness*).
4. Going south=running amok and running amok means having a direct, raw encounter with the subconscious.
5. Low places: swamps, crowds, fog, darkness, fields, heat, unpleasantness, people, life, death.
6. High places: snow, ice, purity, thin air, clear views, isolation, life, death.

…So Does Season

1. Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter=youth, adulthood, middle age, old age/death.
2. Spring=fertility, life, happiness, growth, resurrection (Easter)
3. Fall=harvest, reaping what we sow, both rewards and punishments
4. Winter=hibernation, lack of growth, death, punishment
5. Christmas=childhood, birth, hope, family
6. Irony trumps all: "April is the cruelest month" from "The Wasteland"

Marked for Greatness

Physical imperfections

1. Physical marks or imperfections symbolically mirror moral, emotional, or psychological scars or imperfections.
2. Landscapes can be marked as well—*The Wasteland* by T.S. Eliot
3. Physical imperfection, when caused by social imperfection, often reflects not only the damage inside the individual, but what is wrong with the culture that causes such damage

Monsters

1. Frankenstein—monsters created through no fault of their own; the real monster is the maker
2. Faust—bargains with the devil in exchange for one's soul
3. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—the dual nature of humanity, that in each of us, no matter how well-made or socially groomed, a monstrous Other exists.
4. Quasimodo, Beauty and the Beast—ugly on the outside, beautiful on the inside. The physical deformity reflects the opposite of the truth.

Illnesses and physical ailments
Blindness
1. Physical blindness mirrors psychological, moral, intellectual (etc.) blindness
2. Sometimes ironic; the blind see and sighted are blind
3. Many times blindness is metaphorical, a failure to see—reality, love, truth, etc.
4. darkness=blindness; light=sight
Heart Disease
1. Heart disease=bad love, loneliness, cruelty, disloyalty, cowardice, lack of determination.
2. Socially, something on a larger scale or something seriously amiss at the center of things (*Heart of Darkness*)
Other illnesses
1. Not all illnesses are created equal. Tuberculosis occurs frequently; cholera does not because of the reasons below
2. It should be picturesque
3. It should be mysterious in origin
4. It should have strong symbolic or metaphorical possibilities
Specific symbolic illnesses
1. Tuberculosis—a wasting disease
2. Physical paralysis can mirror moral, social, spiritual, intellectual, political paralysis
3. Plague: divine wrath; the communal aspect and philosophical possibilities of suffering on a large scale; the isolation an despair created by wholesale destruction; the puniness of humanity in the face of an indifferent natural world
4. Malaria: means literally "bad air" with the attendant metaphorical possibilities.
5. Venereal disease: reflects immorality OR innocence, when the innocent suffer because of another's immorality; passed on to a spouse or baby, men's exploitation of women
6. AIDS: the modern plague. Tendency to lie dormant for years, victims unknowing carriers of death, disproportionately hits young people, poor, etc. An opportunity to show courage and resilience and compassion (or lack of); political and religious angles
7. The generic fever that carries off a child

Allusions
Intertextuality = text connections
1. There is no such thing as a wholly original work of literature—stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems.
2. Recognizing the connections between one story and another deepens our appreciation and experience, brings multiple layers of meaning to the text, which we may not be conscious of.
3. The more consciously aware we are, the more alive the text becomes to us.

When in Doubt, It's from Shakespeare…
1. Writers use what is common in a culture as a kind of shorthand. Shakespeare is pervasive, so he is frequently echoed.
2. See plays as a pattern, either in plot or theme or both. Examples:
   a. *Hamlet*: heroic character, revenge, indecision, melancholy nature
   b. *Henry IV*—a young man who must grow up to become king, take on his responsibilities
   c. *Othello*—jealousy
   d. *Merchant of Venice*—justice vs. mercy
   e. *King Lear*—aging parent, greedy children, a wise fool

…Or the Bible
Before the mid 20th century, writers could count on people being very familiar with Biblical stories, a common touchstone a writer can tap into.
1. Common Biblical stories with symbolic implications:
2. Garden of Eden
3. David and Goliath
4. Jonah and the Whale
5. Job
6. The Flood
7. Christ figures
8. The Apocalypse
9. Biblical names often draw a connection between literary character and Biblical character.

Fairy tales and kid's lit
Fairy tales are often didactic, or intended to teach a lesson. Almost all cultures have some version of these stories, so they cross many boundaries.
1. Hansel and Gretel
2. Peter Pan
3. Little Red Riding Hood: similar to vampires: literal, symbolic, or sexual (predatory)
4. Alice in Wonderland, The Wizard of Oz
5. Cinderella
6. Snow White
7. Sleeping Beauty
8. Evil Stepmothers, Queens, Rumpelstilskin
9. Prince Charming heroes who rescue women. (20th c. frequently switched—the women save the men—or used highly ironically)

It's Greek to Me
1. *Odyssey* and *Iliad*: Men in an epic struggle over a woman; Achilles, a small weakness in a strong man; Penelope (Odysseus's wife), the determination to remain faithful and to have faith
2. The Underworld—an ultimate challenge, facing the darkest parts of human nature or dealing with death
3. Oedipus: family triangles, being blinded, dysfunctional family

Irony
Is He Serious? And Other Ironies
1. Irony trumps everything. Look for it.
2. Example: *Waiting for Godot*—journeys, quests, self-knowledge turned on its head. Two men by the side of a road they never take and which never brings anything interesting their way.
3. Irony doesn't work for everyone. Difficult to warm to, hard for some to recognize which causes all sorts of problems.