

# Introduction

In the opening chapters of Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* (1854), the aptly named Thomas Gradgrind warns the teachers and pupils at his "model" school to avoid using their imaginations. "Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life," exclaims Mr. Gradgrind. To press his point, Mr. Gradgrind asks "girl number twenty," Sissy Jupe, the daughter of a circus performer, to define a horse. When she cannot, Gradgrind turns to Bitzer, a pale, spiritless boy who "looked as though, if he were cut, he would bleed white." A "model" student of this "model" school, Bitzer gives exactly the kind of definition to satisfy Mr. Gradgrind:

Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely, twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs.

Anyone who has any sense of what a horse is rebels against Bitzer's lifeless picture of that animal and against the "Gradgrind" view of reality. As these first scenes of *Hard Times* lead us to expect, in the course of the novel the fact-grinding Mr. Gradgrind learns that human beings cannot live on facts alone; that it is dangerous to stunt the faculties of imagination and feeling; that, in the words of one of the novel's more lovable characters, "People must be amused." Through the downfall of an exaggerated enemy of the imagination, Dickens reminds us why we like and even *need* to read literature.

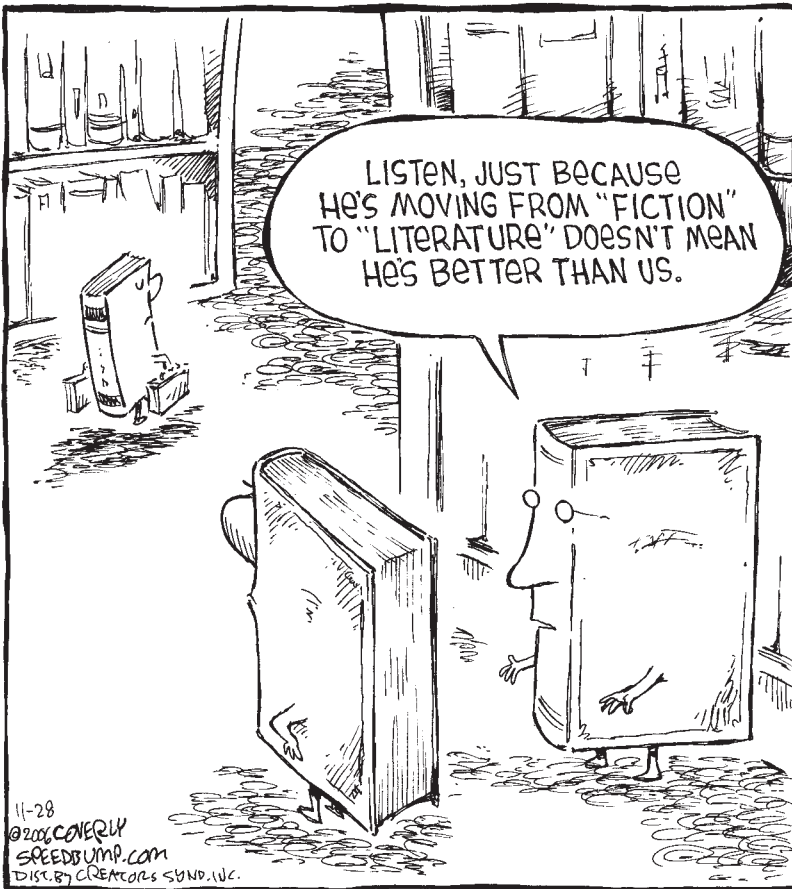
## WHAT IS LITERATURE?

But what is literature? Before you opened this book, you probably could guess that it would contain the sorts of stories, poems, and plays you have encountered in English classes or in the literature section of a library or bookstore. But why are some written works called *literature* whereas others are not? And who gets to decide? *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* offers a number of definitions for the word *literature*, one of which is "imaginative or creative writing, especially of recognized artistic value." In this book, we adopt a version of that definition by focusing on fictional stories, poems, and plays—the three major kinds (or **genres**) of "imaginative or creative writing" that form the heart of literature as it has been taught in schools and universities for over a century. Many of the works we have chosen to include are already ones "of recognized artistic value" and thus belong to what scholars call the **canon**, a select, if much-debated and ever-evolving, list of the most highly and widely esteemed works. Though quite a few of the literary texts we include are simply too new to have earned that status, they, too, have already drawn praise, and some have even generated controversy.

Certainly it helps to bear in mind what others have thought of a literary work. Yet one of this book's primary goals is to get you to think for yourself, as well as communicate with others, about what "imaginative writing" and "artistic value" are or might be and thus about what counts as literature. What makes a story or poem different from an essay, a newspaper editorial, or a technical manual? For

that matter, what makes a published, canonical story like Herman Melville's *BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER* both like and unlike the sorts of stories we tell each other every day? What about so-called *oral literature*, such as the fables and folktales that circulated by word of mouth for hundreds of years before they were ever written down? Or published works such as comic strips and graphic novels that rely little, if at all, on the written word? Or Harlequin romances, television shows, and the stories you collaborate in making when you play a video game? Likewise, how is Shakespeare's poem *MY MISTRESS'S EYES ARE NOTHING LIKE THE SUN* both like and unlike a verse you might find in a Hallmark card or even a jingle in a mouthwash commercial?

Today, literature departments offer courses in many of these forms of expression, expanding the realm of literature far beyond the limits of the dictionary definition. An essay, a song lyric, a screenplay, a supermarket romance, a novel by Toni Morrison or William Faulkner, and a poem by Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson—each may be read and interpreted in *literary ways* that yield insight and pleasure. What makes the literary way of reading different from pragmatic reading is, as scholar Louise Rosenblatt explains, that it does not focus “on what will remain [. . .] *after* the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out,” but rather on “what happens



during [. . .] reading.” The difference between pragmatic and literary reading, in other words, resembles the difference between a journey that is only about reaching a destination and one that is just as much about fully experiencing the ride.

In the pages of this book, you will find cartoons, an excerpt from a graphic novel, song lyrics, folktales, and stories and plays that have spawned movies. Through this inclusiveness, we do not intend to suggest that there are no distinctions among these various forms of expression or between a good story, poem, or play and a bad one; rather, we want to get you thinking, talking, and writing both about what the key differences and similarities among these forms are and what makes one work a better example of its genre than another. Sharpening your skills at these peculiarly intensive and responsive sorts of reading and interpretation is a primary purpose of this book and of most literature courses.

Another goal of inclusiveness is simply to remind you that literature doesn't just belong in a textbook or a classroom, even if textbooks and classrooms are essential means for expanding your knowledge of the literary terrain and of the concepts and techniques essential to thoroughly enjoying and understanding a broad range of literary forms. You may or may not be the kind of person who always takes a novel when you go to the beach or secretly writes a poem about your experience when you get back home. You may or may not have taken a literature course (or courses) before. Yet you already have a good deal of literary experience and even expertise, as well as much more to discover about literature. A major aim of this book is to make you more conscious of how and to what end you might use the tools you already possess and to add many new ones to your tool belt.

## WHAT DOES LITERATURE DO?

One quality that may well differentiate stories, poems, and plays from other kinds of writing is that they help us move beyond and probe beneath abstractions by giving us concrete, vivid particulars. Rather than talking *about* things, they bring them to life for us by *representing* experience, and so they *become* an experience for us—one that engages our emotions, our imagination, and all of our senses, as well as our intellects. As the British poet and critic Matthew Arnold put it more than a century ago, “The interpretations of science do not give us this intimate sense of objects as the interpretations of poetry give it; they appeal to a limited faculty, and not to the whole man. It is not Linnaeus [. . .] who gives us the true sense of animals, or water, or plants, who seizes their secret for us, who makes us participate in their life; it is Shakespeare [. . .] Wordsworth [. . .] Keats.”

To test Arnold's theory, compare the *American Heritage Dictionary's* rather dry definition of *literature* with the following poem, in which John Keats describes his first encounter with a specific literary work—George Chapman's translation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two **epics** by the ancient Greek poet Homer.

## JOHN KEATS

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer<sup>1</sup>

- Much have I traveled in the realms of gold,  
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
 Round many western islands have I been  
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo<sup>2</sup> hold.
- 5 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
 That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;  
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene<sup>3</sup>  
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
- 10 When a new planet swims into his ken;<sup>4</sup>  
 Or like stout Cortez<sup>5</sup> when with eagle eyes  
 He stared at the Pacific—and all his men  
 Looked at each other with a wild surmise—  
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

1816

Keats makes us *see* literature as a “wide expanse” by greatly developing this **metaphor** and complementing it with **similes** likening reading to the sighting of a “new planet” and the first glimpse of an undiscovered ocean. More important, he shows us what literature means and why it matters by allowing us to share with him the subjective experience of reading and the complex sensations it inspires—the dizzying exhilaration of discovery; the sense of power, accomplishment, and pride that comes of achieving something difficult; the wonder we feel in those rare moments when a much-anticipated experience turns out to be even greater than we had imagined it would be.

It isn't the definitions of words alone that bring this experience to life for us as we read Keats's poem, but also their sensual qualities—the way the words look, sound, and even feel in our mouths because of the particular way they are put together on the page. The sensation of excitement—of a racing heart and mind—is reproduced *in* us as we read the poem. For example, notice how the lines in the middle run into each other, but then Keats forces us to slow down at the poem's end—stopped short by that dash and comma in the poem's final lines, just as Cortez and his men are when they reach the edge of the known world and peer into what lies beyond.

## WHAT ARE THE GENRES OF LITERATURE?

The conversation that is literature, as well as the conversation about literature, invites all comers, requiring neither a visa nor a special license of any kind. Yet literary studies, like all disciplines, has developed its own terminology and its own

1. George Chapman's were among the most famous Renaissance translations of Homer; he completed his *Iliad* in 1611, his *Odyssey* in 1616. Keats wrote the sonnet after being led to Chapman by a former teacher and reading the *Iliad* all night long.

2. Greek god of poetry and music. *Fealty*: literally, the loyalty owed by a vassal to his feudal lord.

3. Atmosphere.

4. Range of vision; awareness.

5. Actually, Balboa; he first viewed the Pacific from Darien, in Panama.

systems of classification. Helping you understand and effectively use both is a major focus of this book; especially important terms appear in bold throughout and are defined in a glossary at the back.

Some essential literary terms are common, everyday words used in a special way in the conversation about literature. A case in point, perhaps, is the term *literary criticism*, as well as the closely related term *literary critic*. Despite the usual connotations of the word *criticism*, literary criticism is called *criticism* not because it is negative or corrective but rather because those who write criticism ask searching, analytical, “critical” questions about the works they read. Literary criticism is both the process of interpreting and commenting on literature and the result of that process. If you write an essay on the play *Hamlet*, the poetry of John Keats, or the development of the short story in the 1990s, you engage in literary criticism, and by writing the essay, you’ve become a literary critic.

Similarly, when we classify works of literature, we use terms that may be familiar to you but have specific meanings in a literary context. All academic disciplines have systems of classification, or taxonomies, as well as jargon. Biologists, for example, classify all organisms into a series of ever-smaller, more specific categories: *kingdom*, *phylum* or *division*, *class*, *order*, *family*, *genus*, and *species*. Classification and comparison are just as essential in the study of literature. We expect a poem to work in a certain way, for example, when we know from the outset that it is a poem and not, say, a factual news report or a short story. And—whether consciously or not—we compare it, as we read, to other poems we’ve read in the past. If we know, further, that the poem was first published in eighteenth-century Japan, we expect it to work differently from one that appeared in the latest *New Yorker*. Indeed, we often choose what to read, just as we choose what movie to see, based on the “class” or “order” of book or movie we like or what we are in the mood for that day—horror or comedy, action or science fiction.

As these examples suggest, we generally tend to categorize literary works in two ways: (1) on the basis of contextual factors, especially historical and cultural context—that is, when, by whom, and where it was produced (as in *nineteenth-century literature*, *the literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, *American literature*, or *African American literature*)—and (2) on the basis of formal textual features. For the latter type of classification, the one we focus on in this book, the key term is *genre*, which simply means, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, “A particular style or category of works of art; esp. a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose.”

Applied rigorously, *genre* refers to the largest categories around which this book is organized—**fiction**, **poetry**, and **drama** (as well as **nonfiction** prose). The word *subgenre* applies to smaller divisions within a genre, and the word *kind* to divisions within a subgenre. *Subgenres* of fiction include the **novel**, the **novella**, and the **short story**. *Kinds* of novels, in turn, include things like the **bildungsroman** or the epistolary novel. Similarly, important subgenres of nonfiction include the essay, as well as **biography** and autobiography; a memoir is a particular kind of autobiography, and so on.

However, the terms of literary criticism are not so fixed or so consistently, rigorously used as biologists’ are. You will often see the word *genre* applied both much more narrowly—referring to the novel, for example, or even to a kind of novel such as the epistolary novel or the historical novel.

The way we classify a work depends on which aspects of its form or style we concentrate on, and categories may overlap. When we divide fiction, for example,

into the subgenres novel, novella, and short story, we take the length of the works as the salient aspect. (Novels are much longer than short stories.) But other fictional subgenres—detective fiction, **gothic fiction**, **historical fiction**, science fiction, and even **romance**—are based on the types of **plots**, **characters**, **settings**, and so on that are customarily featured in these works. These latter categories may include works from all the other, length-based categories. There are, after all, gothic novels (think Stephenie Meyer), as well as gothic short stories (think Edgar Allan Poe).

A few genres even cut across the boundaries dividing poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction. A prime example is **satire**—any literary work (whether poem, play, fiction, or nonfiction) “in which prevailing vices and follies are held up to ridicule” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Examples of satire include poems such as Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad* (1728); plays, movies, and television shows, from Molière’s *Tartuffe* (1664) to Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) to *South Park* and *The Daily Show*; works of fiction like Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759); and works of nonfiction such as Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” (1729) and Ambrose Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1906). Three other major genres that cross the borders between fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction are **parody**, **pastoral**, and romance.

Individual works can thus belong simultaneously to multiple generic categories or observe some **conventions** of a genre without being an example of that genre in any simple or straightforward way. The Old English poem *Beowulf* is an **epic** and, because it’s written in verse, a poem. Yet because (like all epics) it narrates a story, it is also a work of fiction in the more general sense of that term.

Given this complexity, the system of literary genres can be puzzling, especially to the uninitiated. Used well, however, classification schemes are among the most essential and effective tools we use to understand and enjoy just about everything, including literature.

## WHY READ LITERATURE?

Because there has never been and never will be absolute, lasting agreement about where exactly the boundaries between one literary genre and another should be drawn or even about what counts as literature at all, it might be more useful from the outset to focus on *why* we look at particular forms of expression.

Over the ages, people have sometimes dismissed *all* literature or at least certain genres as a luxury, a frivolous pastime, even a sinful indulgence. Plato famously banned poetry from his ideal republic on the grounds that it tells beautiful lies that “feed and water our passions” rather than our reason. Thousands of years later, the influential eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham decried the “magic art” of literature as doing a good deal of “mischief” by “stimulating our passions” and “exciting our prejudices.” One of Bentham’s contemporaries—a minister—blamed the rise of immorality, irreligion, and even prostitution on the increasing popularity of that particular brand of literature called the novel.

Today, many Americans express their sense of literature’s insignificance by simply not reading it: The 2004 government report *Reading at Risk* indicates that less than half of U.S. adults read imaginative literature, with the sharpest declines occurring among the youngest age groups. Even if they very much enjoy reading on their own, many contemporary U.S. college students nonetheless hesitate to study or major in literature for fear that their degree won’t provide them with marketable credentials, knowledge, or skills.

Yet the enormous success of *The Hunger Games* trilogy and the proliferation of reading groups are only two of many signs that millions of people continue to find both reading literature and discussing it with others to be enjoyable, meaningful, even essential activities. English thrives as a major at most colleges and universities, almost all of which require undergraduates majoring in other areas to take at least one course in literature. (Perhaps that's why you are reading this book!) Schools of medicine, law, and business are today *more* likely to require their students to take literature courses than they were in past decades, and they continue to welcome literature majors as applicants, as do many corporations. So why do so many people read and study literature, and why do schools encourage and even require students to do so? Even if we know what literature is, what does it *do* for us? What is its value?

There are, of course, as many answers to such questions as there are readers. For centuries, a standard answer has been simply that imaginative literature provides a unique brand of "instruction and delight." John Keats's *ON LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER* illustrates some of the many forms such delight can take. Some kinds of imaginative writing offer us the delight of immediate escape, but imaginative writing that is more difficult to read and understand than a Harry Potter or Twilight novel offers escape of a different and potentially more instructive sort, liberating us from the confines of our own time, place, and social milieu, as well as our habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and looking at the world. In this way, a story, poem, or play can satisfy our desire for broader experience—including the sorts of experience we might be unable or unwilling to endure in real life. We can learn what it might be like to grow up on a Canadian fox farm or to clean ashtrays in the Singapore airport. We can travel back into the past, experiencing war from the perspective of a soldier watching his comrade die or of prisoners suffering in a Nazi labor camp. We can journey into the future or into universes governed by entirely different rules than our own. Perhaps we yearn for such knowledge because we can best come to understand our own identities and outlooks by leaping over the boundaries that separate us from other selves and worlds.

Keats's friend and fellow poet Percy Bysshe Shelley argued that literature increases a person's ability to make such leaps, to "imagine intensely and comprehensively" and "put himself in the place of another and of many othe[r]" people in order "to be greatly good." Shelley meant "good" in a moral sense, reasoning that the ability both to accurately imagine and to truly *feel* the human consequences of our actions is the key to ethical behavior. But universities and professional schools today also define this "good" in distinctly pragmatic ways. In virtually any career you choose, you will need to interact positively and productively with both coworkers and clients, and in today's increasingly globalized world, you will need to learn to deal effectively and empathetically with people vastly different from yourself. At the very least, literature written by people from various backgrounds and depicting various places, times, experiences, and feelings will give you some understanding of how others' lives and worldviews may differ from your own—or how they may be very much the same.

Similarly, our rapidly changing world and economy require intellectual flexibility, adaptability, and ingenuity, making ever more essential the human knowledge, general skills, and habits of mind developed through the study of literature. Literature explores issues and questions relevant in any walk of life. Yet rather than offering us neat or comforting solutions and answers, literature enables us to experience difficult situations and human conundrums in all their complexity and to look at

them from various points of view. In so doing, it invites us sometimes to question conventional thinking and sometimes to see its wisdom, even as it helps us imagine altogether new possibilities.

Finally, literature awakens us to the richness and complexity of language—our primary tool for engaging with, understanding, and shaping the world around us. As we read more and more, seeing how different writers use language to help us feel their joy, pain, love, rage, or laughter, we begin to recognize the vast range of possibilities for self-expression. Writing and discussion in turn give us invaluable practice in discovering, expressing, and defending our own nuanced, often contradictory thoughts about both literature and life. The study of literature enhances our command of language and our sensitivity to its effects and meanings in every form or medium, providing interpretation and communication skills especially crucial in our information age. By learning to appreciate and articulate what the language of a story, poem, a play, or an essay does to us and by considering how it affects others, we also learn much about what we can do with language.

### What We Do With Literature: Three Tips

1. *Take a literary work on its own terms.* Adjust to the work; don't make the work adjust to you. Be prepared to hear things you do not want to hear. Not all works are about your ideas, nor will they always present emotions you want to feel. But be tolerant and listen to the work first; later you can explore the ways you do or don't agree with it.
2. *Assume there is a reason for everything.* Writers do make mistakes, but when a work shows some degree of verbal control it is usually safest to assume that the writer chose each word carefully; if the choice seems peculiar, you may be missing something. Try to account for everything in a work, see what kind of sense you can make of it, and figure out a coherent pattern that explains the text as it stands.
3. *Remember that literary texts exist in time, and times change.* Not only the meanings of words, but whole ways of looking at the universe vary in different ages. Consciousness of time works two ways: Your knowledge of history provides a context for reading the work, and the work may modify your notion of a particular age.

## WHY STUDY LITERATURE?

You may already feel the power and pleasure to be gained from a sustained encounter with challenging reading. Then why not simply enjoy it in solitude, on your own free time? Why take a course in literature? Literary study, like all disciplines, has developed its own terminology and its own techniques. Some knowledge and understanding of both can greatly enhance our personal appreciation of literature and our conversations with others about it. Literature also has a context and a history, and learning something about them can make all the difference in the amount and kind of pleasure and insight you derive from literature. By reading and discussing different genres of literature, as well as works from varied times and places, you may well come to appreciate and even love works that you might never have discovered or chosen to read on your own or that you might have disliked or misunderstood if you did.



Most important, writing about works of literature and discussing them with your teachers and other students will give you practice in analyzing literature in greater depth and in considering alternative views of both the works themselves and the situations and problems the works explore. A clear understanding of the aims and designs of a story, poem, or play never falls like a bolt from the blue. Instead, it emerges from a process that involves trying to put into words *how* and *why* this work had such an effect on you and, just as important, responding to what others say or write about it. Literature itself is a vast, ongoing, ever-evolving conversation in which we most fully participate when we enter into actual conversation with others.

As you engage in this conversation, you will notice that interpretation is always variable, always open to discussion. A great diversity of interpretations might suggest that the discussion is pointless. On the contrary, that's when the discussion gets most interesting. Because there is no single, straight, paved road to an understanding of a literary text, you can explore a variety of blazed trails and less-traveled paths. In sharing your own interpretations, tested against your peers' responses and guided by your instructor's or other critics' expertise, you will hone your skills at both interpretation and communication. After the intricate and interactive process of interpretation, you will find that the work has changed when you read it again. What we do with literature alters what it does to us.