

UNH Professor's New Book Takes Guesswork out of Literary Analysis

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Shakespeare's Romeo refers to "saint-seducing gold." Yeats writes about "the silver apples of the moon." But what exactly are these literary forefathers talking about? English literature is loaded with symbolism and, not surprisingly, many students may find it difficult to wade through the poetry and prose.

Michael Ferber, a University of New Hampshire professor of English, recently completed a reference book aimed at demystifying the meaning of literary symbols for students and scholars. "A Dictionary of Literary Symbols," published by Cambridge University Press, includes 175 main entries on everything from the famous apple in the Garden of Eden to Byron's myrtle, ivy and laurel in "Stanzas Written on the Road between Florence and Pisa."

Ferber's motivation to research and write the dictionary came after reading literary analysis by students that, in some cases, was way off-base. For example, one of his former students suggested that Byron was inspired to use myrtle, ivy and laurel in his poem because "he might have passed them on the road between Florence and Pisa."

Ferber wrote back, explaining that these are symbolic plants and the student needed to look up their meaning. But where? After talking with colleagues, he realized sources were scarce, and the idea of a dictionary was born.

The comprehensive reference work includes quotations and cross-references, and concentrates on English literature. However, its entries range from the Bible and classical authors to the 20th century, along with American and European literature.

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