

14 - Yes, She's a Christ Figure, Too

THIS MAY SURPRISE SOME OF YOU, but we live in a Christian culture. What I mean is that since the preponderance of cultural influences has come down to us from European early settlers, and since those early settlers inflicted their values on the “benighted” cultures they encountered (“benighted,” from the Old English, meaning “anyone darker than myself”), those inflicted values have gained ascendancy. This is not to say that all citizens of this great republic are Christians, any more than that they are all great republicans. I once heard a well-known Jewish professor of composition speak about walking into her very first final examination in college only to be confronted with this question: “discuss the Christian imagery in Billy Budd.” It simply never occurred to her professor back in the 1950s that Christian imagery might be alien territory for some students.

Institutions of higher learning can no longer blithely assume that everyone in class is a Christian, and if they do, it's at their own risk. Still, no matter what your religious beliefs, to get the most out of your reading of European and American literatures, knowing something about the Old and New Testaments is essential. Similarly, if you undertake to read literature from an Islamic or a Buddhist or a Hindu culture, you're going to need knowledge of other religious traditions. Culture is so influenced by its dominant religious systems that whether a writer adheres to the beliefs or not, the values and principles of those religions will inevitably inform the literary work. Often those values will not be religious in nature but may show themselves in connection with the individual's role within society, or humankind's relation to nature, or the involvement of women in public life, although, as we have seen, just as often religion shows up in the form of allusions and analogues. When I read an Indian novel, for example, I'm often aware, if only dimly, of how much I'm missing due to my ignorance of the various religious traditions of the subcontinent. Since I'd like to get more out of my reading, I've worked to reduce that ignorance, but I still have a way to go.

Okay, so not everyone is a Christian around these parts, nor do those who would say they are necessarily have more than a nodding familiarity with the New Testament, aside from John 3:16, which is always beside the goalposts at football games. But in all probability they do know one thing: they know why it's called Christianity. Okay, so it's not the most profound insight ever, but it matters. A lot. Northrop Frye, one of the great literary critics, said in the 1950s that biblical typology - the comparative study of types between the Old and New Testaments and, by extension, out into literature - was a dead language, and things haven't improved since then. While we may not be all that well versed in types and archetypes from the Bible, we generally recognize, whatever our religious affiliation, some of the features that make Christ who he is.

Whether you do or not, this list may be helpful:

- 1) crucified, wounds in the hands, feet, side, and head
- 2) in agony
- 3) self-sacrificing
- 4) good with children
- 5) good with loaves, fishes, water, wine
- 6) thirty-three years of age when last seen
- 7) employed as carpenter
- 8) known to use humble modes of transportation, feet or donkeys preferred
- 9) believed to have walked on water

- 10) often portrayed with arms outstretched
- 11) known to have spent time alone in the wilderness
- 12) believed to have had a confrontation with the devil, possibly tempted
- 13) last seen in the company of thieves
- 14) creator of many aphorisms and parables
- 15) buried, but arose on the third day
- 16) had disciples, twelve at first, although not all equally devoted
- 17) very forgiving
- 18) came to redeem an unworthy world

You may not subscribe to this list, may find it too glib, but if you want to read like a literature professor, you need to put aside your belief system, at least for the period during which you read, so you can see what the writer is trying to say. As you're reading that story or poem, religious knowledge is helpful, although religious belief, if too tightly held, can be a problem. We want to be able to identify features in stories and see how they are being used; in other words, we want to be analytical.

Say we're reading a book, a novel. Short novel, say. And let's say this short novel has a man in it, a man no longer young, in fact old, as well as very poor and engaged in a humble profession. Not carpentry, say, but fishing. Jesus had some dealings with fishermen, too, and is often connected symbolically with fish, so that's a point of similarity. And the old fisherman hasn't had much good luck for a long time, so no one believes in him. In general there's a lot of doubt and nonbelief in our story. But one young boy believes in him; sadly, though, the boy isn't allowed to accompany the fisherman anymore, because everyone, the boy's parents included, think the old man is bad luck. There's a second point of similarity: he's good with children. Or at least one child. And he has one disciple. And this old man is very good and pure, so that's another point. Because the world he lives in is rather sullied and unworthy, fallen even.

During his solitary fishing trip, the old man hooks into a big fish that takes him far out beyond his known limits, to where the sea becomes a wilderness. He's all alone, and he's put through great physical suffering, during which even he begins to doubt himself. His hands are ripped up by the struggle, he thinks he's broken something in his side. But he bucks himself up with aphorisms like "A man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated" - inspiring things like that. Somehow he can endure this whole episode, which lasts three days and which finally makes it seem to those on land that he's dead. His great fish is ruined by sharks, but he manages to drag this huge ruined skeleton back to port. His return is like a resurrection. He has to walk up a hill from the water to his shack, and he carries his mast, which looks like a man carrying a cross from a certain point of view. Then he lies on his bed, exhausted by his struggles, his arms thrown out in the position of crucifixion, showing his damaged, raw hands. And the next morning, when people see the great fish, even the doubters begin to believe in him again. He brings a kind of hope, a kind of redemption, to this fallen world, and...yes?

Didn't Hemingway write a book like that?

Yes, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), a nearly perfect literary parable, so clear, with symbols so available, that the Christian imagery is accessible to even beginning readers. But let's give old Hemingway some credit here; the narrative is more subtle than I've just made it sound. And the struggle is so vivid and concrete that one can get a lot out of it - triumph over adversity, the value of

hope and faith, the attainment of grace – without placing undue weight on the old man, Santiago, as a Christ figure.

So must all Christ figures be as unambiguous as this? No, they don't have to hit all the marks. Don't have to be male. Don't have to be Christian. Don't even have to be good. (See the stories of Flannery O'Connor for example after example.) There, however, we're starting to get into irony, and that's a whole different area where I don't want to go just yet. Yet. But if a character is a certain age, exhibits certain behaviors, provides for certain outcomes, or suffers in certain ways, your literary antennae should begin to twitch. How should we know, though? Here's a handy list, not all-inclusive, but a start:

YOU MIGHT BE A CHRIST FIGURE IF YOU ARE... (CHECK ANY THAT APPLY):

- thirty-three years old
- unmarried, preferably celibate
- wounded or marked in the hands, feet, or side (crown of thorns extra credit)
- sacrificing yourself in some way for others (your life is best, and your sacrifice doesn't have to be willing)
- in some sort of wilderness, tempted there, accosted by the devil

Oh, you get the point. Consult previous list.

Are there things you don't have to do? Certainly. Consider Santiago again. Wait, you say, shouldn't he be thirty-three? And the answer is, sometimes that's good. But a Christ figure doesn't need to resemble Christ in every way; otherwise he wouldn't be a Christ figure, he'd be, well, Christ. The literal elements – changing water into wine, unless in some clumsy way such as pouring out someone's water and filling his glass with wine; stretching loaves and fishes to feed five thousand; preaching (although some do); suffering actual crucifixion; literally following in his footsteps – aren't really required. It's the symbolic level we're interested in.

Which brings us to another issue we've touched upon in other chapters. Fiction and poetry and drama are not necessarily playgrounds for the overly literal. Many times I'll point out that a character is Christlike because he does X and Y, and you might come back with, "But Christ did A and Z and his X wasn't like that, and besides, this character listens to AC/DC." Okay, so the heavy-metal sound isn't in the hymnal. And this character would be very hard pressed to take over Savior duty. No literary Christ figure can ever be as pure, as perfect, as divine as Jesus Christ. Here as elsewhere, one does well to remember that writing literature is an exercise of the imagination. And so is reading it. We have to bring our imaginations to bear on a story if we are to see all its possibilities; otherwise it's just about somebody who did something. Whatever we take away from stories in the way of significance, symbolism, theme, meaning, pretty much anything except character and plot, we discover because our imagination engages with that of the author. Pretty amazing when you consider that the author may have been dead for a thousand years, yet we can still have this kind of exchange, this dialogue, with her. At the same time, this doesn't indicate the story can mean anything we want it to, since that would be a case of our imagination not bothering with that of the author and just inventing whatever it wants to see in the text. That's not reading, that's writing. But that's another matter, and one we'll discuss elsewhere.

On the flip side, if someone in class asks if it's possible that the character under discussion might be a Christ figure, citing three or four similarities, I'll say something like, "Works for me." The bottom line, I

usually tell the class, is that Christ figures are where you find them, and as you find them. If the indicators are there, then there is some basis for drawing the conclusion.

Why, you might ask, are there Christ figures? As with most other cases we've looked at where the work engages some prior text, the short answer is that probably the writer wants to make a certain point. Perhaps the parallel deepens our sense of the character's sacrifice if we see it as somehow similar to the greatest sacrifice we know of. Maybe it has to do with redemption, or hope, or miracle. Or maybe it is all being treated ironically, to make the character look smaller rather than greater. But count on it, the writer is up to something. How do we know what he's up to? That's another job for imagination.