How to Read Literature Like a Professor

A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines

THOMAS C. FOSTER

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It's All Political

Nowadays we think of *A Christmas Carol* as a private morality play and a nice Christmas tale to boot, but in 1843 Dickens was actually attacking a widely held political belief, hiding his criticism in the story of a wretched miser who is saved by spiritual visitations. There was a theory afoot at that time, left over from the Puritanism of the previous two centuries and promulgated most forcefully by the British social thinker Thomas Malthus, that in helping the poor or in increasing food production to feed more people we would in fact encourage an increase in the number of the impoverished, who would, among other things, simply procreate faster to take advantage of all that surplus gruel. Dickens caricatures this Malthusian

thinking in Scrooge's insistence that he wants nothing to do with the destitute and that if they would rather starve than live in the poorhouse or in debtors' prison, then, by golly, "they had best hurry up and do it and decrease the excess population." Scrooge actually says that. What a guy!

Even if you've never heard of Thomas Malthus, when you read *A Christmas Carol* or see one of the umpteen versions of it onscreen, you can tell something is going on beyond the story. If nasty old Scrooge were one of a kind, just a single selfish, embittered man, if he were the only man in England who needed to learn this lesson, the tale would not resonate with us as it does. It's not generally in the way of parables, which *Carol* is, to treat anomalies. No, Dickens picks Scrooge not because he's unique but because he's representative, because there's something of Scrooge in us and in society. We can have no doubt that the story is meant to change us and through us to change society. Some of Scrooge's pronouncements early in the story are almost verbatim from Malthus or his Victorian descendants. Dickens is a social critic, but he's a sneaky one, remaining so consistently entertaining that we may not notice that a major point of his work is to critique social shortcomings. At the same time, you have to be almost willfully blind to read that story and see only Marley's ghost, three spirits, and Tiny Tim, to fail to notice that the tale attacks one way of thinking about our social responsibility and valorizes another.

Concerning politics in literary texts, here's what I think:

I hate "political" writing—novels, plays, poems. They don't travel well, don't age well, and generally aren't much good in their own time and place, however sincere they may be. I speak here of literature whose primary intent is to influence the body politic—for instance, those works of socialist realism (one of the great misnomers of all time) of the Soviet era in which the plucky hero figures out a way to increase production and

thereby meet the goals of the five-year plan on the collective farm—what I once heard the great Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes characterize as the love affair between a boy, and girl, and a tractor. Overtly political writing can be one-dimensional, simplistic, reductionist, preachy, dull.

The political writing I personally dislike is programmatic, pushing a single cause or concern or party position, or it's tied into a highly topical situation that doesn't transfer well out of its own specific time and place. Ezra Pound's politics, for instance, a mixture of anti-Semitism and authoritarianism that made Italian fascism congenial to him, are repugnant to any thinking person, and to the extent that they find expression in his poetry, they destroy everything they touch. But even if they weren't so hideous, their use in his verse tends to be clumsy and heavy-handed, too obviously programmatic. When he starts droning on in the *Cantos* about the evils brought about by "Usura," for instance, eyes glaze over and minds wander. We in the age of credit cards are just not that hopped up about supposed ills of the culture of lending and borrowing between the world wars. The same thing happens with a lot of those left-wing plays of the 1930s; they may have been fine as rallying cries in their day, but as works of lasting interest, they work for lots of us only as cultural anthropology.

I love "political" writing. Writing that engages the realities of its world—that thinks about human problems, including those in the social and political realm, that addresses the rights of persons and the wrongs of those in power—can be not only interesting but hugely compelling. In this category we get the grimy London of Dickens's late work, the fabulous postmodern novels of Gabriel García Márquez and Toni Morrison, the plays of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, Seamus Heaney's poetry of the Northern Irish Troubles, and the feminist struggles with the poetic tradition of Eavan Boland and Adrienne Rich and Audre Lord.

Nearly all writing is political on some level. D. H. Lawrence's work is profoundly political even when it doesn't look like it, even when he is less overt than in *Women in Love,* where he has a character say of a robin that it looks like a "little Lloyd-George of the air." I'm not quite sure how a robin resembles the then prime minister, but it's clear Lawrence didn't approve, and the character clearly shares her creator's politics. I also know that's not the real political element in that novel. No, his real political contribution is in setting a radical individualism in conflict with established institutions. Lawrence's people keep refusing to behave, to submit to convention, to act in a way that conforms to expectations, even expectations of other nonconformists. In *Women in Love* he pillories the bohemianism of the artsy sets of his day, whether the Bloomsbury circle or the group that Lady Ottoline Morrell, the self-consciously bohemian patroness of the arts, gathered around herself. Their avant-gardism merely constitutes another kind of conventionality for him, a way of being "chic" or "in," whereas his heroic ideal goes its solitary way even though it outrage friend as well as foe and confound lover as well as stranger. That radical individualism is politically charged in Lawrence, just as it is in Walt Whitman (whom he admired greatly) and Ralph Waldo Emerson in their very different ways. Indeed, you could argue that the role of the individual is always politically charged, that matters of autonomy and free will and self-determination always drag in the larger society, if only tangentially. Someone like Thomas Pynchon (although, as Chapter 1 suggests, it's not clear there is anyone *like* Pynchon except Pynchon), who seems on one level to be hiding from the body politic, is profoundly political in his concern over the individual's relationship to "America."

Or here's someone whose stories you may not have thought

of as inevitably political: Edgar Allan Poe. His tales "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) and "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) both deal with a stratum of society most of us only get to read about: the nobility. In the former, the prince, in the midst of a terrible plague, gathers his friends and associates for a party, at which he locks them away from the afflicted (and poor) society outside the walls of the palace. The titular scourge finds them anyway and by morning they're all dead. In the latter, the host, Roderick Usher, and his sister Madeline are the last survivors of an old aristocratic family. Living in a decaying mansion surrounded by a forbidding landscape, they are themselves decaying. She has a progressive-wasting disease, while he is prematurely aged and decrepit, his hair nearly gone and his nerves shot. He behaves, moreover, like a madman, and there is more than a slight hint at incestuous closeness between brother and sister. In both of these tales Poe offers criticism of the European class system, which privileges the unworthy and the unhealthy, where the entire atmosphere is corrupt and decaying, where the results are madness and death. The landscape of "Usher" resembles no part of America Poe ever saw. Even the appellation "House of Usher" suggests European monarchy and aristocracy—the Houses of Bourbon or Hanover, for instance—rather than an American place or family. Roderick has buried his sister alive, possibly knowing she wasn't dead, certainly becoming aware of it as time in the story passes. Now why would he do a thing like that? When she escapes, having clawed her way out, she falls into his arms and they collapse to the floor, both dead. The narrator narrowly escapes before the house itself pulls apart and crashes into the "black and lurid tarn" at its base. If all of that doesn't suggest an unhealthy, unholy, and distinctly un-American relationship between brother and sister, then one of us is missing something.

Okay, you're right, that may be going too far. Still, he implicitly believes that what Europe represents is degraded and decaying (and these are not the only examples). Moreover, Poe suggests strongly that this is the inevitable and even just outcome of a corrupt social organization. And that, dear friends, is political.

Ready for another example? How about "Rip Van Winkle"? I'm sure you have doubts. Tell me what you remember.

Okay. Rip Van Winkle, who's lazy and not a great provider for his family, goes hunting. Actually, he's really just getting away from his nagging wife. He meets some odd characters playing ninepins, with whom he drinks a little bit and falls asleep. When he wakes up his dog is gone and his gun has rusted and fallen apart. He has white hair and a beard a mile long and very stiff joints. He makes his way back to town and finds out he's been asleep for twenty years and his wife is dead and everything has changed, including the signs at the hotel. And that's pretty much the story.

Pretty much. Nothing very political in that, right? Except that we need to consider two questions:

1) What does it mean that Dame Van Winkle is dead?

2) How does that connect with the change of Georges on the hotel sign?

During the twenty years he's been away, the American Revolution has happened, the picture of British King George has been transformed by the proprietors into that of our George (Washington), although with the same face. There's a liberty cap atop the flagpole, which carries a new flag, and the tyrant (Dame Van Winkle) is dead. Rip nearly gets attacked when he says he's loyal to the old George, but once that gets straightened out, he finds out he's free and he likes it.

So everything's better?

Definitely not. Irving is writing in 1819 and is observant enough to know that liberty brought with it some problems. Things have become a little run-down. The hotel has some broken windows and needs a face-lift, and the town and its people are generally a little more ragged than they were before the war. But there's a kind of energy that drives them, a certainty that their lives are their own and nobody by golly is going to boss them around. They speak their minds and do what they want. And tyranny and absolute rule are dead. In other words, this slightly scruffy assemblage of people is on the way to defining for itself what it means to be American and free. So not everything is better, but the things that really matter—freedom, self-determination—they *are* better.

How can I be so sure that Irving means to imply all that? Part of his protective coloration is as this rather naive, rustic spinner of tales, but that's not him; it's pure disguise. Washington Irving was a man of great sophistication who studied law, was admitted to the bar, served in Spain as a diplomat, wrote histories as well as fiction, traveled widely. Does that sound like a man who didn't understand what his narrative signified? His ostensible narrator, Diedrich Knickerbocker, is a jolly companion who spins out these tales of his Dutch ancestors without seeing all the implications. Irving saw them, though. He knew, moreover, that with Rip and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1819) he was creating an American consciousness in literature, a thing that hadn't existed prior to his time. Like Poe, he sets himself up in opposition to European literary tradition, offering instead a body of work that could only come from an American and that features and celebrates freedom from its former colonial power.

So is every literary work political?

I can't go that far. Some of my more political colleagues may tell you yes, that every work is either part of the social

problem or part of the solution (they'll give it to you with rather more subtlety than that, but that's the gist). I do think, though, that most works must engage with their own specific period in ways that can be called political. Let's say this: writers tend to be men and women who are interested in the world around them. That world contains many things, and on the level of society, part of what it contains is the political reality of the time—power structures, relations among classes, issues of justice and rights, interactions between the sexes and among various racial and ethnic constituencies. That's why political and social considerations often find their way onto the page in some guise, even when the result doesn't look terribly "political."

An example. When Sophocles is a very old man, he finally writes the middle third of his Theban trilogy of plays, *Oedipus at Colonus* (406 B.C.), in which the old and frail Oedipus arrives at Colonus and receives the protection of the Athenian king, Theseus. Theseus is everything we might want in a ruler: strong, wise, gentle, tough when necessary, determined, cool-headed, compassionate, loyal, honest. Theseus protects Oedipus from potential harm and guides him to the sacred spot where the old man is fated to die. Is that political? I think so. You see, Sophocles is writing this not only at the end of his life but at the end of the fifth century B.C., which is to say at the end of the period of Athenian greatness. The city-state is threatened from the outside by Spartan aggression and from the inside by leaders who, whatever their virtues, sure aren't Theseus. What he's saying is, in effect, we could really use a leader like Theseus again; maybe *he* could get us out of this mess and keep Athens from total ruin. Then outsiders (Creon in the play, the Spartans in reality) wouldn't be trying to overrun us. Then we'd still be strong and just and wise. Does Sophocles actually say any of these things? No, of course not. He's old, not senile. You say these things openly, they give you hemlock or something. He

doesn't have to say them, though; everyone who sees the play can draw his own conclusions: look at Theseus, look at whatever leader you have near to hand, look at Theseus again—hmmm (or words to that effect). See? Political.

All this matters. Knowing a little something about the social and political milieu out of which a writer creates can only help us understand her work, not because that milieu controls her thinking but because that is the world she engages when she sits down to write. When Virginia Woolf writes about women of her time only being permitted a certain range of activities, we do her and ourselves a great disservice by not seeing the social criticism involved. For instance, in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Lady Bruton invites Richard Dalloway, a member of Parliament, and Hugh Whitbread, who has a position at court, to luncheon. Her purpose is to dictate to them material she wants to see introduced into legislation and sent as a letter to the *Times,* all the while protesting that she's merely a woman who doesn't understand these matters as a man would. What Woolf shows us is a very capable, if not entirely lovable, woman using the fairly limited Richard and the completely doltish Hugh to make her point in a society which would not take the point seriously if it was seen as coming directly from her. In the years after the Great War, the scene reminds us, ideas were judged on the basis of the class and gender of the person putting them forward. Woolf handles all of this so subtly that we may not think of it as political, but it is.

It always—or almost always—is.