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Two Kinds of Allusion

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a work of literature is inspired by other past works. Writers and readers alike know that complete originality is impossible, and so every piece ever written has bits and pieces that come from other works. But Thomas Foster, the author of *How To Read Literature Like A Professor*, takes this argument one step further. Foster’s main idea is that not only do past works influence the literature of today, but that all literature comes from one of four sources (Shakespeare, the Bible, fairy tales, or mythology). Foster points out that every writer, whether knowingly or not, incorporates elements from past stories and is influenced by them. He says that “work[s] interact[t] with other works[, and] those works with others”, so that all literature is interconnected. In addition, Foster adds that Shakespeare, the Bible, fairy tales, and mythology are highly influential on literature because of the familiarity the reader has with them and the impact they can make. He asserts that writers turn to those four works often because of how much can be said simply by alluding to them.

As evidence, Foster uses an assortment of examples. He points out several pieces of literature that were undoubtedly influenced by past works. Mark Twain, for example, must have read Arthurian romances in order to write *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Athol Fugard turned to Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* when writing *Master Harold…and the Boys*. Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is forced to react to “the Apocalypse…riding up [her] lane” (Foster), a Bible allusion. Nor does Foster limit himself to concrete examples of past works influencing future works. He points out how unavoidable Shakespeare quotes are in today’s society, to the point that, while reading Shakespeare, people “keep stumbling across lines [they’ve] been hearing and reading all your life” (Foster). Ever heard “Double, double toil and trouble/Fire burn, and cauldron bubble” (Crowther 130) from Macbeth? Foster also challenges the reader to create a movie western without using any archetypes or familiar story elements. By asking the reader to find or create a story with no outside influences, Foster drives home the point that all stories are interconnected.

At first, Foster’s claims appear to be only partially true. It is quite obvious that stories are connected, but the idea that *every* story must be from one of four sources seems preposterous. Of course there are *some* stories that come from Shakespeare, the Bible, fairy tales, or mythology, but surely not every one? After all, Chris Colfer may have written about “[t]he evil Enchantress who tried killing Sleeping Beauty [coming] back” (111) to get revenge in his *The Land of Stories* series, but other writers, like Jennifer A. Nielsen, author of *The False Prince*, do not seem to have been influenced by any of the four sources. Nielsen tells the tale of a prince who masquerades as the “orphaned son of a failed musician and a barmaid” (271) until his family is killed and a dangerous coup begins, and the story appears to have no influence from any of the four sources mentioned. It is only after careful inspection that Foster’s claims hold to be true, and the reason behind this is very simple. All stories come from Foster’s four sources, but some are influenced more subtly than others.

On one hand, some literature obviously comes from Foster’s four sources. A whole array of books called “fairytale retellings” easily fit in this category. *The Land of Stories* is one such example, as is Stephanie Sanders’ *Villain School* duology. *Villain School* proudly features “Dracula’s daughter… [and the son of the] Big Bad Wolf” (Sanders 4). There are references to Goldilocks, the witch from Hansel and Gretel, and Rumpelstiltskin. In fact, a majority of Foster’s examples are like these obviously influenced pieces: a “reworked A Midsummer Night’s Dream as…A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy” (Foster), *East of Eden* as a biblical reference, and *The Gingerbread House* as a retelling of Hansel and Gretel are prime examples. These examples do not support Foster’s arguments very well, as it is quite evident that the writer intended to reference the sources and it does not address stories whose references to the four sources are far less evident. However, these examples do prove the “shaping and sustaining power” (Foster) of the four sources, since the writers evidently chose these sources for their influence on the world and the effect one can get from alluding to them.

On the other hand, other works of literature make their influences more subtle. For example, the aforementioned *The False Prince*. Its premise does not immediately seem to be from any of the sources: ambitious Conner kills the royal family and seeks for a boy to pose as the long-lost prince and help him win the throne. Little does he know that one of his candidates for his false prince is the actual Prince Jaron, who “ha[s] a talent for causing trouble” (Nielsen 258) and plans to use it in order to avenge his family. But Conner resembles Macbeth, a man “tempted into murder to fulfill his ambitions to the throne” (Crowther ix), and Jaron has his similarities to the infamous prodigal son of the Bible, another troublemaker who also left his family and had a better older brother. The novel is full of the thematic patterns of the two sources, as well: lies, regret, and ambition fill it to the brim. Though Nielsen cites “the music of Eddie Vedder” (344) as the novel’s inspiration, the Bard and the Bible have both made a lasting mark on the book. Foster also uses examples that hide their influences better: Indiana Jones “goes back to Apollonius and The Argonautica” (Foster), and James Baldwin’s *Sonny’s Blues* references Isaiah 51:17. These examples work well in supporting Foster’s argument. They quickly prove that the four sources are hiding in the stories that we may not immediately expect.

However, despite how interesting Foster’s argument may be, it is not necessary for a reader to know this. The story is not greatly impacted by any allusion, as “so many readers [will] not get the allusion” (Foster) that no writer would hinge the comprehensibility of the story on it. What does it matter if “[Kyra] and Ariana [being] best friends” (Zinn 12) in Bridget Zinn’s *Poison* is reminiscent of the relationship of David and Jonathan in the Bible? The truth is that Foster’s theory has very little effect on how one reads literature. While it certainly makes literary analysis far more interesting, Foster’s ideas have little bearing on the average reader. Unless one is writing a research paper, Foster’s articles are merely interesting and not very significant.