

1 - 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 anymore 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. 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.

9 - It's Greek to Me

IN THESE LAST THREE CHAPTERS we've talked about three sorts of myth: Shakespearean, biblical, and folk/fairy tale. The connection of religion and myth sometimes causes trouble in class when someone takes myth to mean "untrue" and finds it hard to unite that meaning with deeply held religious beliefs. That's not what I mean by "myth," though. Rather, what I'm suggesting is the shaping and sustaining power of story and symbol. Whether one believes that the story of Adam and Eve is true, literally or figuratively, matters, but not in this context. Here, in this activity of reading and understanding literature, we're chiefly concerned with how that story functions as material for literary creators, the way in which it can inform a story or poem, and how it is perceived by the reader. All three of these mythologies work as sources of material, of correspondences, of depth for the modern writer (and every writer is modern - even John Dryden was not archaic when he was writing), and provided they're recognizable to the reader, they enrich and enhance the reading experience. Of the three, biblical myth probably covers the greatest range of human situations, encompassing all ages of life including the next life, all relationships whether personal or governmental, and all phases of the individual's experience, physical, sexual, psychological, spiritual. Still, both the worlds of Shakespeare and of fairy and folk tales provide fairly complete coverage as well.

What we mean in speaking of "myth" in general is story, the ability of story to explain ourselves to ourselves in ways that physics, philosophy, mathematics, chemistry - all very highly useful and informative in their own right - can't. That explanation takes the shape of stories that are deeply ingrained in our group memory, that shape our culture and are in turn shaped by it, that constitute a way of seeing by which we read the world and, ultimately, ourselves. Let's say it this way: myth is a body of story that matters.

Every community has its own body of story that matters. Nineteenth-century composer Richard Wagner went back to the Germanic myths for the material for his operas, and whether the results are good or bad in either historic or musical terms, the impulse to work with his tribal myths is completely understandable. The late twentieth century witnessed a great surge of Native American writing, much of which went back to tribal myth for material, for imagery, for theme, as in the case of Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman," Louise Erdrich's Kashpaw/Nanapush novels, and Gerald Vizenor's peculiar Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles. When Toni Morrison introduces human flight into Song of Solomon, many readers, white readers especially, take her to be referring to Icarus, whereas what she really has in mind, she has said, is the myth of the flying Africans, a story that matters to her community, her tribe. On one level, there's not much difference between Silko's project and Wagner's; he too is simply going back to the myths of his tribe. We sometimes forget that people in an age of top hats and stiff collars had tribes, but we do so at our peril. In all these cases, what the artist is doing is reaching back for stories that matter to him and his community - for myth.

In European and Euro-American cultures, of course, there's another source of myth. Let me rephrase that: MYTH. When most of us think myth, we mean the northern shores of the Mediterranean between two and three thousand years ago. We mean Greece and Rome. Greek and Roman myth is so much a part of the fabric of our consciousness, of our unconscious really, that we scarcely notice. You doubt me? In the town where I live, the college teams are known as the Spartans. Our high school? The Trojans. In my state we have a Troy (one of whose high schools is Athens - and they say there are no comedians in education), an Ithaca, a Sparta, a Romulus, a Remus, and a Rome. These communities are scattered around the state and date from different periods of settlement. Now if a town in the center of Michigan, a fair distance from anything that can be called Aegean or Ionian (although it's not very far

from the town of Ionia), can be named Ithaca, it suggests that Greek myth has had pretty good staying power.

Let's go back to Toni Morrison for a moment. I'm always slightly amazed that Icarus gets all the ink. It was his father, Daedalus, who crafted the wings, who knew how to get off Crete and safely reach the mainland, and who in fact flew to safety. Icarus, the kid, the daredevil, failed to follow his father's advice and plunged to his death. His fall remains a source of enduring fascination for us and for our literature and art. In it we see so much: the parental attempt to save the child and the grief at having failed, the cure that proves as deadly as the ailment, the youthful exuberance that leads to self-destruction, the clash between sober, adult wisdom and adolescent recklessness, and of course the terror involved in that headlong descent into the sea. Absolutely none of this has anything to do with Morrison and her flying Africans, so it's little wonder that she's a bit mystified by this response of her readers. But it's a story and a pattern that is so deeply burrowed into our consciousness that readers may almost automatically consider it whenever flying or falling is invoked. Clearly it doesn't fit the situation in *Song of Solomon*. But it does apply in other works. In 1558 Pieter Brueghel painted a wonderful picture, *Landscape with Fall of Icarus*. In the foreground we see a plowman and his ox, just beyond him a shepherd and his flock, and at sea a merchant ship sailing placidly along; this is a scene of utter ordinariness and tranquillity. Only in the lower right corner of the painting is there anything even remotely suggestive of trouble: a pair of legs askew as they disappear into the water. That's our boy. He really doesn't have much of a presence in the frame, but his presence makes all the difference. Without the pathos of the doomed boy, we have a picture of farming and merchant shipping with no narrative or thematic power. I teach, with some regularity, two great poems based on that painting, W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1940) and William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with Fall of Icarus" (1962). They're wonderful poems, very different from each other in tone, style, and form, but in essential agreement about how the world goes on even in the face of our private tragedies. Each artist alters what he finds in the painting. Brueghel introduces the plowman and the ship, neither of which appears in the version that comes to us from the Greeks. And Williams and Auden find, in their turn, slightly different elements to emphasize in the painting. Williams's poem stresses the pictorial elements of the painting, trying to capture the scene while sneaking in the thematic elements. Even his arrangement of the poem on the page, narrow and highly vertical, recalls the body plummeting from the sky. Auden's poem, on the other hand, is a meditation on the private nature of suffering and the way in which the larger world takes no interest in our private disasters. It is astonishing and pleasing to discover that the painting can occasion these two very different responses. Beyond them, readers find their own messages in all this. As someone who was a teenager in the sixties, I am reminded by the fate of Icarus of all those kids who bought muscle cars with names like GTO and 442 and Charger and Barracuda. All the driver education and solid parental advice in the world can't overcome the allure of that kind of power, and sadly, in too many cases those young drivers shared the fate of Icarus. My students, somewhat younger than I am, will inevitably draw other parallels. Still, it all goes back to the myth: the boy, the wings, the unscheduled dive.

So that's one way classical myth can work: overt subject matter for poems and paintings and operas and novels. What else can myth do?

Here's a thought. Let's say you wanted to write an epic poem about a community of poor fishermen in the Caribbean. If this was a place you came from, and you knew these people like you know your own family, you'd want to depict the jealousies and resentments and adventure and danger, as well as capturing their dignity and their life in a way that conveys all that has escaped the notice of tourists and white property owners. You could, I suppose, try being really, really earnest, portraying the characters as very serious and sober, making them noble by virtue of their goodness. But I bet that

wouldn't work. What you'd wind up with instead would probably be very stiff and artificial, and artificiality is never noble. Besides, these folks aren't saints. They make a lot of mistakes: they're petty, envious, lustful, occasionally greedy as well as courageous, elegant, powerful, knowledgeable, profound. And you want noble, after all, not Tonto – there's no Lone Ranger here. Alternatively, you might try grafting their story onto some older story of rivalry and violence, a story where even the victor is ultimately doomed, a story where, despite occasional personal shortcomings, the characters have an unmistakable nobility. You could give your characters names like Helen, Philoctetes, Hector, and Achilles. At least that's what Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott does in his *Omeros* (1990). Those names are drawn, of course, from *The Iliad*, although Walcott uses elements – parallels, persons, and situations – of both it and *The Odyssey* in his epic.

The question we will inevitably ask is, Why?

Why should someone in the late twentieth century draw on a story that was passed along orally from the twelfth through the eighth century B.C. and not written down until maybe two or three hundred years later? Why should someone try to compare modern fishermen with these legendary heroes, many of whom were descended from gods? Well for starters, Homer's legendary heroes were farmers and fishermen. Besides, aren't we all descended from gods? Walcott reminds us by this parallel of the potential for greatness that resides in all of us, no matter how humble our worldly circumstances.

That's one answer. The other is that the situations match up more closely than we might expect. The plot of *The Iliad* is not particularly divine or global. Those who have never read it assume mistakenly that it is the story of the Trojan War. It is not. It is the story of a single, rather lengthy action: the wrath of Achilles. Achilles becomes angry with his leader, Agamemnon, withdraws his support from the Greeks, only rejoining the battle when the consequences of his action have destroyed his best friend, Patroclus. At this point he turns his wrath against the Trojans and in particular their greatest hero, Hector, whom he eventually kills. His reason for such anger? Agamemnon has taken his war prize. Trivial? It gets worse. The prize is a woman. Agamemnon, forced by divine order and by public sentiment to return his concubine to her father, retaliates against the person who most publicly sided against him, Achilles, by taking his concubine, Briseis. Is that petty enough? Is that noble? No Helen, no judgment of Paris, no Trojan horse. At its core, it's the story of a man who goes berserk because his stolen war bride is confiscated, acted out against a background of wholesale slaughter, the whole of which is taking place because another man, Menelaus (brother of Agamemnon) has had his wife stolen by Paris, half brother of Hector. That's how Hector winds up having to carry the hopes for salvation of all Troy on his shoulders.

And yet somehow, through the centuries, this story dominated by the theft of two women has come to epitomize ideals of heroism and loyalty, sacrifice and loss. Hector is more stubbornly heroic in his doomed enterprise than anyone you've ever seen. Achilles' grief at the loss of his beloved friend is truly heartbreaking. The big duels – between Hector and Ajax, between Diomedes and Paris, between Hector and Patroclus, between Hector and Achilles – are genuinely exciting and suspenseful, their outcomes sources of grand celebration and dismay. No wonder so many modern writers have often borrowed from and emulated Homer.

And when did that begin?

Almost immediately. Virgil, who died in 19 B.C., patterned his Aeneas on the Homeric heroes. If Achilles did it or Odysseus went there, so does Aeneas. Why? It's what heroes do. Aeneas goes to the underworld. Why? Odysseus went there. He kills a giant from the enemy camp in a final climactic battle. Why? Achilles did. And so on. The whole thing is less derivative than it sounds and not without

humor and irony. Aeneas and his followers are survivors of Troy, so here we have this Trojan hero acting out the patterns set down by his enemies. Moreover, when these Trojans sail past Ithaca, home to Odysseus, they jeer and curse the agent of their destruction. On the whole, though, Virgil has him undertake these actions because Homer had already defined what it means to be a hero.

Back to Walcott. Almost exactly two thousand years after Virgil, Walcott has his heroes perform actions that we can recognize as symbolic reenactments of those in Homer. Sometimes it's a bit of a stretch, since we can't have a lot of battlefield duels out in the fishing boats. Nor can he call his Helen "the face that launched a thousand dinghies." Lacks grandeur, that phrase. What he can do, though, is place them in situations where their nobility and their courage are put to the test, while reminding us that they are acting out some of the most basic, most primal patterns known to humans, exactly as Homer did all those centuries before. The need to protect one's family: Hector. The need to maintain one's dignity: Achilles. The determination to remain faithful and to have faith: Penelope. The struggle to return home: Odysseus. Homer gives us four great struggles of the human being: with nature, with the divine, with other humans, and with ourselves. What is there, after all, against which we need to prove ourselves but those four things?

In our modern world, of course, parallels may be ironized, that is, turned on their head for purposes of irony. How many of us would see the comedy of three escaped convicts as parallel to the wanderings of Odysseus? Still, that's what the brothers Joel and Ethan Coen give us in their 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* It's about trying to get home, isn't it? Or this, the most famous example: a single day in Dublin in 1904, on which a young man decides on his future and an older man wanders the city, eventually returning home to his wife in the small hours of the next morning. The book has only one overt clue that this all might have something to do with Homer, its one-word title: *Ulysses* (1922). As we now know, James Joyce envisioned every one of the eighteen episodes of the novel as a parallel to some incident or situation in *The Odyssey*. There's an episode in a newspaper office, for instance, which parallels Odysseus's visit to Aeolus, the god of the winds, but the parallel may seem pretty tenuous. To be sure, newspapermen are a windy group and there are a lot of rhetorical flourishes in the episode, to say nothing of the fact that a gust of wind does zip through at one point. Still, we can see it as resembling the Homeric original only if we understand that resemblance in terms of a funhouse mirror, full of distortion and goofy correspondences - if we understand it, in other words, as an ironic parallel. The fact that it's ironic makes the parallel - and the Aeolus episode - such fun. Joyce is less interested than Walcott in investing his characters with classical nobility, although finally they do take on something of that quality. After watching poor old Leopold Bloom stroll around Dublin all day and half the night, running into no end of trouble and recalling great heartbreak in his life, we may well come to feel he is noble in his own way. His nobility, however, is not that of Odysseus.

Greek and Roman myth, of course, is more than Homer. The transformations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* show up in all sorts of later works, not least in Franz Kafka's story of a man who wakes up one morning to find he's changed into an enormous beetle. He called it "The Metamorphosis." Indiana Jones may look like pure Hollywood, but the intrepid searcher after fabulous treasure goes back to Apollonius and *The Argonautica*, the story of Jason and the Argonauts. Something a bit homier? Sophocles' plays of Oedipus and his doomed clan show up over and over again in all sorts of variations. There is, in fact, no form of dysfunctional family or no personal disintegration of character for which there is not a Greek or Roman model. Not for nothing do the names of Greek tragic characters figure in Freud's theories. The wronged woman gone violent in her grief and madness? Would you like Aeneas and Dido or Jason and Medea? And as in every good early religion, they had an explanation for natural phenomena, from the change of seasons (Demeter and Persephone and Hades) to why the nightingale sounds the way it does (Philomena and Tereus). Happily for us, most of it got written down, often in

several versions, so that we have access to this wonderful body of story. And because writers and readers share knowledge of a big portion of this body of story, this mythology, when writers use it, we readers recognize it, sometimes to its full extent, sometimes only dimly or only because we know the Looney Tunes version. That recognition makes our experience of literature richer, deeper, more meaningful, so that our own modern stories also matter, also share in the power of myth.

Oh, did I forget to say? That title of Walcott's, *Omeros*? In the local dialect, it means Homer. Naturally.

11 - ...More Than It's Gonna Hurt You: Concerning Violence

CONSIDER. Sethe is an escaped slave, and her children were all born in slave-owning Kentucky; their escape to Ohio is like the Israelites' escape from Egypt in Exodus. Except that this time Pharaoh shows up on the doorstep threatening to drag them back across the Red Sea. So Sethe decides to save her children from slavery by killing them, succeeding with only one of them.

Later, when that murdered child, the title character of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, makes her ghostly return, she's more than simply the child lost to violence, sacrificed to the revulsion of the escaped slave toward her former state. Instead she is one of, in the words of the epigraph to the novel, the "sixty million and more" Africans and African-descended slaves who died in captivity and forced marches on the continent or in the middle passage or on the plantations made possible by their captive labor or in attempts to escape a system that should have been unthinkable – as unthinkable as, for instance, a mother seeing no other means of rescuing her child except infanticide. *Beloved* is in fact representative of the horrors to which a whole race was subjected.

Violence is one of the most personal and even intimate acts between human beings, but it can also be cultural and societal in its implications. It can be symbolic, thematic, biblical, Shakespearean, Romantic, allegorical, transcendent. Violence in real life just is. If someone punches you in the nose in a supermarket parking lot, it's simply aggression. It doesn't contain meaning beyond the act itself. Violence in literature, though, while it is literal, is usually also something else. That same punch in the nose may be a metaphor.

Robert Frost has a poem, "Out, Out – " (1916), about a momentary lapse of attention and the terrible act of violence that ensues. A farm boy working with the buzz saw looks up at the call to dinner, and the saw, which has been full of menace as it "snarl[s] and rattle[s]" along, seizes the moment, as if it has a mind of its own, to take off the boy's hand. Now the first thing we have to acknowledge about this masterpiece is that it is absolutely real. Only a person who has been around the ceaseless danger of farm machinery could have written the poem, with all its careful attention to the details of the way death lurks in everyday tasks. If that's all we get from the poem, fine, the poem will in one sense have done its job. Yet Frost is insisting on more in the poem than a cautionary tale of child labor and power tools. The literal violence encodes a broader point about the essentially hostile or at least uncaring relationship we have with the universe. Our lives and deaths – the boy dies of blood loss and shock – are as nothing to the universe, of which the best that can be said is that it is indifferent, though it may be actively interested in our demise. The title of the poem is taken from *Macbeth*, "Out, out, brief candle," suggesting the brevity not merely of a teenager's life but of any human existence, particularly in cosmic terms. The smallness and fragility of our lives is met with the cold indifference not only of the distant stars and planets, which we can rightly think of as virtually eternal in contrast to ourselves, but of the more immediate "outer" world of the farm itself, of the inhumanity of machinery which wounds or kills indiscriminately. This is not John Milton's "Lycidas" (1637), not a classical elegy in which all nature weeps. This nature shows not the slightest ripple of interest. Frost uses the violence here, then, to emphasize our status as orphans: parentless, frightened, and alone as we face our mortality in a cold and silent universe.

Violence is everywhere in literature. Anna Karenina throws herself under the train, Emma Bovary solves her problem with poison, D. H. Lawrence's characters are always engaging in physical violence toward one another, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus is beaten by soldiers, Faulkner's Colonel Sartoris becomes a greater local legend when he guns down two carpetbaggers in the streets of Jefferson, and Wile E. Coyote holds up his little "Yikes" sign before he plunges into the void as his latest gambit to

catch the Road Runner fails. Even writers as noted for the absence of action as Virginia Woolf and Anton Chekhov routinely resort to killing off characters. For all these deaths and maimings to amount to something deeper than the violence of the Road Runner cartoon, the violence has to have some meaning beyond mere mayhem.

Let's think about two categories of violence in literature: the specific injury that authors cause characters to visit on one another or on themselves, and the narrative violence that causes characters harm in general. The first would include the usual range of behavior – shootings, stabbings, garrotings, drownings, poisonings, bludgeonings, bombings, hit-and-run accidents, starvations, you name it. By the second, authorial violence, I mean the death and suffering authors introduce into their work in the interest of plot advancement or thematic development and for which they, not their characters, are responsible. Frost's buzz-saw accident would be such an example, as would Little Nell on her deathbed in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) and the death of Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Is it fair to compare them? I mean, do death by consumption or heart disease really fall into the same universe as a stabbing?

Sure. Different but the same. Different: no guilty party exists in the narrative (unless you count the author, who is present everywhere and nowhere). Same: does it really matter to the dead person? Or this: writers kill off characters for the same set of reasons – make action happen, cause plot complications, end plot complications, put other characters under stress.

And that's not enough reason for violence to exist?

With some exceptions, the most prominent being mystery novels. Figure at least three corpses for a two-hundred-page mystery, sometimes many more. How significant do those deaths feel? Very nearly meaningless. In fact, aside from the necessities of plot, we scarcely notice the deaths in a detective novel; the author goes out of her way, more often than not, to make the victim sufficiently unpleasant that we scarcely regret his passing, and we may even feel a sort of relief. Now the rest of the novel will be devoted to solving this murder, so clearly it is important on some level. But the death lacks gravitas. There's no weight, no resonance, no sense of something larger at work. What mysteries generally have in common is a lack of density. What they offer in terms of emotional satisfaction – the problem solved, the question answered, the guilty punished, the victim avenged – they lack in weightiness. And I say this as a person who generally loves the genre and who has read hundreds of mysteries.

So where does this alleged weight come from?

Not alleged. Felt. We sense greater weight or depth in works when there is something happening beyond the surface. In mysteries, whatever layering there may be elsewhere, the murders live on the narrative surface. It's in the nature of the genre that since the act itself is buried under layers of misdirection and obfuscation, it cannot support layers of meaning or signification. On the other hand, "literary" fiction and drama and poetry are chiefly about those other layers. In that fictive universe, violence is symbolic action. If we only understand *Beloved* on the surface level, Sethe's act of killing her daughter becomes so repugnant that sympathy for her is nearly impossible. If we lived next to her, for instance, one of us would have to move. But her action carries symbolic significance; we understand it not only as the literal action of a single, momentarily deranged woman but as an action that speaks for the experience of a race at a certain horrific moment in history, as a gesture explained by whip scars on her back that take the form of a tree, as the product of the sort of terrible choice that

only characters in our great mythic stories – a Jocasta, a Dido, a Medea – are driven to make. Sethe isn't a mere woman next door but a mythic creature, one of the great tragic heroines.

I suggested earlier that Lawrence's characters manage to commit a phenomenal amount of violence toward each other. Here are just a couple of examples. In *Women in Love* Gudrun Brangwen and Gerald Crich meet after each of them has made separate displays of violent will. In front of the Brangwen sisters, Gerald holds a terrified mare at a grade crossing, spurring her until her flanks bleed. Ursula is outraged and indignant, but Gudrun is so caught up in this display of masculine power (and the language Lawrence uses is very much that of a rape) that she swoons. He later sees her engaging in eurythmics – a pre-“Great War version of disco – in front of some highly dangerous Highland cattle. When Gerald stops her to explain the peril she has created for herself, she slaps him hard. This is, mind, their very first meeting. So he says (more or less), I see you've struck the first blow. Her response? “And I shall strike the last.” Very tender. Their relationship pretty much follows from that initial note, with violent clashes of will and ego, violent sex, needy and pathetic visitations, and eventually hatred and resentment. Technically, I suppose, she's right, since she does strike the last blow. The last time we see them, though, her eyes are bulging out as he strangles her, until suddenly he stops, overcome by revulsion, and skis off to his own death in the highest reaches of the Alps. Too weird? Want the other example? In his exquisite novella “The Fox,” Lawrence creates one of the oddest triangles in literature. Banford and March are two women running a farm, and the only reason their relationship stops short of being openly lesbian must be because of censorship concerns, Lawrence already having had quite enough works banned by that time. Into this curious ménage a young soldier, Henry Grenfel, wanders, and as he works on the farm, a relationship develops between him and March. When the difficulties of a three-way set of competing interests become insurmountable, Henry chops down a tree which twists, falls, and crushes poor, difficult Banford. Problem solved. Of course, the death gives rise to issues which could scuttle the newly freed relationship, but who can worry about such details?

Lawrence, being Lawrence, uses these violent episodes in heavily symbolic ways. His clashes between Gerald and Gudrun, for instance, have as much to do with deficiencies in the capitalist social system and modern values as with personality shortcomings of the participants. Gerald is both an individual and someone corrupted by the values of industry (Lawrence identifies him as a “captain of industry”), while Gudrun loses much of her initial humanism through association with the “corrupt” sort of modern artists. And the murder by tree in “The Fox” isn't about interpersonal hostility, although that antipathy is present in the story. Rather, Banford's demise figures the sexual tensions and gender-role confusion of modern society as Lawrence sees it, a world in which the essential qualities of men and women have been lost in the demands of technology and the excessive emphasis on intellect over instinct. We know that these tensions exist, because while Banford (Jill) and March (Ellen or Nellie) sometimes call each other by their Christian names, the text insists on their surnames without using “Miss,” thereby emphasizing their masculine tendencies, while Henry is simply Henry or the young man. Only by radically changing the interpersonal sexual dynamic can something like Lawrentian order be restored. There is also the mythic dimension of this violence. Gerald in *Women in Love* is repeatedly described as a young god, tall and fair and beautiful, while Gudrun is named for a minor Norse goddess. Their clash, then, automatically follows mythic patterns. Similarly, the young soldier comes striding onto the makeshift farm as a fertility god, fairly screaming virility. Lawrence shared with many of his contemporaries a fascination with ancient myths, particularly those of the wasteland and various fertility cults. For fertility to be restored to the little wasteland of the failing farm, the potent male and the fertile female must be paired off, and any blocking element, including any females with competing romantic interests, must be sacrificed.

William Faulkner's violence emanates from a slightly different wellspring, yet the results are not entirely different. I know of creative writing teachers who feel Faulkner is the single greatest danger to budding fiction writers. So alluring is his penchant for violence that the imitation Faulknerian story will have a rape, three cases of incest, a stabbing, two shootings, and a suicide by drowning, all in two thousand words. And indeed, there is a great deal of violence of all sorts in his fictional Yoknapatawpha County. In the story "Barn Burning" (1939), young Sarty Snopes watches as his father, a serial arsonist, hires out to a wealthy plantation owner, Major de Spain, only to attempt to burn the major's barn in a fit of class resentment. When Sarty (whose full name is Colonel Sartoris Snopes) attempts to intercede, Major de Spain rides down Ab, the father, and Sarty's elder brother, and the last we hear of them is a series of shots from the major's pistol, leaving Sarty sobbing in the dust. The arson and the shootings here are, of course, literal and need to be understood in that light before we go looking for any further significance. But with Faulkner, the violence is also historically conditioned. Class warfare, racism and the inheritance of slavery (at one point Ab says that slave sweat must not have made the de Spain mansion white enough and that therefore white sweat - his - is evidently called for), impotent rage at having lost the Civil War, all figure in the violence of a Faulkner story. In *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Ike McCaslin discovers while reading through plantation ledgers that his grandfather had sired a daughter by one of his slaves, Eunice, and then, not scrupling at incest or recognizing the humanity in his slaves that would make his act incest, got that daughter, Tomasina, pregnant. Eunice's response was to kill herself. That act is personal and literal, but it is also a powerful metaphor of the horrors of slavery and the outcomes when people's capacity for self-determination is stripped away utterly. The slave woman has no say in how her body or her daughter's has been used, nor is any avenue open for her to express her outrage; the only escape permitted to her is death. Slavery allows its victims no decision-making power over any aspect of their lives, including the decision to live. The lone exception, the only power they have, is that they may choose to die. And so she does. Even then, old Carothers McCaslin's only comment is to ask whoever heard of a black person drowning herself, clearly astonished that such a response is possible in a slave. That Eunice's suicide takes place in a novel that draws its title from a spiritual, in which Moses is asked to "go down" into Egypt to "set my people free," is no accident. If Moses should fail to appear, it may fall to the captive race to take what actions they can to liberate themselves. Faulknerian violence quite often expresses such historical conditions at the same time that it draws on mythic or biblical parallels. Not for nothing does he call one novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which a rebellious, difficult son repudiates his birthright and destroys himself. *Light in August* (1932) features a character named Joe Christmas who suffers emasculation at the novel's end; while neither his behavior nor his particular wound is very obviously Christlike, his life and death have to do with the possibility of redemption. Of course, things change when irony comes in, but that's another matter.

Thus far we've been speaking of character-on-character violence. So what about violence without agency, where writers simply dispose of their characters? Well, it depends. Accidents do happen in real life, of course. So do illnesses. But when they happen in literature they're not really accidents. They're accidents only on the inside of the novel - on the outside they're planned, plotted, and executed by somebody, with malice aforethought. And we know who that somebody is. I can think of two novels from the 1980s that involve characters floating down to earth after a jetliner explosion. Fay Weldon, in *The Hearts and Lives of Men* (1988), and Salman Rushdie, in *The Satanic Verses*, may have slightly different purposes in introducing such massive violence into their story lines and then having some characters survive. We can be fairly sure, however, that they do mean something - several somethings - by the graceful falls to earth that their characters undergo. The little girl in Weldon's novel occupies what amounts to a state of grace in an otherwise corrupt adult world; the easy descent of the airliner's tail section proves a lovely, gentle corollary to this quality in the child. Rushdie's two characters, on the other hand, experience their descent as a fall not from innocence to experience but

from an already corrupt life into an existence as demons. So, too, with illness. We'll talk later about what heart disease means in a story, or tuberculosis or cancer or AIDS. The question always is, what does misfortune really tell us?

It's nearly impossible to generalize about the meanings of violence, except that there are generally more than one, and its range of possibilities is far larger than with something like rain or snow. Authors rarely introduce violence straightforwardly, to perform only its one appointed task, so we ask questions. What does this type of misfortune represent thematically? What famous or mythic death does this one resemble? Why this sort of violence and not some other? The answers may have to do with psychological dilemmas, with spiritual crises, with historical or social or political concerns. Almost never, though, are they cut-and-paste, but they do exist, and if you put your mind to it, you can usually come up with some possibilities. Violence is everywhere in literature. We'd lose most of Shakespeare without it, and Homer and Ovid and Marlowe (both Christopher and Philip), much of Milton, Lawrence, Twain, Dickens, Frost, Tolkien, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Saul Bellow, and on and on. I guess Jane Austen wouldn't be too much affected, but relying on her would leave our reading a little thin. It seems, then, that there's no option for us but to accept it and figure out what it means.

25 - Don't Read with Your Eyes

REMEMBER THE TWELFTH NIGHT party in Joyce's story "The Dead" that we looked at earlier? To a child of late-twentieth-century America (or early-twenty-first, for that matter), the meal is no big deal. Except for the goose. Not that many households in this country roast a goose for the holiday, or any holiday. But the rest looks pretty ordinary to us. A vase with stalks of celery, American apples and oranges on the sideboard, floury potatoes. Nothing very remarkable. Unless you live, as do the old ladies who provide the meal, in preelectrification Dublin, where it happens to be the sixth of January. So if you're going to understand the ladies, and the meal, and the story, you have to read through eyes that are not your own, eyes that, while not those of Aunts Kate and Julia, can take in the meaning of the meal they have provided. And those eyes did not grow up watching *Animaniacs*. The aunts have provided a meal beyond their limited means, in which they feed exotic and expensive produce to a substantial number of guests. Celery does not grow in Ireland in January, and the fruit is from America and therefore quite expensive. They have gone to considerable expense on Epiphany, the second most important day of the Christmas season, the day the Christ child was revealed to the wise men. In addition to its religious significance, the evening is also the old ladies' one big extravagance of the year, the party by which they cling to a fading gentility and memories of greater comfort as members of the middle class. We cannot understand their anxiety over the success of this gathering unless we see how important it is in their lives.

Or take this situation. James Baldwin's wonderful short story "Sonny's Blues" deals with a rather uptight math teacher in Harlem in the 1950s whose brother serves time in prison for heroin possession. At the end of the story there's a scene we looked at in an earlier chapter, where the brother, Sonny, has returned to playing in a club and the math teacher, our narrator, goes to hear him for the first time ever. There's been a lot of tension throughout the story since the two don't comprehend each other and the math teacher really can't fathom the troubles that drive Sonny and his music and his drug problem. Nor does he understand jazz; the only jazz name he can come up with is Louis Armstrong, proving to Sonny that he's hopelessly square. As the brother sits listening to Sonny with the jazz combo, however, he begins to hear in this beautiful, troubled music the depths of feeling and suffering and joy that lie behind it. So he sends an offering, a scotch and milk, that indicates understanding and brotherhood; Sonny sips, sets the drink back on the piano, and acknowledges the gift, which shimmers like "the very cup of trembling," in the closing words of the story. It's deep and emotional and biblical, with a resonance that very few stories ever achieve - about as close to perfection as we're likely to encounter. Now here's where the business of interpretation gets interesting. At my school, there are sociology/social work classes on substance abuse. And two or three times I've had a recent student in said substance abuse classes show up at discussions of "Sonny's Blues," very earnestly saying something like, "You should never give alcohol to a recovering addict." Perfectly true, I'm sure. In this context, though, not helpful. This story was published in 1957, using the best information Baldwin had at that time, and it is meant as a study of relations between brothers, not as a treatise on addiction. It's about redemption, not recovery. If you read it as the latter, that is, if you don't adjust your eyes and mind to transport you from contemporary reality to Baldwin's 1957, whatever the ending has to offer will be pretty well lost on you.

We all have our own blind spots, and that's normal. We expect a certain amount of verisimilitude, of faithfulness to the world we know, in what we watch and what we read. On the other hand, a too rigid insistence on the fictive world corresponding on all points to the world we know can be terribly limiting not only to our enjoyment but to our understanding of literary works. So how much is too much? What can we reasonably demand of our reading?

That's up to you. But I'll tell you what I think, and what I try to do. It seems to me that if we want to get the most out of our reading, as far as is reasonable, we have to try to take the works as they were intended to be taken. The formula I generally offer is this: don't read with your eyes. What I really mean is, don't read only from your own fixed position in the Year of Our Lord two thousand and some. Instead try to find a reading perspective that allows for sympathy with the historical moment of the story, that understands the text as having been written against its own social, historical, cultural, and personal background. There are dangers in this, and I'll return to them. I also need to acknowledge here that there is a different model of professional reading, deconstruction, that pushes skepticism and doubt to its extreme, questioning nearly everything in the story or poem at hand, to deconstruct the work and show how the author is not really in charge of his materials. The goal of these deconstructive readings is to demonstrate how the work is controlled and reduced by the values and prejudices of its own time. As you will have discerned, this is an approach with which I have limited sympathy. At the end of the day, I prefer to like the works I analyze. But that's another story.

Let's return for a moment to Baldwin's math teacher and Sonny's addiction. The comment about giving alcohol to an addict betrays a certain mind-set about social problems as well as a unique history of artistic and popular culture experiences on the part of the reader that are at odds with the story's own goals. "Sonny's Blues" is about redemption, but not the one students have been conditioned to expect. So much of our popular culture - daytime talk shows, made-for-television movies, magazine articles - leads us to think in terms of identifying a problem, such as addiction, and seeking a simple, direct solution. In its place, such thinking makes perfect sense. On the other hand, Baldwin is only slightly interested in Sonny's addiction in and of itself; what he really cares about is the brother's emotional turmoil. Everything in the story points to this interest. The point of view (the brother's), the depth of detail about the brother's life relative to Sonny's, the direct access to the brother's thoughts, all remind us this is about the narrator and not the jazzman. Most tellingly, it is the brother who is removed from his world, taken out of his comfort zone, when he follows Sonny to meet with other musicians and then to hear Sonny play. If you want to put pressure on a character to cause him to change or crumble, take him away from home, make him inhabit an alien world. For the middle-class math teacher, the world of jazz might as well be Neptune.

Here's why this business of the reader's perspective matters. This story falls into that very large category that I call "last-chance-for-change" stories. Not a terribly scientific name, I'll grant, but that's what they are. Here's how they work: the character - sufficiently old to have experienced a number of opportunities to grow, to reform, to get it right, but of course he never has - is presented with one more chance, one last opportunity to educate himself in this most important area (and it varies with the story) where up to now he has remained stunted. The reason he's older is just the opposite of why the quester is typically younger: his possibilities for growth are limited and time is running out. In other words, there is a time imperative, a sort of urgency as the sands run out. And then the situation in which he finds himself needs to be compelling. Our guy? He's never understood or sympathized with his brother, even to the point of not visiting him in prison. When the narrator's daughter dies and Sonny writes a caring letter of sympathy, he makes the narrator (I'm sorry he doesn't have a name) feel even greater guilt. Now that Sonny is out of prison and not using heroin, the narrator has a chance to get to know his younger, troubled brother as he never has before. If he can't do that this time, he never will. And this leads us to the point of the last-chance-for-change story, which is always the same: can this person be saved? This is the question Baldwin is asking in the story, but he's not asking it about Sonny. In fact (such is the heartlessness of authors), for the question to really matter to us in terms of the narrator, Sonny's own future must be very cloudy. Whether he can do the one thing in the world he's good at and not be drawn back into the addiction that is rife within the jazz community, we cannot know. Our doubts on his behalf add to the urgency of the narrator's growth; anyone can love and understand a reformed junkie, but one who may not be reformed, who admits the perils are still there

for him, offers real difficulties. Now if we read the story through the filter of daytime talk shows and social work classes, we not only miss the focus of the story, we misunderstand it at its most basic level. Sonny's trouble is interesting, of course, but it's merely the hook to draw us in; the real issues the story raises all concern the narrator/brother. If we see it as Sonny's story, the resolution will be profoundly dissatisfying. If we understand it as the brother's, it works beautifully.

And this is a fairly recent story. How much harder to understand the mind-set behind, say, *Moby-Dick*. *The Last of the Mohicans*. *The Iliad*. All that violence. A diet that is almost purely carnivorous. Blood sacrifices. Looting. Multiple gods. Concubines. Those readers who have been raised in a monotheistic culture (which is all of us, whatever our religious persuasion or lack thereof, who live within the Western tradition) might have a little trouble with the piety of the Greeks, whose chief implement of religious practice is the carving knife. Indeed, the very setup of the epic, in which Achilles throws a fit and withdraws from the war because his sex slave has been taken from him, does not engage our sympathies as it would have those of the ancient Greek audience. For that matter, his "redemption," in which he proves he's back on track by slaughtering every Trojan in sight, strikes us as distinctly barbaric. So what can this "great work" and its spirituality, sexual politics, code of machismo, and overwrought violence teach us? Plenty, if we're willing to read with the eyes of a Greek. A really, really old Greek. Achilles destroys the thing he holds most dear, his lifelong friend Patroclus, and dooms himself to an early death by allowing excessive pride to overrule his judgment. Even great men must learn to bend. Anger is unbecoming. One day our destiny will come for us, and even the gods can't stop it. There are lots of useful lessons in *The Iliad*, but while it may at times read like an episode of *The Jerry Springer Show*, we'll miss most of them if we read it through the lens of our own popular culture.

Now, about that danger I mentioned earlier. Too much acceptance of the author's viewpoint can lead to difficulties. Do we have to accept the values of a three-thousand-year-old blood culture as depicted in the Homeric epics? Absolutely not. I think we should frown on the wanton destruction of societies, on the enslavement of conquered peoples, on keeping concubines, on wholesale slaughter. At the same time, though, we need to understand that the Mycenaean Greeks did not. So if we would understand *The Iliad* (and it is worth understanding), we have to accept those values for those characters. Must we accept the novel that is full of racial hatred, that vilifies persons of African or Asian or Jewish ancestry? Of course not. Is *The Merchant of Venice* anti-Semitic? Probably. More or less so than its historical moment? Much less, I should think. Shylock, while hardly a glowing picture of the Jew, is at least given reasons for being as he is, is invested with a kind of humanity that many nonfiction tracts of the Elizabethan period do not credit Jews with having. Shakespeare does not blame him for the Crucifixion, nor does he recommend burning Jews at the stake (as was happening in the century of the play's composition in other parts of Europe). So accept the play or reject it? Do as you see fit. What I would suggest is that we see Shylock's villainy in the context of the difficult and complex situation Shakespeare creates for him, see if he makes sense as an individual and not merely as a type or representative of a hated group, see if the play works independently of whatever bigotry might lie behind it or if it requires that bigotry to function as art. For me, if it must rely on hatred in order to function, it has to go. I don't see *Merchant* working only or even primarily as a product of bigotry, and I will go on reading it, although there are many works by Shakespeare that I like better and return to more regularly. Each reader or viewer must decide this one for himself. The one thing I find unacceptable is to reject it, or any work, sight unseen.

Let's take, briefly, a more recent and more troubling example. The Cantos of Ezra Pound have some marvelous passages, but they also contain some very ugly views of Jewish culture and Jewish people. More to the point, they are the product of a man who was capable of being much more anti-Semitic than he is in the poems, as he proved in his wartime broadcasts on Italian radio. I sort of weaseled my

way around the issue with Shakespeare, claiming that he was somewhat less bigoted than his time; I can make no such claim for Pound. Moreover, that he made such statements at precisely the time that millions of Jews were being put to death by the Nazis only compounds our sense of outrage toward him. Nor can we write it off as insanity, which is what the defense counsel did at his trial for treason (he was charged with broadcasting for the enemy). So what about the poetry? Well, you decide. I know Jewish readers who still read Pound and claim to gain something from the experience, others who refuse to have anything to do with him, and still others who read him but rant against him all the while. Nor does one have to be Jewish. I do still read Pound, some. I find much that is astonishing, beautiful, haunting, powerful. Very much worthwhile. I also find, with some regularity, myself asking, How could someone so talented be so blind, so arrogant, so bigoted? The answer is, I don't know. The more time I spend with him, the more I'm astonished by his capacity for folly. It's unfortunate that genius was harnessed to someone who may not have worn it well. I find the Cantos, for all its brilliance, a very flawed masterpiece; flawed for reasons other than the anti-Semitism, but certainly more flawed because of it. It remains one of the half dozen or so most important works in my field of specialization, however, so I can't turn my back on it even if I want to. I've been telling you earlier in this chapter that you generally want to adopt the worldview the work requests of its audience. Sometimes, though, as in the case of Pound and his Cantos, the work asks too much.

Now here is where I envy you. If you are a professor, you have to deal with some pretty unsavory characters and some questionable works. If you only want to read like one, you can walk away whenever you want to.