

# How to Read Literature Like a Professor Summary

By Thomas C. Foster

They say that there are no new stories. Mark Twain famously said, 'There's no such thing as a new idea. It is impossible. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. We give them a turn and they make new and curious combinations. We keep on turning and making new combinations indefinitely; but they are the same old pieces of colored glass that have been in use through all the ages.'

*How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, analyzes literature as a body of work. This allows us to extend our ability to read and set aside any shallow or superficial analysis. Not only do critical reading and study improve our overall skills and understanding, but they also enliven a text and make it more exciting.

We're taught that although there are no new stories, all stories grow out of other stories. We need to view books as part of a library, rather than as single stories, because each story builds on others. Understanding context and history, memory, symbols, and patterns, will help us to develop the critical skills needed to become an expert reader.

Thomas Foster is a retired professor of literature and writing, and has a passion for sharing his knowledge and wisdom. We've seen that it's been suggested that there aren't any new stories. So, surely reading shouldn't be that difficult? The problem is there is reading, and then there is *reading*. And, we can either choose to take a book at face value, or we can do a deep reading of a text and ignite a hunger for reading and learning.

This summary will briefly set you on the path of developing a sharp critical analysis. We'll learn that books should be seen as part of a collection, rather than as single stories. We'll see how each story builds on from other books, and that the world of literature is a complex and wondrous place. Furthermore, we'll examine how although we can get enjoyment from a basic and shallow reading of a book, the more we engage with it, and the more we analyze it, the more alive it becomes. Ultimately, whether you enjoy reading, or whether you find it intimidating, this book will give you a range of tools to improve your engagement with writing and literature.

## History and Context

If we look at literature as a sum of its parts, it's not only about the single story, but also about how it builds on a vast history of other stories. Hence we need to look at literature in terms of history and context. Gregory Bateson succinctly argues that, 'Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all.'

Many people go wrong because they just focus on the essential elements of the story – these are things like the basic storyline, the characters, and perhaps some of the descriptions. As an analogy, when we watch films, we usually focus on the primary storyline and the characters. However, if

we start taking note of the cinematography, mise-en-scene, sound, and editing, a whole new world of storytelling opens up to us.

A critical reading requires background knowledge. We need to consider the historical context, and from this, we can delve into memory, symbol, and pattern.

Reading is a skill we develop and grow. What separates an advanced reader from the rest, is the fact that advanced readers can delve a lot more deeply into Memory, Symbol, and Pattern.

## **Memory, Symbol, and Pattern**

What was the first book that you remember reading? Most of us have vivid memories of our first books, learning to read, and the first time that we connected with a story. Perhaps you've always loved reading, or maybe it's something that you've found intimidating. Wherever you are on the spectrum, books and stories connect to our memories.

We trigger our memories every time that we read or hear a story. We think to ourselves, 'Where have I read this before,' or 'What does this story remind me of?' As with all things, the more we read, the more knowledge we accumulate. This allows us to move between the book we're currently reading, and the books we've read before. Our brains catalog everything that we read, and therefore when we engage with a new text, our brain should be able to flip through all of the files and make connections. The more we read, and the more we remember, the more we'll be able to find similarities and differences between characters, plot, decision-making, and so forth. It's this sense of memory that helps us to identify recurring symbols and patterns, and make sense of them. So

when you critically analyze a text, you're looking to compare it with other texts.

When we read, we need to do so with a collection of symbols at the back of our minds. As we grow and develop over time, we collect symbols that we can refer back to. Symbolic imagination takes time because it takes a lot of training. Hence, the more we read and engage, the more we learn about these things. And once we've begun to understand them, they open a whole new world of reading. When it comes to symbols, we shouldn't be reductionist, and that's why history and context are so important. Symbols shouldn't be taken at face value, nor reduced to a single meaning. When we analyze symbols in the context of the story, we learn that they can mean a range of things, and don't have a single universal meaning. When it comes to symbols, we need to look out for metaphors, similes, and other literary devices that take the literal to the metaphorical.

Memory allows us to build our history and context, and symbols emerge through developing a catalog of literature from which to draw. Having a broader understanding means that identifying the complex nature of symbols becomes easier. For example, a skull and crossbones could signify poison, death, or pirates. Likewise, while a red rose is universally symbolic of love, it can also represent blood. Learning how to develop our understanding of symbols means paying attention to the text and questioning repetition and objects and emotions that are honed in on.

Once we have drawn on our memories, and have identified possible symbols, we can start looking for patterns. Learning how to identify patterns means paying attention, and interrogating what we're reading. Patterns originate from archetypes. Archetypes can be ideas, characters, and even plot structure. Patterns also allow us to form relationships, and

we often relate to characters because we've seen them before. For example, "a knight in shining armor," "a damsel in distress," or "an evil villain." This may make us relate to them, or we may find ourselves disliking them. Despite being able to identify patterns, and possibly predict where a story is going, how the author crafts the narrative, and how they develop the genre gives a text its own unique complexity.

## **The Multiple Facets of the Monomyth**

What do Jane Eyre, Hamlet, Bilbo Baggins, Katniss Everdeen, and Harry Potter have in common?

In narrative, the monomyth, quest, or hero's journey is one of the most popular plot structures. These familiar, or archetypal stories share a very predictable plot structure, yet they're all original in their execution.

Many stories are universal, and the monomyth is very formulaic. The basic structure is that a protagonist lives a relatively quiet and ordinary life, they get a call to action, and they're usually reluctant to take on the "quest" because they feel ill-prepared. They then meet a mentor or mentors who coach and encourage them, they face a series of tests, and finally, they reach a critical point where they need to go through introspection. They feel prepared, and there's a resulting clash or conflict that's been built towards. Finally, they're rewarded for their heroism and they return home having undergone a colossal change.

However, despite this universal plot structure, there's no denying that *Jane Eyre* and *Harry Potter*, are entirely different reading experiences. This is why we never stop reading, even though stories share so many similarities.

## **Intertextuality as a Form of Borrowing or Giving an Ironic "Nod"**

Intertextuality is when one text references another. For example James Joyce's *Ulysses* references Homer's *Odyssey*.

In film, this also happens often. Did you know that *The Lion King* is based on *Hamlet*, *West Side Story* is based on *Romeo and Juliet*, and *10 Things I Hate About You* is a rom-com take on *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The more we know about other texts, the more we can identify intertextuality, and authors often offer us rewards for having prior knowledge. It's a lot like being party to an in-joke, and it's a way of rewarding fans and readers for reading their body of work.

Stephen King is renowned for intertextuality, and he often hides numerous "easter eggs" in his books. He frequently refers to minor characters, plot points, or places in his books that refer back to other novels that he's written. Furthermore, he often references music lyrics, films, literary works, and television shows. First-time Stephen King readers may not know that these little nods are there, because they're very subtle, but a seasoned reader will know to expect them and look for them.

# Mapping Our Stories

Place has massive symbolic significance when it comes to narrative. Space and place evoke tremendous emotion in us, and we ascribe a profound amount of value to it.

How does your emotional landscape change, when you're in a bustling town versus when you're in nature? What are some of the connotations that you think about when you visualize a desert? Space and place come with a vocabulary, and they evoke feelings and therefore have a symbolic value.

If we think about a novel like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, each place that Frodo passes through represents the emotions of the characters, the path towards danger, and tells us about the history of the world Tolkien created. The Shire is juxtaposed against Mordor, which is another reminder of what's at stake in terms of fulfilling the quest. Space and place are never simple, and so we need to learn how to interrogate the landscape alongside the weather patterns, and the vocabulary and symbolism that the author is utilizing.

Landscape and setting is often another character in a story, so never take it for granted. As Shakespeare famously said, 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,' and this set the tone and mood for the entire play. Likewise 'In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,' introduces a central theme that a place where fairness and justice are prized, is about to become tested.

# Irony Sets You Apart

Understanding irony is a key indicator of how well you understand writing and literature. Sadly for those familiar with 90s music, we often turn to a relatively poor, albeit popular explanation of irony, that's sure to detach the retina of any learned educator. To be clear, Alanis Morissette's controversial tune *Ironic*, is maybe not where you should be going for a watertight definition of irony. Although one could argue that the very fact she wrote a song about irony, which contained almost no irony whatsoever, is in itself ironic. But that's for you to decide.

So then, what is irony?

Maureen Johnson put it so beautifully when she said, 'Irony is the word I forget the meaning of immediately after I look it up, but I kind of feel like I live in a constant state of it.'

Irony is one thing that we need to be on the lookout for, and you'll know when you come across it because your expectations will be somewhat confounded. It's basically a way for authors to lead you one way, build your expectations, and then present you with a very different reality.

There are different types of irony, some borderline on sarcasm; in some cases, the reader has a greater knowledge of the plot than the character. Then, there's the type of irony where the story goes entirely against the expectation set up by the author.

In the story of *Oedipus*, the irony is that he only sees the truth once he has gouged out his eyes, and in *King Lear*, this same fate befalls the king. He



is blind to the truth, until he loses his sight.

If we look at the idea of subverting a monomyth through irony, *Waiting for Godot* is a wonderful example. As readers, we're given many cues that a quest is about to begin. These cues come from memory, symbols, and patterns we're familiar with, but yet the characters don't set off on their journey. The characters stay put, and famously "nothing happens." In fact, 'nothing happens, twice.'

## **In Conclusion**

In order to read literature like a professor, you have to start by cultivating a thirst for knowledge. Whatever you read, you should ask questions about it, and not just take things at face value. It's about understanding that you'll never know everything, and that reading is a lot like looking at art. We can draw on the tools of analysis, but at the end of the day, we'll never really know exactly what the author intended.

Reading requires background knowledge and tools, and we've already been given a lot of these tools from growing up with religious texts, fairy tales, folklore, myths, and even stories around the dinner table. Each story we read or hear adds to our canon of knowledge, and we can always draw something from every book that we read.

This is an instrumental book to get you on the way to developing your critical analysis, encouraging deep thinking, pursuing knowledge, and finding passion in literature and writing. As Brian Sanderson says, 'The purpose of a storyteller is not to tell you how to think, but to give you questions to think upon.' And, perhaps that's the essence, to read more, and to think more.