

through the air, which was cause for no small laughter, and Sancho would have been embarrassed to no less a degree if his master had not reassured him again that it had been enchantment; Sancho's foolishness, however, never was so great that he did not believe it was the pure and absolute truth, and he was not deceived, as he had been crossed in a blanket by flesh-and-blood people, not dreamed or imagined phantoms, as his master believed and affirmed.

The illustrious company had already gone to bed in the inn, and thinking it would be better to sleep than to argue, they would spare Dorotea and Don Fernando the trouble of returning with Don Quixote to his village under the guise of restoring Queen Micomicona to her throne and would allow the barber to take him back to his home in Salamanca, as they desired, and the squire to go with him. Their scheme to arrange with an ox driver who happened to be passing by that he would carry Don Quixote home in this manner, they prepared so that nothing like what had happened in the castle should occur. To hold Don Quixote company, the priest, the barber, and the squire, the servants of Don Luis, the officers of the Brotherhood, and the innkeeper, all of them under the direction and guidance of the priest, covered their faces and disguised themselves in a variety of ways so that Don Quixote would not think they were the people he had seen in the castle.

When he awoke, he found himself lying in a bed here where Don Quixote lay sleeping, resting after his recent conflicts. They approached as he slept and held him firmly and tied his hands and feet with ropes, and he awoke with a start; he could not move or do anything but feel astonishment and wonder at the strange visages he saw before him; he immediately found an explanation, believing that all those figures were phantoms from the enchanted castle and that he, beyond any doubt, had also been enchanted, for he had not seen any of those figures before, which was exactly what the priest, the barber, and the squire had planned would happen. Only Sancho, of all those present, was in his right mind and not pretending to be someone else, and although he was not far from being afflicted with the same madness as his master, he was still a man who those masked figures were, but he did not dare open his mouth until he saw how far the assault on Don Quixote and his captives would go; his master did not say a word either as he waited to see the outcome of this misfortune, and it was that the cage was brought in, Don Quixote was

HOW TO READ LITERATURE LIKE A PROFESSOR

REVISED
EDITION

A LIVELY AND
ENTERTAINING GUIDE
TO READING
BETWEEN THE LINES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

DON QUIXOTE

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through the air, which was cause for no small laughter, and Sancho would have been embarrassed to no less a degree if his master had not reassured him again that it had been enchantment; Sancho's foolishness, however, never was so great that he did not believe it was the same and absolute truth, mixed with the spirit of the world, crossed in a blanket by flesh-and-blood people; not dreamed or imagined phantoms, as his master believed and affirmed.

The illusion, however, had already been broken when he inn, and thinking it was the same, he would spare Dorotea and Don Fernando the trouble of returning with Don Quixote to his village under the guise of restoring Queen Micomicona to her throne and would allow the barber to take him back to his home in La Mancha, as they desired.

Their scheme was to arrange with an ox driver who happened to be passing by that he would carry Don Quixote home in this manner; they prepared something like a cage with bars, and they held Don Quixote captive in it, and the servants of Don Luis, the officers of the Brotherhood, and the innkeeper, all of them under the direction and guidance of the priest, covered their faces and disguised themselves in a variety of ways so that Don Quixote would not think they were the people he had seen in the castle.

When he awoke, he found himself here where Don Quixote lay sleeping, resting after his recent conflicts. They approached as he slept, and they held him firmly and tied his hands and feet to the bars of the cage with a start he could not move or do anything but feel astonishment and wonder at the strange visages he saw before him; he immediately found an explanation for them, believing that all those figures were phantoms from the enchanted castle and that he, beyond any doubt, had also been enchanted, for he could not see the faces of those who were exactly what the priest, who had the plan, thought would happen. Only Sancho, of all those present, was in his right mind and not pretending to be someone else, and although he was not far from being afflicted with the same madness as his master, he still knew who those masked figures were, but he did not dare open his mouth until he saw how for the world on Don Quixote, and his fortune would be; his master did not say a word either as he waited to see the outcome of this misfortune, and it was that the cage was brought in, Don Quixote was

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**A LIVELY AND
ENTERTAINING GUIDE
TO READING
BETWEEN THE LINES**

THOMAS C. FOSTER

How to Read Literature Like a Professor



A Lively and Entertaining Guide
to Reading Between the Lines

THOMAS C. FOSTER

HARPER  PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI • AUCKLAND

Dedication

For my sons, Robert and Nathan

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Preface



THE AMAZING THING ABOUT BOOKS is how they have lives of their own. Writers think they know their business when they sit down to compose a new work, and I suppose they do, right up to the moment when the last piece of punctuation gets planted on the final sentence. More often than not, that punctuation is a period. It should be a question mark, though, because what occurs from then on is anybody's guess.

The classic example is the writer whose best book goes *thud* upon release. Think Herman Melville or F. Scott Fitzgerald. Melville must have thought, after finding large readerships for earlier novels, that the crazed search for the white whale would be a smash. It wasn't. Nor was Fitzgerald's tale of a romantic dreamer trying to rewrite his past. *The Great Gatsby* is so much subtler, so much more insightful about human nature and its historical moment, than his earlier books that it is almost inconceivable that his huge audience turned away. On the other hand, maybe that is why it turned away. Successfully predicting the coming calamity looks a lot like an excess of gloominess—until the disaster arrives. Humankind, observed Fitzgerald's contemporary T. S. Eliot, cannot bear too much reality. In any case, Fitzgerald lived only long enough to see his books largely out of print, his royalties nonexistent. It would take another generation for the world to discover how great *Gatsby* truly is, three or four times that for *Moby-Dick* to be recognized as a masterpiece.

There are also tales, of course, of unexpected bestsellers that go on and on, as well as flashes in the pan that flare up but then die out without a trace. But it's the Moby-Gatsby kind of story that compels our attention. If you want to know what the world thinks about a writer and her work, check back with us in, oh, two hundred years or so.

Not all stories of publication switchbacks are so stark. We all hope to find an audience—any audience—and we believe we have some idea who that will be. Sometimes we're right, sometimes we're all wet. What follows is a confession of sorts.

The customary acknowledgments and thanks are typically placed at the back of the book. I wish, however, to recognize one special debt of gratitude to a group whose assistance has been monumental. Indeed, without them, this revision would not have been possible. A dozen or so years ago when I was drafting the original, I was pretty clear on the audience for my book. She was a thirty-seven-year-old returning student, probably divorced, probably a nurse forced back to coursework by changes in the licensure rules of the profession. Faced with the prospect of obtaining a bachelor's degree, she chose to follow her heart this time around and pursue a degree in English. She had always been a serious reader, but she had felt that she was missing something in her experience of literature, some deep secret her teachers had known but not imparted to her.

You think I'm kidding, right? I'm not. Teaching at a branch campus of a famous university, I meet her, or her male equivalent, the guy (usually, although there are women as well) laid off from the

assembly line at General Motors, again and again. And again. One of the great things about teaching at the University of Michigan–Flint, as opposed to the University of Michigan, is ceaseless contact with adult learners, many of whom hunger for more learning. I also have plenty of the typical-college-student type, but the nontraditional students have taught me a few things. First, never assume anything about background experience. I've had students who have read all of Joyce or Faulkner or Hemingway, and one who had read more Czech novels than I could ever hope to get through, as well as students who had read pretty much only Stephen King or Danielle Steel. There have been Hitchcock fanatics and devotees of Bergman and Fellini, and others who thought *Dallas* was high art. And you can never tell which will be which.

Second, explain yourself. They expect, and are sometimes more vocal about it than their younger classmates, to see how the trick is done. Whether they think I am the high priest or the high charlatan, they want to know how the magic works, how I arrive at my sometimes idiosyncratic readings.

And third, teach precepts, then stand aside. Once I show these older students how I work with texts, I get out of the way. This is not because of the wonders of my approach or my teaching; chiefly, what happens is that I validate something about their own way of reading that gives them permission to run free, and run they do. Younger students do, too, but they are often more inhibited, having spent their whole lives inside classrooms. There's nothing like being out on your own to make you intellectually self-reliant.

Are these older students all geniuses? No, although a few might be. Nor are they all closet intellectuals, although more than a few are—you know, the sort who get nicknamed “Professor” because they're seen reading books on their lunch break. But however smart they may be, they push me and school me even as I do the same to them. So I figured there must be others out there like them. And it was for that group that I wrote this book.

Boy, was I wrong. I was right, too. I have heard from quite a lot of mature readers, some of whom fit the above descriptions, others who had been English majors in college but who had been left with the feeling that something was missing, that some key element of literary study had passed them by. I would receive the occasional e-mail from such readers. Then, about two years in, the nature of those missives changed. I started hearing from English teachers. Not often, but every once in a while. And about six months after that, I started hearing from high school students. The teachers were uniformly glowing in their praise, the students mostly so. With just enough hate mail to make it clear that this wasn't a put-up job. One student said, in one of the more printable messages, “I don't know what the big deal is. Everything in your book I learned in ninth grade.” I told her I would like to shake her ninth-grade teacher's hand. And no refunds. It was also at about this time that I heard indirectly that the book was being discussed on a site for Advanced Placement English teachers.

In the years since, I have been blessed to have contact with teachers and students from around the country. There have been all sorts of inquiries, from “What did you mean by *X*?” to “Can I apply this notion to that book that you didn't discuss?” to “Can you look over my thesis sentence (or my whole paper)?” The first two are great, the latter less so, since it puts me in an awkward ethical position. Even so, it is flattering that students trust a complete stranger enough to ask such questions.

I have also had plenty of direct interaction. I go into several classrooms a year to talk with classes

about the book and how they're using it. These visits are a lot of fun and almost always involve a great question or two. Needless to say, the in-person visits are largely limited to places I can drive in a few hours, although I did once go as far afield as Fort Thomas, Kentucky. I have also, thanks to the wonders of the digital age, been able to engage with students electronically. Diane Burrowes, the queen of academic marketing at HarperCollins, stays up nights thinking of new and strange ways to get me, or at least a digital version thereof, into classrooms from New Jersey and Virginia to Flagstaff, Arizona. And of course the development of platforms like Skype has made such visits almost commonplace.

What has struck me most in the ensuing years is the endless inventiveness of secondary English teachers in general and AP teachers in particular. They have figured out ways to use this book that would never have occurred to me if I taught for a thousand years. In one class, each student is assigned as the keeper of a chapter; if Sam is in charge of rain and snow, he makes a poster explaining the significant elements of the chapter, and whenever the reading involves precipitation, Sam is prepared to discuss its implications. I suspect Sam got a raw deal and has to work harder than almost anyone else, but maybe he likes being busy. In another class, students work in groups to make short movies, and every movie must incorporate at least one concept from the book. At the end of the year, they have a mock-Oscar ceremony, complete with tuxedos and statuettes (used sports trophies, I'm told). Now that's just brilliant. What I like best about many of the schemes is the degree of student autonomy built into them. I suspect that one of the appealing elements of the book is that it lacks the apparatus of a textbook, which allows teachers to make of it what they will—and they make many different things of it. In turn, many of them pass that open-endedness along to their students, permitting them to be creative with the text and their own insights.

Is that the key to the book's popularity among teachers? I don't know. I was amazed when I first heard that it was being adopted for courses, my thoughts revolving around the utter absence of academic trappings (things like notes, glosses, and questions at the end of chapters, which, by the way, I've always hated) and the scattershot organization. I grouped the discussions in a way that felt right to me, but that's not the same as making sense for classroom use. Indeed, I am not sure what would make sense in a classroom setting, since I have never, and would never, use the book in a course. How's that for a confession? It is not an excess of modesty, a thing of which I have never been accused, that prevents my using it. The reason is more practical. This book contains most of my literary insights and all my jokes. If I assigned it, I would have nothing left to do. The goal of education, as I see it, is to bring students to the point where they no longer need you—in essence, to put yourself out of a job . . . but that retirement would be a little more sudden than I'd prefer.

So when I heard that teachers were assigning the book as summer reading, I was more than a little astonished. That it has found a home in high schools is testament to the creativity and intelligence of secondary teachers of English. They're working at a time when, we're told, no one reads anymore, yet they somehow manage to inspire a love of reading among their students. They work incredibly hard, grading work by as many as 150 students at a time, a load that just thinking about would make most university professors woozy. They get far too little respect and not nearly enough pay for doing a remarkable job. One of my more waggish colleagues, noting my frequent visits to secondary classes,

says that I could have my pick of any high school teaching job in America. He's wrong, of course. I couldn't keep up with the people already there.

To the English teachers who have made *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* a success, I can offer only my profound gratitude. That this book is even in print, much less in the process of being revised, is all your fault. I can't thank each of you individually, but I would like to thank some representative members of the tribe: Joyce Haner (now retired) of Okemos High School (Michigan), for many late-night discussions at, of all places, softball team parties, as well as for being my first welcomer among Michigan teachers; Amy Anderson and Bill Spruytte of Lapeer East High School (Michigan); Stacey Turczyn of Powers Catholic High School in Flint; and Gini Wozny of Academy of the Redwoods in Eureka, California, all of whom sent their—and their students'—recommendations and suggestions for the new edition. Literally dozens of others have offered suggestions in person or via e-mail over the years, and to each of you, many, many thanks. What you do is far more important than any book.

The changes to this edition are modest but, I hope, significant. Most significant, to my troubled mind, is that I was able to remove or correct two or three howling blunders. No, I won't tell you what they were. It's bad enough I've had to live with them, so I certainly won't broadcast my folly. And there are quite a few fit-and-finish issues I was able to resolve, little matters of grammar and orthography—needless repetitions of words or phrases, an unhappy word choice here or there, the usual niggling matters that make it so hard to read one's own work and that make one think, "Surely I could have done better than *that*." But there are also matters of substance. The chapter on sonnet shape was generally deemed not to fit the rest of the volume. It's about form and structure, really, when the rest of the book is about figurative meaning and the way meaning deflects from one object or action or event at the surface level to something else on another. If, like me, you always liked that chapter, fear not. I'm planning a discussion of poetry, quite possibly in e-book form, so that chapter may reappear in a couple of years. The chapters on illness, heart and otherwise, have been shortened and run together; it felt as if the text was straining for length there.

In their place, I added a chapter on characterization and on why being buddies with protagonists is so bad for the health of second fiddles. There's also a new discussion on public versus private symbols. One of the central precepts of the book is that there is a universal grammar of figurative imagery, that in fact images and symbols gain much of their power from repetition and reinterpretation. Naturally, however, writers are always inventing new metaphors and symbols that sometimes recur throughout their work, or that show up once and are never heard from again. In either case, we need a strategy for dealing with these anomalies, so I try to oblige.

I have also included, as a path toward increased analytical confidence, a meditation on taking charge of one's own reading experience, of understanding the reader's importance in the creation of literary meaning. It's surprising to me how, even as they actively create readings of their own, students and other readers can still maintain an essentially passive view of experiencing texts. It's high time they gave themselves more credit.

Of course, literature is a moving target, and thousands upon thousands of books have been published in the decade or so since the book appeared. While there is no need to overhaul the

references and examples from edition to edition, I have used a few illustrations from more recent publications. There have been some terrific developments in poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction in the last few years, even for those of us who are not enthralled by teenage vampires or Jane Austen's novels beset by monsters and parasitic adaptations. *Mr. Darcy's Second Cousin's Wife Gets a Hangnail*. That sort of thing. Against those trends, however, we can set the appearance of talented newcomers as well as work by established masters in the various genres, writers as diverse and interesting as Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Jess Walter, Colum McCann, Colm Tóibín, Margaret Atwood, Thomas Pynchon, Emma Donoghue, Lloyd Jones, Adam Foulds, Orhan Pamuk, Téa Obreht, and Audrey Niffenegger. And that's just the fiction writers. There have been startling new finds and painful losses. We sometimes hear of the death of literature or of this or that genre (the novel is a favorite whipping boy), but literature doesn't die, just as it doesn't "progress" or "decay." It expands, it increases. When we feel that it has become stagnant or stale, that usually just means we ourselves are not paying sufficient attention. Whether it's the untold story of a famous writer's wife or the racial newcomers to a changing Britain or America or a boy in a lifeboat with a tiger or a tiger in a Balkan village or a man on a wire between the Twin Towers, new tales, as well as old tales with new wrinkles, continue to be told. Makes you want to keep getting up in the morning just to see what happens next.

While we're on the subject of thanksgiving, I would like to express my gratitude to a critically important population. Every time I meet with students, I am inspired. In the course of my work, naturally I deal with college students, both undergraduate and graduate, on a frequent basis, and those interactions have been rich, full, frustrating, uplifting, disappointing, and sometimes downright miraculous. English majors form a large portion of that group, but thanks to the wonders of general education requirements, I have had a great deal of contact with majors in other fields (biologists are a special favorite), and they inevitably bring different skill sets, different attitudes, and different questions to the table. They make me pay attention.

I have also, for the last ten years or so, had frequent contact with high school students, an experience I wish everyone could have—not merely high-school-age young people, but teenagers in their capacity as students. A great deal has been written and said about this group, most of it negative—they don't read, can't write, don't care about the world around them, don't know anything about history or science or politics or, well, you name it. In other words, the same things that have been said about teenagers since I was one. And for a long time before that. I'm pretty sure that one day we will unearth a clay tablet or a papyrus scroll with those exact sentiments expressed. I'm sure some of it is true, that some of it has always been true. But here's what I know, from my dealings in person and via e-mail, about high school students. They are thoughtful, interested and interesting, curious, rebellious, forward-looking, ambitious, and hardworking. When faced with the choice, many opt for the heavier workload and higher demands of AP classes, even though they could slide through something easier. They are readers. Many read—and some read a huge amount—beyond the syllabus. They write. More than a few aspire to write professionally. When told that it is nearly impossible to make a living as a writer and likely to get even harder, they still aspire to be writers. I know this from all the questions I field and the conversations we have together. And as long as there are young

people who are interested in language, in story, in poetry, in writing, there will be literature. It may move into digital realms, it may return to handmade manuscripts, it may take form in graphic novels or on screens, but it will continue to be created. And read.

A couple of years ago, I gave a talk and reading in Grand Rapids. Students from a local district came to the event to get me to sign books. Not the book that had just been published, but the one they had been assigned the previous year in tenth grade. This book. Now, lest you misunderstand, this event was after the school year, so there was no extra credit on offer. They were there because they loved their English class, which really means they loved the teacher who made the class great, and because the book was written by someone who was (a) in Michigan, (b) coming to their town, and (c) not dead. That last part made me a rarity in their school reading. The books were used. Hard used, lots of underlinings and broken spines and dog-eared covers. A couple seemed to have met a bulldozer. Several of the kids said a variation of the following statement, which I get with some frequency, “My heart sank when I saw that a book on reading was assigned, but it turned out to be pretty cool/not so bad/all right.” And they thanked me. *They* thanked me. I nearly wept.

Faced with all that, how could I be anything but grateful?

Introduction



How'd He Do That?

MR. LINDER? THAT MILQUETOAST?

Right. Mr. Lindner the milquetoast. So what did you think the devil would look like? If he were red with a tail, horns, and cloven hooves, any fool could say no.

The class and I are discussing Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), one of the great plays of the American theater. The incredulous questions have come, as they often do, in response to my innocent suggestion that Mr. Lindner is the devil. The Youngers, an African American family in Chicago, have made a down payment on a house in an all-white neighborhood. Mr. Lindner, a meekly apologetic little man, has been dispatched from the neighborhood association, check in hand, to buy out the family's claim on the house. At first, Walter Lee Younger, the protagonist, confidently turns down the offer, believing that the family's money (in the form of a life insurance payment after his father's recent death) is secure. Shortly afterward, however, he discovers that two-thirds of that money has been stolen. All of a sudden the previously insulting offer comes to look like his financial salvation.

Bargains with the devil go back a long way in Western culture. In all the versions of the Faust legend, which is the dominant form of this type of story, the hero is offered something he desperately wants—power or knowledge or a fastball that will beat the Yankees—and all he has to give up is his soul. This pattern holds from the Elizabethan Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* through the nineteenth-century Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* to the twentieth century's Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and *Damn Yankees*. In Hansberry's version, when Mr. Lindner makes his offer, he doesn't demand Walter Lee's soul; in fact, he doesn't even know that he's demanding it. He is, though. Walter Lee can be rescued from the monetary crisis he has brought upon the family; all he has to do is admit that he's not the equal of the white residents who don't want him moving in, that his pride and self-respect, his *identity*, can be bought. If that's not selling your soul, then what is it?

The chief difference between Hansberry's version of the Faustian bargain and others is that Walter Lee ultimately resists the satanic temptation. Previous versions have been either tragic or comic depending on whether the devil successfully collects the soul at the end of the work. Here, the protagonist psychologically makes the deal but then looks at himself and at the true cost and recovers in time to reject the devil's—Mr. Lindner's—offer. The resulting play, for all its tears and anguish, is structurally comic—the tragic downfall threatened but avoided—and Walter Lee grows to heroic

stature in wrestling with his own demons as well as the external one, Lindner, and coming through without falling.

A moment occurs in this exchange between professor and student when each of us adopts a look. My look says, “What, you don’t get it?” Theirs says, “We don’t get it. And we think you’re making it up.” We’re having a communication problem. Basically, we’ve all read the same story, but we haven’t used the same analytical apparatus. If you’ve ever spent time in a literature classroom as a student or a professor, you know this moment. It may seem at times as if the professor is either inventing interpretations out of thin air or else performing parlor tricks, a sort of analytical sleight of hand.

Actually, neither of these is the case; rather, the professor, as the slightly more experienced reader, has acquired over the years the use of a certain “language of reading,” something to which the students are only beginning to be introduced. What I’m talking about is a grammar of literature, a set of conventions and patterns, codes and rules, that we learn to employ in dealing with a piece of writing. Every language has a grammar, a set of rules that govern usage and meaning, and literary language is no different. It’s all more or less arbitrary, of course, just like language itself. Take the word “arbitrary” as an example: it doesn’t mean anything inherently; rather, at some point in our past we agreed that it would mean what it does, and it does so only in English (those sounds would be so much gibberish in Japanese or Finnish). So too with art: we decided to agree that perspective—the set of tricks artists use to provide the illusion of depth—was a good thing and vital to painting. This occurred during the Renaissance in Europe, but when Western and Oriental art encountered each other in the 1700s, Japanese artists and their audiences were serenely untroubled by the lack of perspective in their painting. No one felt it particularly essential to the experience of pictorial art.

Literature has its grammar, too. You knew that, of course. Even if you didn’t know that, you knew from the structure of the preceding paragraph that it was coming. How? The grammar of the essay. You can read, and part of reading is knowing the conventions, recognizing them, and anticipating the results. When someone introduces a topic (the grammar of literature), then digresses to show other topics (language, art, music, dog training—it doesn’t matter what examples; as soon as you see a couple of them, you recognize the pattern), you know he’s coming back with an application of those examples to the main topic (voilà!). And he did. So now we’re all happy, because the convention has been used, observed, noted, anticipated, and fulfilled. What more can you want from a paragraph?

Well, as I was saying before I so rudely digressed, so too in literature. Stories and novels have a very large set of conventions: types of characters, plot rhythms, chapter structures, point-of-view limitations. Poems have a great many of their own, involving form, structure, rhythm, rhyme. Plays, too. And then there are conventions that cross genre lines. Spring is largely universal. So is snow. So is darkness. And sleep. When spring is mentioned in a story, a poem, or a play, a veritable constellation of associations rises in our imaginative sky: youth, promise, new life, young lambs, children skipping . . . on and on. And if we associate even further, that constellation may lead us to more abstract concepts such as rebirth, fertility, renewal.

Okay, let’s say you’re right and there is a set of conventions, a key to reading literature. How

do I get so I can recognize these?

Same way you get to Carnegie Hall. Practice.

When lay readers encounter a fictive text, they focus, as they should, on the story and the characters: who are these people, what are they doing, and what wonderful or terrible things are happening to them? Such readers respond first of all, and sometimes only, to their reading on an emotional level; the work affects them, producing joy or revulsion, laughter or tears, anxiety or elation. In other words, they are emotionally and instinctively involved in the work. This is the response level that virtually every writer who has ever set pen to paper or fingertip to keyboard has hoped for when sending the novel, along with a prayer, to the publisher. When an English professor reads, on the other hand, he will accept the affective response level of the story (we don't mind a good cry when Little Nell dies), but a lot of his attention will be engaged by other elements of the novel. Where did that effect come from? Whom does this character resemble? Where have I seen this situation before? Didn't Dante (or Chaucer, or Merle Haggard) say that? If you learn to ask these questions, to see literary texts through these glasses, you will read and understand literature in a new light, and it'll become more rewarding and fun.

Memory. Symbol. Pattern. These are the three items that, more than any other, separate the professorial reader from the rest of the crowd. English professors, as a class, are cursed with memory. Whenever I read a new work, I spin the mental Rolodex looking for correspondences and corollaries—where have I seen his face, don't I know that theme? I can't *not* do it, although there are plenty of times when that ability is not something I want to exercise. Thirty minutes into Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider* (1985), for instance, I thought, Okay, this is *Shane* (1953), and from there I didn't watch another frame of the movie without seeing Alan Ladd's face. This does not necessarily improve the experience of popular entertainment.

Professors also read, and think, symbolically. Everything is a symbol of something, it seems, until proven otherwise. We ask, Is this a metaphor? Is that an analogy? What does the thing over there signify? The kind of mind that works its way through undergraduate and then graduate classes in literature and criticism has a predisposition to see things as existing in themselves while simultaneously also representing something else. Grendel, the monster in the medieval epic *Beowulf* (eighth century a.d.), is an actual monster, but he can also symbolize (a) the hostility of the universe to human existence (a hostility that medieval Anglo-Saxons would have felt acutely) and (b) a darkness in human nature that only some higher aspect of ourselves (as symbolized by the title hero) can conquer. This predisposition to understand the world in symbolic terms is reinforced, of course, by years of training that encourages and rewards the symbolic imagination.

A related phenomenon in professorial reading is pattern recognition. Most professional students of literature learn to take in the foreground detail while seeing the patterns that the detail reveals. Like the symbolic imagination, this is a function of being able to distance oneself from the story, to look beyond the purely affective level of plot, drama, characters. Experience has proved to them that life

and books fall into similar patterns. Nor is this skill exclusive to English professors. Good mechanics, the kind who used to fix cars before computerized diagnostics, use pattern recognition to diagnose engine troubles: if this and this are happening, then check that. Literature is full of patterns, and your reading experience will be much more rewarding when you can step back from the work, even while you're reading it, and look for those patterns. When small children, very small children, begin to tell you a story, they put in every detail and every word they recall, with no sense that some features are more important than others. As they grow, they begin to display a greater sense of the plots of their stories—what elements actually add to the significance and which do not. So too with readers. Beginning students are often swamped with the mass of detail; the chief experience of reading *Dr. Zhivago* (1957) may be that they can't keep all the names straight. Wily veterans, on the other hand, will absorb those details, or possibly overlook them, to find the patterns, the routines, the archetypes at work in the background.

Let's look at an example of how the symbolic mind, the pattern observer, the powerful memory combine to offer a reading of a nonliterary situation. Let's say that a male subject you are studying exhibits behavior and makes statements that show him to be hostile toward his father but much warmer and more loving toward, even dependent on, his mother. Okay, that's just one guy, so no big deal. But you see it again in another person. And again. And again. You might start to think this is a pattern of behavior, in which case you would say to yourself, "Now where have I seen this before?" Your memory may dredge up something from experience, not your clinical work but a play you read long ago in your youth about a man who murders his father and marries his mother. Even though the current examples have nothing to do with drama, your symbolic imagination will allow you to connect the earlier instance of this pattern with the real-life examples in front of you at the moment. And your talent for nifty naming will come up with something to call this pattern: the Oedipal complex. As I said, not only English professors use these abilities. Sigmund Freud "reads" his patients the way a literary scholar reads texts, bringing the same sort of imaginative interpretation to understanding his cases that we try to bring to interpreting novels and poems and plays. His identification of the Oedipal complex is one of the great moments in the history of human thought, with as much literary as psychoanalytical significance.

What I hope to do, in the coming pages, is what I do in class: give readers a view of what goes on when professional students of literature do their thing, a broad introduction to the codes and patterns that inform our readings. I want my students not only to agree with me that, indeed, Mr. Lindner is an instance of the demonic tempter offering Walter Lee Younger a Faustian bargain; I want them to be able to reach that conclusion without me. I know they can, with practice, patience, and a bit of instruction. And so can you.

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 any more 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 who he is. 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 or may not 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 superhip (for 1965), 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.

Nice to Eat with You: Acts of Communion

PERHAPS YOU'VE HEARD THE ANECDOTE about Sigmund Freud. One day one of his students, or assistants, or some such hanger-on, was teasing him about his fondness for cigars, referring to their obvious phallic nature. The great man responded simply that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." I don't really care if the story is true or not. Actually, I think I prefer that it be apocryphal, since made-up anecdotes have their own kind of truth. Still, it is equally true that just as cigars may be just cigars, so sometimes they are not.

Same with meals in life and, of course, in literature. Sometimes a meal is just a meal, and eating with others is simply eating with others. More often than not, though, it's not. Once or twice a semester at least, I will stop discussion of the story or play under consideration to intone (and I invariably intone in bold): **whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion**. For some reasons, this is often met with a slightly scandalized look, communion having for many readers one and only one meaning. While that meaning is very important, it is not the only one. Nor, for that matter, does Christianity have a lock on the practice. Nearly every religion has some liturgical or social ritual involving the coming together of the faithful to share sustenance. So I have to explain that just as intercourse has meanings other than sexual, or at least did at one time, so not all communions are holy. In fact, literary versions of communion can interpret the word in quite a variety of ways.

Here's the thing to remember about communions of all kinds: in the real world, breaking bread together is an act of sharing and peace, since if you're breaking bread you're not breaking heads. One generally invites one's friends to dinner, unless one is trying to get on the good side of enemies or employers. We're quite particular about those with whom we break bread. We may not, for instance, accept a dinner invitation from someone we don't care for. The act of taking food into our bodies is so personal that we really only want to do it with people we're very comfortable with. As with any convention, this one can be violated. A tribal leader or Mafia don, say, may invite his enemies to lunch and then have them killed. In most areas, however, such behavior is considered very bad form. Generally, eating with another is a way of saying, "I'm with you, I like you, we form a community together." And that is a form of communion.

So too in literature. And in literature, there is another reason: writing a meal scene is so difficult, and so inherently uninteresting, that there really needs to be some compelling reason to include one in the story. And that reason has to do with how characters are getting along. Or not getting along. Come

on, food is food. What can you say about fried chicken that you haven't already heard, said, seen, thought? And eating is eating, with some slight variations of table manners. To put characters, then, in this mundane, overused, fairly boring situation, something more has to be happening than simply beef, forks, and goblets.

So what kind of communion? And what kind of result can it achieve? Any kind you can think of.

Let's consider an example that will never be confused with religious communion, the eating scene in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), which, as one of my students once remarked, "sure doesn't look like church." Specifically, Tom and his lady friend, Mrs. Waters, dine at an inn, chomping, gnawing, sucking on bones, licking fingers; a more leering, slurping, groaning, and, in short, sexual meal has never been consumed. While it doesn't feel particularly *important* thematically and, moreover, it's as far from traditional notions of communion as we can get, it nevertheless constitutes a shared experience. What else is the eating about in that scene except devouring the other's body? Think of it as a consuming desire. Or two of them. And in the case of the movie version of *Tom Jones* starring Albert Finney (1963), there's another reason. Tony Richardson, the director, couldn't openly show sex as, well, sex. There were still taboos in film in the early sixties. So what he does is show something else as sex. And it's probably dirtier than all but two or three sex scenes ever filmed. When those two finish swilling ale and slurping on drumsticks and sucking fingers and generally wallowing and moaning, the *audience* wants to lie back and smoke. But what is this expression of desire except a kind of communion, very private, admittedly, and decidedly not holy? I want to be with you, you want to be with me, let us share the experience. And that's the point: communion doesn't need to be holy. Or even decent.

How about a slightly more sedate example? The late Raymond Carver wrote a story, "Cathedral" (1981), about a guy with real hang-ups: included among the many things the narrator is bigoted against are people with disabilities, minorities, those different from himself, and all parts of his wife's past in which he does not share. Now the only reason to give a character a serious hang-up is to give him the chance to get over it. He may fail, but he gets the chance. It's the Code of the West. When our unnamed narrator reveals to us from the first moment that a blind man, a friend of his wife's, is coming to visit, we're not surprised that he doesn't like the prospect at all. We know immediately that our man has to overcome disliking everyone who is different. And by the end he does, when he and the blind man sit together to draw a cathedral so the blind man can get a sense of what one looks like. To do that, they have to touch, hold hands even, and there's no way the narrator would have been able to do that at the start of the story. Carver's problem, then, is how to get from the nasty, prejudiced, narrow-minded person of the opening page to the point where he can actually have a blind man's hand on his own at the ending. The answer is food.

Every coach I ever had would say, when we faced a superior opposing team, that they put on their pants one leg at a time, just like everybody else. What those coaches could have said, in all accuracy, is that those supermen shovel in the pasta just like the rest of us. Or in Carver's story, cube steak. When the narrator watches the blind man eating—competent, busy, hungry, and, well, normal—he begins to gain a new respect for him. The three of them, husband, wife, and visitor, ravenously consume the cube steak, potatoes, and vegetables, and in the course of that experience our narrator

finds his antipathy toward the blind man beginning to break down. He discovers he has something in *common* with this stranger—eating as a fundamental element of life—that there is a bond between them.

What about the dope they smoke afterward?

Passing a joint doesn't quite resemble the wafer and the chalice, does it? But thinking symbolically, where's the difference, really? Please note, I am not suggesting that illicit drugs are required to break down social barriers. On the other hand, here is a substance they take into their bodies in a shared, almost ritualistic experience. Once again, the act says, "I'm with you, I share this moment with you, I feel a bond of community with you." It may be a moment of even greater trust. In any case, the alcohol at supper and the marijuana after combine to relax the narrator so he can receive the full force of his insight, so he can share in the drawing of a cathedral (which, incidentally, is a place of communion).

What about when they don't? What if dinner turns ugly or doesn't happen at all?

A different outcome, but the same logic, I think. If a well-run meal or snack portends good things for community and understanding, then the failed meal stands as a bad sign. It happens all the time on television shows. Two people are at dinner and a third comes up, quite unwished for, and one or more of the first two refuse to eat. They place their napkins on their plates, or say something about losing their appetite, or simply get up and walk away. Immediately we know what they think about the interloper. Think of all those movies where a soldier shares his C rations with a comrade, or a boy his sandwich with a stray dog; from the overwhelming message of loyalty, kinship, and generosity, you get a sense of how strong a value we place on the comradeship of the table. What if we see two people having dinner, then, but one of them is plotting, or bringing about the demise of the other? In that case, our revulsion at the act of murder is reinforced by our sense that a very important propriety, namely that one should not do evil to one's dinner companions, is being violated.

Or consider Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982). The mother tries and tries to have a family dinner, and every time she fails. Someone can't make it, someone gets called away, some minor disaster befalls the table. Not until her death can her children assemble around a table at the restaurant and achieve dinner; at that point, of course, the body and blood they symbolically share are hers. Her life—and her death—become part of their common experience.

For the full effect of dining together, consider James Joyce's story "The Dead" (1914). This wonderful story is centered around a dinner party on the Feast of the Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas. All kinds of disparate drives and desires enact themselves during the dancing and dinner, and hostilities and alliances are revealed. The main character, Gabriel Conroy, must learn that he is not superior to everyone else; during the course of the evening he receives a series of small shocks to his ego that collectively demonstrate that he is very much part of the more general social fabric. The table and dishes of food themselves are lavishly described as Joyce lures us into the atmosphere:

A fat brown goose lay at one end of the table and at the other end, on a bed of creased

paper strewn with sprigs of parsley, lay a great ham, stripped of its outer skin and peppered over with crust crumbs, a neat paper frill round its shin and beside this was a round of spiced beef. Between these rival ends ran parallel lines of side-dishes: two little minsters of jelly, red and yellow; a shallow dish full of blocks of blancmange and red jam, a large green leaf-shaped dish with a stalk-shaped handle, on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds, a companion dish on which lay a solid rectangle of Smyrna figs, a dish of custard topped with grated nutmeg, a small bowl full of chocolates and sweets wrapped in gold and silver papers and a glass vase in which stood some tall celery stalks. In the centre of the table there stood, as sentries to a fruit-stand which upheld a pyramid of oranges and American apples, two squat old-fashioned decanters of cut glass, one containing port and the other dark sherry. On the closed square piano a pudding in a huge yellow dish lay in waiting and behind it were three squads of bottles of stout and ale and minerals, drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms, the first two black, with brown and red labels, the third and smallest squad white, with transverse green sashes.

No writer ever took such care about food and drink, so marshaled his forces to create a military effect of armies drawn up as if for battle: ranks, files, “rival ends,” sentries, squads, sashes. Such a paragraph would not be created without having some purpose, some ulterior motive. Now, Joyce being Joyce, he has about five different purposes, one not being enough for genius. His main goal, though, is to draw us into that moment, to pull our chairs up to that table so that we are utterly convinced of the reality of the meal. At the same time, he wants to convey the sense of tension and conflict that has been running through the evening—there are a host of us-against-them and you-against-me moments earlier and even during the meal—and this tension will stand at odds with the sharing of this sumptuous and, given the holiday, unifying meal. He does this for a very simple, very profound reason: we need to be part of that communion. It would be easy for us simply to laugh at Freddy Malins, the resident drunkard, and his dotty mother, to shrug off the table talk about operas and singers we’ve never heard of, merely to snicker at the flirtations among the younger people, to discount the tension Gabriel feels over the speech of gratitude he’s obliged to make at meal’s end. But we can’t maintain our distance because the elaborate setting of this scene makes us feel as if we’re seated at that table. So we notice, a little before Gabriel does, since he’s lost in his own reality, that we’re all in this together, that in fact we share something.

The thing we share is our death. Everyone in that room, from old and frail Aunt Julia to the youngest music student, will die. Not tonight, but someday. Once you recognize that fact (and we’ve been given a head start by the title, whereas Gabriel doesn’t know his evening has a title), it’s smooth sledding. Next to our mortality, which comes to great and small equally, all the differences in our lives are mere surface details. When the snow comes at the end of the story, in a beautiful and moving passage, it covers, equally, “all the living and the dead.” Of course it does, we think, the snow is just like death. We’re already prepared, having shared in the communion meal Joyce has laid out for us, a communion not of death, but of what comes before. Of life.

Nice to Eat You: Acts of Vampires

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A PREPOSITION MAKES ! If you take the “with” out of “Nice to eat with you,” it begins to mean something quite different. Less wholesome. More creepy. It just goes to show that not all eating that happens in literature is friendly. Not only that, it doesn’t even always look like eating. Beyond here there be monsters.

Vampires in literature, you say. Big deal. I’ve read *Dracula*. And Anne Rice.

Good for you. Everyone deserves a good scare. But actual vampires are only the beginning; not only that, they’re not even necessarily the most alarming type. After all, you can at least recognize them. Let’s start with Dracula himself, and we’ll eventually see why this is true. You know how in all those Dracula movies, or almost all, the count always has this weird attractiveness to him? Sometimes he’s downright sexy. Always, he’s alluring, dangerous, mysterious, and he tends to focus on beautiful, unmarried (which in the social vision of nineteenth-century England meant virginal) women. And when he gets them, he grows younger, more alive (if we can say this of the undead), more virile even. Meanwhile, his victims become like him and begin to seek out their own victims. Van Helsing, the count’s ultimate nemesis, and his lot, then, are really protecting young people, and especially young women, from this menace when they hunt him down. Most of this, in one form or another, can be found in Bram Stoker’s novel (1897), although it gets more hysterical in the movie versions. Now let’s think about this for a moment. A nasty old man, attractive but evil, violates young women, leaves his mark on them, steals their innocence—and coincidentally their “usefulness” (if you think “marriageability,” you’ll be about right) to young men—and leaves them helpless followers in his sin. I think we’d be reasonable to conclude that the whole Count Dracula saga has an agenda to it beyond merely scaring us out of our wits, although scaring readers out of their wits is a noble enterprise and one that Stoker’s novel accomplishes very nicely. In fact, we might conclude it has something to do with sex.

Well, of course it has to do with sex. Evil has had to do with sex since the serpent seduced Eve. What was the upshot there? Body shame and unwholesome lust, seduction, temptation, danger, among other ills.

So vampirism isn’t about vampires?

Oh, it is. It is. But it’s also about things other than literal vampirism: selfishness, exploitation, a refusal to respect the autonomy of other people, just for starters. We’ll return to this list a bit later on.

This principle also applies to other scary favorites, such as ghosts and doppelgängers (ghost doubles or evil twins). We can take it almost as an act of faith that ghosts are about something besides themselves. That may not be true in naive ghost stories, but most literary ghosts—the kind that occur in stories of lasting interest—have to do with things beyond themselves. Think of the ghost of Hamlet’s father when he takes to appearing on the castle ramparts at midnight. He’s not there simply to haunt his son; he’s there to point out something drastically wrong in Denmark’s royal household. Or consider Marley’s ghost in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), who is really a walking, clanking, moaning lesson in ethics for Scrooge. In fact, Dickens’s ghosts are always up to something besides scaring the audience. Or take Dr. Jekyll’s other half. The hideous Edward Hyde exists to demonstrate to readers that even a respectable man has a dark side; like many Victorians, Robert Louis Stevenson believed in the dual nature of humans, and in more than one work he finds ways of showing that duality quite literally. In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) he has Dr. J. drink a potion and become his evil half, while in his now largely ignored short novel *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), he uses twins locked in fatal conflict to convey the same sense. You’ll notice, by the way, that many of these examples come from Victorian writers: Stevenson, Dickens, Stoker, J. S. Le Fanu, Henry James. Why? Because there was so much the Victorians couldn’t write about directly, chiefly sex and sexuality, they found ways of transforming those taboo subjects and issues into other forms. The Victorians were masters of sublimation. But even today, when there are no limits on subject matter or treatment, writers still use ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and all manner of scary things to symbolize various aspects of our more common reality.

The last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade (and counting) of the twenty-first could be dubbed the teen vampire era. The phenomenon can likely be traced to Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and its successors in the *Vampire Chronicles* series (1976–2003). For a number of years Rice was a one-woman industry, but slowly other names came forward. Vampires even made it to weekly television with the unlikely hit *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which debuted in 1997. Things really took off with Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005) and the series of teen-and-vampire tales it spawned. Meyer’s great innovation is to center the stories on a nonvampire teenage girl and young (these things are relative, I guess) vampire who loves her but must fight his bloodlust. Much has been made of the element of the bloodsucking (and therefore sexual) restraint of the novels, notable in a genre where traditionally the main figures have had no self-control at all. What turned out to be unrestrained was the reading appetite of teenagers; Meyer was the top-selling American author in 2008 and 2009. Critics generally cringed, but, clearly, adolescents don’t read book reviews.

Try this for a dictum: **ghosts and vampires are never only about ghosts and vampires.**

Here’s where it gets a little tricky, though: the ghosts and vampires don’t always have to appear in visible forms. Sometimes the really scary bloodsuckers are entirely human. Let’s look at another Victorian with experience in ghost and nonghost genres, Henry James. James is known, of course, as a master, perhaps *the* master, of psychological realism; if you want massive novels with sentences as long and convoluted as the Missouri River, James is your man. At the same time, though, he has some shorter works that feature ghosts and demonic possession, and those are fun in their own way, as well as a good deal more accessible. His novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) is about a governess who

tries, without success, to protect the two children in her care from a particularly nasty ghost who seeks to take possession of them. Either that or it's about an insane governess who fantasizes that a ghost is taking over the children in her care, and in her delusion literally smothers them with protectiveness. Or just possibly it's about an insane governess who is dealing with a particularly nasty ghost who tries to take possession of her wards. Or possibly . . . well, let's just say that the plot calculus is tricky and that much depends on the perspective of the reader. So we have a story in which a ghost features prominently even if we're never sure whether he's really there or not, in which the psychological state of the governess matters greatly, and in which the life of a child, a little boy, is consumed. Between the two of them, the governess and the "specter" destroy him. One might say that the story is about fatherly neglect (the stand-in for the father simply abandons the children to the governess's care) and smothering maternal concern. Those two thematic elements are encoded into the plot of the novella. The particulars of the encoding are carried by the details of the ghost story. It just so happens that James has another famous story, "Daisy Miller" (1878), in which there are no ghosts, no demonic possession, and nothing more mysterious than a midnight trip to the Colosseum in Rome. Daisy is a young American woman who does as she pleases, thus upsetting the rigid social customs of the European society she desperately wants to approve of her. Winterbourne, the man whose attention she desires, while both attracted to and repulsed by her, ultimately proves too fearful of the disapproval of his established expatriate American community to pursue her further. After numerous misadventures, Daisy dies, ostensibly by contracting malaria on her midnight jaunt. But you know what really kills her? Vampires.

No, really. Vampires. I know I told you there weren't any supernatural forces at work here. But you don't need fangs and a cape to be a vampire. The essentials of the vampire story, as we discussed earlier: an older figure representing corrupt, outworn values; a young, preferably virginal female; a stripping away of her youth, energy, virtue; a continuance of the life force of the old male; the death or destruction of the young woman. Okay, let's see now. *Winterbourne* and *Daisy* carry associations of winter—death, cold—and spring—life, flowers, renewal—that ultimately come into conflict (we'll talk about seasonal implications in a later chapter), with winter's frost destroying the delicate young flower. He is considerably older than she, closely associated with the stifling Euro-Anglo-American society. She is fresh and innocent—and here is James's brilliance—so innocent as to appear to be a wanton. He and his aunt and her circle watch Daisy and disapprove, but because of a hunger to disapprove of someone, they never cut her loose entirely. They play with her yearning to become one of them, taxing her energies until she begins to wane. Winterbourne mixes voyeurism, vicarious thrills, and stiff-necked disapproval, all of which culminate when he finds her with a (male) friend at the Colosseum and chooses to ignore her. Daisy says of his behavior, "He cuts me dead!" That should be clear enough for anyone. His, and his clique's, consuming of Daisy is complete; having used up everything that is fresh and vital in her, he leaves her to waste away. Even then she asks after him. But having destroyed and consumed her, he moves on, not sufficiently touched, it seems to me, by the pathetic spectacle he has caused.

So how does all this tie in with vampires? Is James a believer in ghosts and spooks? Does "Daisy Miller" mean he thinks we're all vampires? Probably not. I believe what happens here and in other

stories and novels (*The Sacred Fount* [1901] comes to mind) is that he deems the figure of the consuming spirit or vampiric personality a useful narrative vehicle. We find this figure appearing in different guises, even under nearly opposite circumstances, from one story to another. On the one hand, in *The Turn of the Screw*, he uses the literal vampire or the possessing spook to examine a certain sort of psychosocial imbalance. These days we'd give it a label, a dysfunctional something or other, but James probably only saw it as a problem in our approach to child rearing or a psychic neediness in young women whom society disregards and discards. On the other hand, in "Daisy Miller," he employs the figure of the vampire as an emblem of the way society—polite, ostensibly normal society—battens on and consumes its victims.

Nor is James the only one. The nineteenth century was filled with writers showing the thin line between the ordinary and the monstrous. Edgar Allan Poe. J. S. Le Fanu, whose ghost stories made him the Stephen King of his day. Thomas Hardy, whose poor heroine in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) provides table fare for the disparate hungers of the men in her life. Or virtually any novel of the naturalistic movement of the late nineteenth century, where the law of the jungle and survival of the fittest reign. Of course, the twentieth century also provided plenty of instances of social vampirism and cannibalism. Franz Kafka, a latter-day Poe, uses the dynamic in stories like "The Metamorphosis" (1915) and "A Hunger Artist" (1924), where, in a nifty reversal of the traditional vampire narrative, crowds of onlookers watch as the artist's fasting consumes him. Gabriel García Márquez's heroine Innocent Eréndira, in the tale bearing her name (1972), is exploited and put out to prostitution by her heartless grandmother. D. H. Lawrence gave us any number of short stories where characters devour and destroy one another in life-and-death contests of will, novellas like "The Fox" (1923) and even novels like *Women in Love* (1920), in which Gudrun Brangwen and Gerald Crich, although ostensibly in love with one another, each realize that only one of them can survive and so engage in mutually destructive behavior. Iris Murdoch—pick a novel, any novel. Not for nothing did she call one of her books *A Severed Head* (1961), although *The Unicorn* (1963) would work splendidly here, with its wealth of faux gothic creepiness. There are works, of course, where the ghost or vampire is merely a gothic cheap thrill without any particular thematic or symbolic significance, but such works tend to be short-term commodities without much staying power in readers' minds or the public arena. We're haunted only while we're reading. In those works that continue to haunt us, however, the figure of the cannibal, the vampire, the succubus, the spook announces itself again and again where someone grows in strength by weakening someone else.

That's what this figure really comes down to, whether in Elizabethan, Victorian, or more modern incarnations: exploitation in its many forms. Using other people to get what we want. Denying someone else's right to live in the face of our overwhelming demands. Placing our desires, particularly our uglier ones, above the needs of another. That's pretty much what the vampire does, after all. He wakes up in the morning—actually the evening, now that I think about it—and says something like, "In order to remain undead, I must steal the life force of someone whose fate matters less to me than my own." I've always supposed that Wall Street traders utter essentially the same sentence. My guess is that as long as people act toward their fellows in exploitative and selfish ways, the vampire will be with us.