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AP Literature and Composition

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Questions

“Memory. Symbol. Pattern.” (xv). In the introduction to Thomas Foster’s *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, he provides these three simple words. He believes that these three things are important to any good reader. Those who read will see things, recall similar situations in other books, and draw parallels between the two. Over time, this develops into a skill that readers use almost subconsciously. It is almost funny how true that is.

Throughout the book, Foster has picked out certain details about literature that are important to consider. For example, he talks about connections to familiar works from Shakespeare, the Bible, and mythology. He also discusses finer elements, such as weather, food, and vampires. Each of those examples can be found in separate chapters, but they are really all connected. Foster’s “Memory. Symbol. Pattern.” idea applies to his own book.

With each new chapter and topic, Foster points out things that the average reader might not see. In chapter ten, he discusses the significance of weather, particularly rain and snow. He asks, “Why would a writer want the wind howling and the rain bucketing down, want the manor house of the cottage or the weary traveler lashed and battered?” (74-5). He believes that it isn’t just a meteorological phenomenon. There is meaning to the rain. Perhaps it brings back memories of the story of Noah and the great flood. Or maybe it is a cleansing rain. Either way, the author intended to use rain as more than just a component of the setting. That question he posed appears in each chapter in some form.

The way Foster wrote his book seems to go along with the way in which readers think. His interlude between the tenth and eleventh chapters says, “Yes, all of this can really be found in a novel. Just look for it.” His twelfth chapter, the one on symbols, also fits nicely into the read. Up until that point, he would talk about a topic and reference literature containing such details and ideas. They were all fairly specific, though. In the twelfth chapter, he says that some of it is left to the reader. “Seriously, what do you think it stands for,” he asks, “because that’s probably what it does. At least for you.” (97). His theories then become less cut and dry and more personal. Not everything is about the author.

The idea that literature is just as much about the reader as it is about the author is quite insightful. If an author wanted readers to think a certain way, he/she would have to spell it out. Instead, most things are left up to interpretation. Foster discusses how both cases can be seen in literature. He references *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, saying that it is an allegory. The message Orwell is trying to share with readers is clear. The actions are not symbolic, in the sense that each reader might see them very differently. The novel portrays human beings as animals who cannot handle or control revolution well.

Foster’s analysis of literature is really quite simple. It is just a matter of knowing where to look and what to ask. In most cases, the question is “Why?” Often, the seemingly basic details carry the most weight. As he points out, food isn’t always just food, weather can be more than water, and that character’s name probably means something. In order to understand literature the way Foster does, one needs to find that mindset. One must question everything to find meaning.