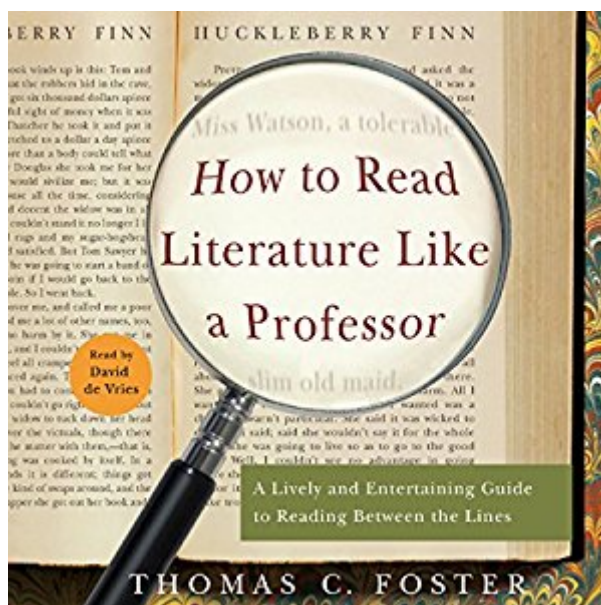


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# How To Read Literature Like A Professor: A Lively And Entertaining Guide To Reading Between The Lines



## Synopsis

What does it mean when a fictional hero takes a journey? Shares a meal? Gets drenched in a sudden rain shower? Often, there is much more going on in a novel or poem than is readily visible on the surface - a symbol, maybe, that remains elusive, or an unexpected twist on a character - and there's that sneaking suspicion that the deeper meaning of a literary text keeps escaping you. In this practical and amusing guide to literature, Thomas C. Foster shows how easy and gratifying it is to unlock those hidden truths, and to discover a world where a road leads to a quest; a shared meal may signify a communion; and rain, whether cleansing or destructive, is never just rain. Ranging from major themes to literary models, narrative devices, and form, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* is the perfect companion for making your reading experience more enriching, satisfying, and fun.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The author is an English professor at the University of Michigan and it becomes apparent quite quickly that he is one of those popular professors who is chatty and has lots of students signing up for his introductory courses on literature. The language is friendly and the examples are entertaining as well as informative. If I lived in Flint, I'd take his classes. There have been many times I've read a book and just \*known\* the author is trying to impart more than I am taking away from the prose, and I hear about symbolism in literature, yet I have very little success finding it on my own. One time in high school I had a very good English teacher who would point out the symbolism in stories and novels, but he never told us how to do it, as this book does. With chapters on a wide range of topics

(journeys, meals, poetry, Shakespeare, the Bible, mythology, fairy tales, weather, geography, violence, politics, sex and illness, among others) and a wide variety of examples, I found myself learning A LOT. Certainly this would not be of much value to a literature graduate student or professor, but for the rest of us this is a great introduction to getting more out of our reading (or viewing, as the author also touches on film, though to a lesser extent). The book concludes with a test, in which you read a short story and interpret it using the principles put forth by Professor Foster, then interpretations by several students and Foster himself -- delightful and illuminating! Finally, the author gives a suggested reading/viewing list and an index.

One thing's for certain: after finishing HOW TO READ LITERATURE LIKE A PROFESSOR, you will either praise the author for opening your eyes to the pleasures of literary analysis, or curse him for making you think too much. That's because Thomas C. Foster, a professor of English at the University of Michigan at Flint, gives his readers a lot to consider. The short answer one comes away with is that nothing is as it appears to be. Symbolism is key. Weather, for example, is not just weather. Rain can be cleansing, cold is harsh but clean, wet is earthy and animal. In case the reader doesn't quite get what Foster is saying, he succinctly states his meaning in a single, boldface sentence. "Myth is a body of the story that matters" reads one. "The real reason for a quest is always self-knowledge" is another. My favorite is, "There's no such thing as a wholly original work of literature," a theme that is repeated on several occasions. According to Foster, everything any author has ever read influences what he writes. Using the western film as an example, he suggests, "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 them . . ." Not that he blames writers for lack of originality: "You can't avoid [repetition], since even avoidance is a form of interaction. It's simply impossible to write . . . in a vacuum." As previously mentioned, some chapters get slightly repetitive. "It's More Than Just Rain or Snow" has many features similar to "...And So Does Season," while "One Story" mirrors many aspects of "Now, Where Have I Seen Her Before."

In spite of others' praise, I have to say I don't think highly of the book. It seems rather obvious to point out that stories can't be entirely original and writers will write partly in response to what they have read, and create variations on themes, situations, and subjects -- but is it really enlightening to claim that there is only one story? This idea can only work if you reduce stories to "Somebody lived once. He or she did things and then died" -- which is not, of course, looking at a story on any

meaningful level. Similarly, the discussions of symbolism, etc., seemed shallow to me. All meals are not communions, and claiming that they are will alienate many thinking readers who recognize that. Does the author really think so poorly of his students to oversimplify in this way? It would be far better to talk about the resonances and suggestiveness of meals and eating, and include communion as a symbol in that group of associations. There is a huge difference between " $x = y$ " and " $x$  suggests  $y$ ." I can very readily believe that he gets disbelieving looks from his students. I found his cutesy writing to be very annoying -- such as "Guess what?" and "you-know-who" (meaning Shakespeare). Barf. But worse, does he have a good command of what he's talking about? He says Henry V has his old friend Falstaff hanged, but this does not happen in the play. (Where was a knowledgeable editor? And why didn't those other professors who provided the rave reviews on the back cover & inside front of the book point this out to him? Linda Wagner Martin of UNC says "What a knowledge of modern literature! What good stories!" Another is James Shapiro, who, it seems, has written a book about Shakespeare.) He claims "benighted" comes from Old English meaning "anyone darker than myself."

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