

How to Read Literature Like a Professor



A Lively and Entertaining Guide
to Reading Between the Lines

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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 himself. 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 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.

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It does look a bit weird at first glance, experimental and super-hip, 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.

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.

Edgar Allan Poe, superpatriot?

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.

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Interlude



One Story

WE'VE SPENT QUITE A WHILE thinking about specific tasks involved in the activity of reading, such as considering how this means x , that signifies y , and so on. Now of course I believe "this" and "that" and x and y matter, and on some level so do you, else we would not be at this point in our discussion. But there's a greater truth, at least as I see it, behind all these specific interpretive activities, a truth that informs and drives the creation of novels and plays and stories and poems and essays and memoirs even when (as is usually the case) writers aren't aware of it. I've mentioned it before and have employed it throughout, so it's no very great secret. Moreover, it's not my personal invention or discovery, so I'm not looking for credit here, but it needs saying again, so here it is: **there's only one story.**

One story. Everywhere. Always. Wherever anyone puts pen to paper or hands to keyboard or fingers to lute string or quill to papyrus. They all take from and in return give to the same story, ever since Snorgg got back to the cave and told Ongk about the mastodon that got away. Norse sagas, Samoan creation stories, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Tale of Genji*, *Hamlet*, last year's graduation speech, last week's Dave Barry column, *On the Road* and *Road to Rio* and "The Road Not Taken." One story.

What's it about?

That's probably the best question you'll ever ask, and I apologize for responding with a really lame answer: I don't know. It's not about anything. It's about everything. It's not about something the way an elegy is *about* the death of a young friend, for instance, or the way *The Maltese Falcon* is about solving the mystery of the fat man and the black bird. It's about everything that anyone wants to write about. I suppose what the one story, the ur-story, is about is ourselves, about what it means to be human. I mean, what else is there? When Stephen Hawking writes *A Brief History of Time*, what is he doing except telling us what home is like, describing the place where we live? You see, being human takes in just about everything, since we want to know about space and time and this world and the next, questions I'm pretty sure none of my English setters have ever really pondered. Mostly, though, we're interested in ourselves in space or time, in the world. So what our poets and storytellers do for us—drag a rock up to the fire, have a seat, listen to this one—is explain us-and-the-world, or us-in-the-world.

Do writers know this? Do they think about it?

- a. *Good heavens, no.*
- b. *Absolutely, yes.*
- c. *Let me try again.*

On one level, everyone who writes anything knows that pure originality is impossible. Everywhere you look, the ground is already camped on. So you sigh and pitch your tent where you can, knowing someone else has been there before. Think of it this way: can you use a word no one else has ever used? Only if you're Shakespeare or Joyce and coin words, but even they mostly use the same ones as the rest of us. Can you put together a combination of words that is absolutely unique? Maybe, occasionally, but you can't be sure. So too with stories. John Barth discusses an Egyptian papyrus complaining that all the stories have been told and that therefore nothing remains for the contemporary writer but to retell them. That papyrus describing the postmodern condition is forty-five hundred years old. This is not a terrible thing, though. Writers notice all the time that their characters resemble somebody—Persephone, Pip, Long John Silver, La Belle Dame sans Merci—and they go with it. What happens if the writer is good is usually not that the work seems derivative or trivial but just the opposite: the work actually acquires depth and resonance from the echoes and chimes it sets up with prior texts, weight from the accumulated use of certain basic patterns and tendencies. Moreover, works are actually more comforting because we recognize elements in them from our prior reading. I suspect that a wholly original work, one that owed nothing to previous writing, would so lack familiarity as to be quite unnerving to readers. So that's one answer.

But here's another. Writers also have to practice a kind of amnesia when they sit down or (like Thomas Wolfe, who was very tall and wrote on top of the refrigerator—really) stand up to write. The downside of the weight of millennia of accumulated practice of any activity is that it's very . . . heavy. I once psyched out a teammate in an over-thirty men's basketball league quite by accident. We were practicing free throws

before a game when something occurred to me, and like an idiot I couldn't keep it to myself. "Lee, have you ever considered," I asked, "how many things can go wrong when you shoot a free throw?" He literally stopped in mid-shot to offer his view. "Damn you," he said. "Now I won't make one all night." He was right. Had I known I could have that kind of effect, I'd have warmed up with the other team. Now consider Lee's problem if he had to consider not merely all the biomechanics of shooting a basketball but the whole history of free-throw shooting. You know, not too much like Lenny Wilkins, a bit of Dave Bing, some of Rick Barry before he switched to the two-handed underhand shot, plenty of Larry Bird (but don't plagiarize him outright), none at all of Wilt Chamberlain. What are the chances any of us would ever make a free throw? And basketball only dates back about one century. Now consider trying to write a lyric poem, with everyone from Sappho to Tennyson to Frost to Plath to Verlaine to Li Po looking over your shoulder. That's a lot of hot breath on the back of your neck. So, amnesia. When the writer gets to work, she has to shut out the voices and write what she writes, say what she has to say. What the unremembering trick does is clear out this history from the front of her mind so her own poem can come in. While she may never, or very rarely, think at all about these matters consciously, she's been reading poetry since she was six, when Aunt Tillie gave her Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*, burns through a couple of volumes of poetry a week, has read most of Wallace Stevens six or seven times. In other words, the history of poetry never leaves her. It's always present, a gigantic subconscious database of poetry (and fiction, since she's read that, too).

You know by now I like to keep things fairly simple. I'm no fan of the latest French theory or of jargon of any stripe, but sometimes we really can't do without it. What I'm talking about here involves a couple of concepts we need to consider.

The first, as I mentioned a few chapters back, is *intertextuality*. This highly ungainly word denoting a most useful notion comes to us from the great Russian formalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who limits it pretty much to fiction, but I think I'll follow the example of T. S. Eliot, who, being a poet, saw that it operates throughout the realms of literature. The basic premise of intertextuality is really pretty simple: everything's connected. In other words, anything you write is connected to other written things. Sometimes writers are more up front about that than others, openly showing, as John Fowles does in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, that he's drawing on the tradition of the Victorian novel, and on the works of Thomas Hardy and Henry James in particular. At one point Fowles writes an especially Jamesian sentence, full of embedded clauses, false starts, delayed effects, until, having thoroughly and delightfully aped the master, he declares, "But I must not ape the master." We get the joke, and the punch line makes the parody better than if he'd pretended he was up to nothing very special, since it says with a wink that we're in on the whole thing, that we knew all along.

Other writers pretend their work is completely their own, untutored, immediate, unaffected. Mark Twain claimed never to have read a book, yet his personal library ran to something over three thousand volumes. You can't write *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) without being familiar with Arthurian romances. Jack Kerouac presents himself as a free spirit performing automatic writing, but there's a lot of evidence that this Ivy Leaguer (Columbia) did a lot of revising and polishing—and reading of quest tales—before his manuscript of *On the Road* (1957) got typed on one long roll of paper. In each case, their work interacts with other works. And those works with others. The result is a sort of World Wide Web of writing. Your novel may contain echoes or refutations of novels or poems you've never read.

Think of intertextuality in terms of movie westerns. You're writing your first western; good for you. What's it about? A big showdown? *High Noon*. A gunslinger who retires? *Shane*. A lonely outpost during an uprising? *Fort Apache*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*—the woods are full of 'em. Cattle drive? *Red River*. Does it involve, by any chance, a stagecoach?

No, wait, I wasn't thinking about any of them.

Doesn't matter. Your movie will. Here's the thing: you can't avoid them, since even avoidance is a form of interaction. It's simply impossible to write or direct in a vacuum. The movies you have seen were created by men and women who had seen others, and so on, until every movie connects with every other movie ever made. If you've seen Indiana Jones being dragged behind a truck by his whip, then you've been touched by *The Cisco Kid* (1931), even though there's a strong chance you've never seen *The Cisco Kid* itself. Every western has a little bit of other westerns in it, whether it knows it or not. Let's take the most basic element, the hero. Will your hero talk a lot or not? If not, then he's in the tradition of Gary Cooper and John Wayne and (later) Clint Eastwood. If he does speak, just talks his fool head right off, then he's like James Garner and those revisionist films of the sixties and seventies. Or maybe you have two, one talker and one silent type—*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). Your guy is going to have a certain amount of dialogue, and whatever type you decide on, audiences are going to hear echoes of some prior film, whether you think those echoes are there or not. And that, dear friends, is intertextuality.

The second concept for our consideration is *archetype*. The late great Canadian critic Northrop Frye took the notion of archetypes from C. G. Jung's psychoanalytical writings and showed that whatever Jung can tell us about our heads, he can tell us a great deal more about our books. "Archetype" is a five-dollar word for "pattern," or for the mythic original on

which a pattern is based. It's like this: somewhere back in myth, something—a story component, let's call it—comes into being. It works so well, for one reason or another, that it catches on, hangs around, and keeps popping up in subsequent stories. That component could be anything: a quest, a form of sacrifice, flight, a plunge into water, whatever resonates and catches our imaginations, setting off vibrations deep in our collective consciousness, calling to us, alarming us, inspiring us to dream or nightmare, making us want to hear it again. And again and again and again. You'd think that these components, these archetypes, would wear out with use the way cliché wears out, but they actually work the other way: they take on power with repetition, finding strength in numbers. Here is the *aha!* factor again. When we hear or see or read one of these instances of archetype, we feel a little frisson of recognition and utter a little satisfied “aha!” And we get that chance with fair frequency, because writers keep employing them.

Don't bother looking for the originals, though. You can't find the archetype, just as you can't find the pure myths. What we have, even in our earliest recorded literature, are variants, embellishments, versions, what Frye called “displacement” of the myth. We can never get all the way to the level of pure myth, even when a work like *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Odyssey* or *The Old Man and the Sea* feels “mythic,” since even those works are displacements of myth. Perhaps it's impossible; perhaps there never has been a single, definite version of the myth. Frye thought the archetypes came from the Bible, or so he said at times, but such a notion won't account for the myths and archetypes that lie behind and inform the works of Homer, say, or those of any storyteller or poet who lacked access to the Judeo-Christian tradition. So let's say that somewhere back there in the mists of time when storytelling was completely oral (or pictorial, if you count the cave walls), a body of myth began establishing itself. The unanswerable

question, it seems to me, is whether there was ever freestanding myth informing our stories or whether the mythic level grows out of the stories that we tell to explain ourselves and our world. In other words, was there some original master story for any particular myth from which all subsequent stories—pallid imitations—are “displacements,” or does the myth take shape by slow accretion as variant story versions are told and retold over time? I incline toward the latter, but I don’t know. In fact, I doubt anyone can know. I also doubt whether it matters. What does matter is that there is this mythic level, the level on which archetype operates and from which we borrow the figure of, for instance, the dying-and-reviving man (or god) or the young boy who must undertake a long journey.

Those stories—myth, archetype, religious narrative, the great body of literature—are always with us. Always in us. We can draw upon them, tap into them, add to them whenever we want. One of our great storytellers, country singer Willie Nelson, was sitting around one day just noodling on the guitar, improvising melodies he’d never written down, never heard in quite those forms. His companion, a nonmusician whose name I forget, asked him how he could come up with all those tunes. “They’re all around us,” old Willie said. “You just reach up and pick them out of the air.” Stories are like that, too. That one story that has been going on forever is all around us. We—as readers or writers, tellers or listeners—understand each other, we share knowledge of the structures of our myths, we comprehend the logic of symbols, largely because we have access to the same swirl of story. We have only to reach out into the air and pluck a piece of it.