LITERARY ANALYSIS GUIDEPOSTS

The “grammar of literature” is a set of conventions, patterns, and symbols that help to enhance our understanding of a piece of writing. These patterns and symbols help to decode the author’s purpose as well as giving the experience of reading much more depth and resonance. When looking for patterns, symbols, and conventions, remember that just as the strength of an argument depends on its support, the explanation of a pattern or symbol will depend on the number of pieces of evidence (and their credibility). So any pattern you see can be legitimate—as long as you can support it with evidence.

SOME UNIVERSALLY RECOGNIZABLE PATTERNS:

1. **THE QUEST.** Anytime a character leaves one location and travels to another, it may be a quest. The components are as follows:
   a. A destination.
   b. A stated reason to go there (why does the character believe s/he needs to go to this place?)
   c. Obstacles or trials to overcome.
   d. The real reason for the trip, which is always self-knowledge. What does the character learn about himself/herself?

   i. **Pop culture example:** *Star Wars* –Luke Skywalker undertakes a quest to avenge his family’s deaths. He travels into enemy territory, becomes engaged in a war, and eventually learns not only that he is part of a noble tradition of protectors, but that friendship can be as great a bond as family. Other examples: *Lord of the Rings, Wizard of Oz, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Sideways.*

   **CONSIDER:** Can you locate a quest, identifying all components in the story?

2. **NICE TO EAT WITH YOU—ACTS OF COMMUNION.** Though the word “communion” in the Western world often carries a Christian connotation, in nearly every culture and religion breaking bread together is an act of sharing and peace. Putting literary characters into what would otherwise be a mundane scene is a deliberate device by the author. Anytime an author brings characters together for a meal (or similar activity—characters drinking, etc.), the author’s purpose is to give the readers a close look at the relationships between the characters, and about the characters as individuals.

   **CONSIDER:** Can you locate a meal (or something similar) shared between characters in the story? What do you learn about them, and their relationships, from the interaction and the details?
3. **WHERE HAVE I SEEN THIS BEFORE?** There is no such thing as a wholly original work of literature. As you read, you recognize elements—characters, plot lines, events—which echo other works. As you recognize them, you draw parallels and comparisons so that your reading becomes deeper and broader than simply that which is on the page. These elements can come from anywhere, including fiction (*Apocalypse Now* was a retelling of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*), drama, or history. Other popular sources of themes and motifs are:
   a. The Bible (Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Dead Man Walking*).
   b. Shakespeare (*O* was a re-envisioning of *Othello*, *West Side Story* was an updated *Romeo and Juliet*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *A Thousand Acres*).
   c. Fairy tales (*Brothers Grimm*, *Shrek*, *Princess Bride*).

**CONSIDER:** Does any aspect of the piece seem familiar to you—a plot, a character, a setting? Try listing the differences/similarities—does this help you see some aspect of the story in a new light?

4. **STORMY WEATHER/ELEMENTS.** Weather always represents or shows the reader something. It is never just detail. For example:
   a. **Rain.** Rain can represent sadness (tears), depression; it can also represent healing, cleansing, growth (as in the spring), and restoration. It can function as a plot device (throwing people together in a shelter, for example). Rain can also precipitate:
   b. **Floods.** Even in pre-biblical times, floods signified destruction as well as a new start.
   c. **Fog.** Often signifies some kind of confusion—perhaps mental, ethical, physical.
   d. **Snow.** Can signify cleanliness, austerity, rationality, emotional coldness, severity, purity, death.
   e. **Heat.** Can represent anger, passion, violent emotions.
   f. **Fire.** Anger, passion, purification, loss of control. Loss/endings—from the Biblical prediction of the “fire next time.”
   g. **Electrical storm.** Danger, shock, God’s judgment.

**CONSIDER:** Is there any place in the story where weather is described in detail? Do the details give the reader further clues as to what the weather represents?
5. **Baptism or Drowning.** If a character gets wet in some sense, especially if s/he is submerged, notice what happens next. If the person emerges from the wet a newer/different/wiser person, it’s a baptism. If the person never returns (is never whole again, never himself again, etc.), it’s a drowning.

**Consider:** Does your character at any time become wet with some substance? If so, is there a change (positive or negative) in the character following their dousing? Does the character emerge as a new being, or disappear, never to return?

6. **Violence.** Violence in a well-written story is more than a plot device. It provides many clues to the characters and the worldview embodied in the story.

**Consider:**
- What does the violence tell you about the personality/motives of the perpetrator? About the victim?
- What does the violence tell you about the world at large? Does the world notice it, or does it go on unchanged? Is there grief, concern, indifference?
- What is the root cause of the violence? Is it internally conditioned (the perpetrator’s personality or past) or historically conditioned (is it the fault of the system)?

7. **Seasons.** Like weather, seasons may indicate aspects of character or plot development. Don’t look only at seasons themselves, but also at names.
- **Spring:** youth, inexperience, fertility, new life.
- **Summer:** heat, passion, adult sexuality
- **Fall:** middle age, knowledge of mortality, illness, self-realization
- **Winter:** old age, end of life, purity, death, coldness, preparation for rebirth

**Consider:** In what season/s does the story take place? Do the characters’ names or place names reflect any seasonal aspects? What might this convey to the reader?
8. **CHRIST FIGURE**. When reading western literature, no matter what one’s personal religious convictions, an understanding of the religious heritage that has informed/influenced society will aid understanding. Often an author will provide a Christ figure to make a point—often about sacrifice, redemption, hope, or the miraculous. Remember not to be overly literal here—it is the symbolic level that readers are interested in. If a character has three or more of the following qualities (again, may not be literal), s/he is a possible Christ figure:

- **Crucified.** (May have wounds in hand, feet, side, or brow).
- **Agony.** (Pain greater than most are asked to endure).
- **Self-sacrificing.** May give up something for benefit of another or a group.
- **Good with children.**
- **Loaves, fishes, water, wine.** The subject of some of Jesus’ miracles. Does your character interact with any of these?
- **33 years of age (thereabouts).**
- **Carpenter.** Your character may be a carpenter or other similarly humble profession.
- **Walked on water.** May be figurative—your character may spend time on a boat, floating, etc.
- **Time alone in the wilderness.**
- **Tempted by the devil.** Is your character tempted by something and able to morally withstand it?
- **Spends time with the lower elements of society without being one of them.**
- **Buried and rose on the third day.** May not be literal—does your character disappear or is hidden from view for three days?
- **12 disciples.** Does your character have someone or a group who follows him/her?
- **Unusually forgiving.** Does your character forgive above and beyond the call of duty?
- **Redeems an unworthy world.** Does your character save someone or a group of people who don’t deserve to be saved?
- **Predecessor/prophet.** As in John the Baptist, who announced Jesus’ coming—does your character have a predecessor?
- **Baptism.** Does your character go in the water and come up wiser, or reborn in some way?
- **The One.** Is your character human, but somehow more than human?
- **Halo.** In Catholic tradition, Jesus’ head was surrounded by light. Is your character’s head similarly distinguished in some way (again, not literal).

**CONSIDER:** Does your character have three or more of these traits, and if so, how specific are they? What traits distinguish your character as a Christ figure, and what point(s) do you think the author was making by giving the character these traits?
9. **GEOGRAPHY.** Place and landscape matter. Geography can define an environment, mood, character; it can play an important part in the plot, as well as in underlying themes. It can be quite obvious, as in *The Wizard of Oz* or *Edward Scissorhands*, or less obvious, as the underlying meaning of the open prairies in *Dances With Wolves*. Also think about direction: If a character travels up, or north, it is often about an ascent of some kind—enlightenment, fulfillment, purity, clarity of vision, isolation, achievement. If a character travels down, or south, it is often about obscured vision, falling, being brought low, leaving civilization—a descent of some kind.

**CONSIDER:** Pay attention to the language the author uses to describe the landscape and architecture of a work. Does the environment give you clues—is it rugged, wide-open, dreary, mountainous, light, gloomy? What about the culture—primitive, sophisticated, urban? How might all this information impact the story and characters?

10. **SYMBOLISM.** A true symbol may represent many things, adding richness and many levels to the text. While symbols can’t mean everything, they also can’t stand for only one thing—a one to one correspondence would make it an allegory. Symbols are by their nature **overdetermined**, meaning they carry multiple layers of meaning. The meaning of symbols may be drawn from myth, history, literature, psychology, archetypes, religion, and more. While we need to rely on evidence of the text to discipline our identification of the symbol, understanding the symbol also involves some instinctive creative intelligence—trust your instincts.

**CONSIDER:** Does an object show up more than once? If it keeps appearing, there’s a reason. Is it described in unusually vivid or particular detail? What’s happening each time the symbol is mentioned? Is there a pattern or progression of events each time? Are there qualities of the symbol which may give clues to its meaning—color, size, texture, nature (wild vs. domestic, for example), etc.?

11. **IRONY TRUMPS ALL.** If the writer is using irony as a literary device, any of the above concepts may be reversed or negated. Irony works in part because of our expectations and the surprise when they are reversed. Sometimes the reader sees implications that may elude the character (as in the dramatic irony in “Appointment in Samarra.”)

**CONSIDER:** If you find evidence of any of these patterns or symbols, but as the story progresses the expected outcome is reversed, then consider what the author may be trying to communicate to the reader.