

# English Literature

## *A Very Short Introduction*

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You can hardly cover to any significant extent the realm of English Literature within the confines of a Very Short Introduction. Such an attempt would necessarily reduce to a dry list of titles and authors, maybe embellished by schemes of classifications abetted with pertinent arrows. Thus instead the author choses a reflective mood confining himself to intermittent skydives to its terrain.

For one thing what is Literature and in particular English Literature? As to the first the author chooses to bring up the case of children's books, because after all this is our first introduction to literature, and in many ways perhaps the most vivid one, because the child is impressionable, and nothing makes such an impression as a first impression<sup>1</sup>. It sets the stage with its 'Once upon a time' in which a contract is made with the reader given to the understanding that what is to be narrated is distinct from the here and now and thus factual statements have no bearing on actual life and what follows will inhabit the tenuous border between being and non-being referred to as fiction. What matters is not truth per se, whatever that means, but intrinsic consistency as in mathematical explorations. The author brings forward such recent classics as Winnie-the-Pooh, reflecting the fact that there seems to have been a Golden Age of children's literature around the turn of the century, when books children may be expected to enjoy were actually, unlike Swifts satirical forays one and a half century earlier, intentionally directed to children. My own favorites were the adaptations of 'Robinson Crusoe' and Stevenson's 'Treasure Island'.

But what is literature more generally? Most of what marks children's books are of course also true for adult, but an adult would not be content to live on a fare of children's literature indefinitely, it has to touch on adult issues, some of which are fairly obvious such as sex and death, traditionally considered anathema for the innocent child. There is a lot of fiction being written, but is it all literature? It is very hard to set down precise criteria that separated the wheat from the chaff never mind that the distinction is bound not to be precise. The only test is individual and in particular subjective. A book to which you will inevitably return and which will grow on repeated readings qualifies as a classic, and chances are that if you would enjoy it, others will, and hence reading tradition automatically creates a body of so called classics. Reading lies at the heart of literature, it is only in reading that literature proves its mettle and comes alive. Everybody, especially writers, read much more than they write. The urge to write itself is born out of passionate reading. Thus reading begets writing for the individual, although it begs the question as

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<sup>1</sup> E.M.Forster remarked that nothing he ever read beats 'The Swiss family Robinson' he read as a child, and in spite of its obvious shortcomings, it surely would remain dear to him long after more worthy contenders for his attention and appreciation would have faded away.

to what came first for the collective - reading or writing.

The most basic writing is the one that is merely meant to instruct on a basic level, such as a manual. In one sense one can claim that all writing is about instruction be it at higher levels, trying to communicate what never can be communicated by symbols alone. Pleasure is, as has already been indicated, essential to literature, and most markedly in poetry, where form tends to take preference over content. And that pleasure must be connected to the fact that literature transcends its mechanical encoding in symbols (i.e. characters). As Borges famously remarked, all books can in principle be listed stuffed into a library of finite extent, albeit none physically realizable in the known universe, yet the mere existence, in some way or another, is not the same as being alive. A book only becomes alive in the mind of a reader, prior to that it is but dead matter. There are so many potential treasures among all that chaff which we will never know. 'Pleasure' may not be the kind of word with which we would like to describe sublime reading experiences, and De Quincey took exception to that word supplied by Dr Johnson. Instead of mere 'pleasure' he would like to speak about 'power'. The power to imagine that great literature bestows on the reader.

Intimately connected with enduring works of literature is the notion of a 'canon'. As noted reading experiences, although by nature individualistic, nevertheless, in Jungian terms, partake of a shared collectivity. What would be more natural than to codify a 'canon' a list of essential reading, maybe even of compulsory? Such canons exist of course, be it in the form of school syllabi or publishers choices, such as the black covered classics series by Penguin. Yet there is invariably a strong component of convention and arbitrariness in such list, and there undeniable similarities may be more due to imitation than independent thought. The author reminds the reader that such decisions on inclusion or rejection are necessarily based on committee work, and gives an example of what eventually would deem to be worthy in the inclusion of the Bible, whose form, (as opposed to its contents?) thus is not the result of divine intervention. Similarly, what are the real great Shakespearean plays? 'Hamlet', 'King Lear' and 'Macbeth' are usually mentioned as the pinnacle of his work, yet as to contenders the list varies with time, certain rather obscure plays may become for a time part of the repertoire only to fade again. As to canons there is always an element of fashion which manifests itself cyclically. The impossibility to fashion definite canons does of course not mean that they do not exist, only that their precise boundaries are fuzzy, and hence do not lend themselves to the format of lists.

The traditional way of presenting a body of literature, in this case English, is to start with the historical beginnings and then proceed chronologically. Such an approach, natural as it may seem, has its inevitable drawbacks. History viewed by the leisure of hindsight may be quite a different thing than history lived in the present. Not that it is wrong, only different. Our identification with history as narrative, which is the natural way it is first presented to us, is responsible for this confusion. As R.G. Collingwood remarks, we may in many ways know much more about a past event than those who participated in it, knowledge and experience being two different things. The problem with a historical presentation of English literature is to figure out when English became English, a language which in its infancy was in a flux, the original Anglo-Saxon roots being deeply affected by Scandinavian influences during the Viking Age. 'Beowulf' now being considered as the

first English piece of literature, although it is supposedly set in Southern Scandinavia, was until the 19th century basically unknown, its first translation out of Old English, being into Danish. Hence one may question its influence on the burgeoning of English literature. More important were the Arthur legends which were written down after the Norman Conquest and its Roman influence on the English language, and who were also taken up and embellished by French writers during the Medieval period, only to sink into oblivion only to be revived during the 19th century passionately eager for such tales. While 'Beowulf' may be seen as the foremost representative of the Old English phase, Chaucer with his Canterbury tales is seen as the canonical representative for the Middle English period, and with the 16th century the transform into Modern English, with its embarrassment of riches, was affected. What followed is, in the standard phrase, history.

Related to this is of course the systematic division into periods. Modern English can thus be further subdivided into Renaissance, including Shakespeare, Classical period starting with the restoration of the Stuarts and continuing until the advent of the French Revolution, a period also known as that of the Enlightenment, to be followed by its reaction - the Romanticism, with the towering figure of Lord Byron, which in its turn would be followed by the Victorian era, say represented by Dickens in popular novel and a host of poets which in its turn would be replaced by the Modernism of the 20th century an era of pure writing and literary experimentation. The exact dating of the periods is of course fraught with uncertainty, as are the concomitant classifications of various writers. Many of them can be seen to belong to adjacent periods, either by anticipation or revival.

A more significant classification is by form, i.e. be it poetry, drama or novel (including short stories), to which should be added genres such as biographies, travel writing, critical studies, philosophy and those not automatically intended for publication such as letters, diaries and journals, the latter closely geared towards the minutiae of quotidian life, and thus somehow related to still-lives of visual art. And also in this case precise delineations are hard to make, one form blending into another. The bounded form so to speak of poetry was the norm in the earliest surviving form of writings, maybe as a consequence of the demands of memorization in a pre-literary age. Poetry as such being easier to commit to memory and to quote than prose, where sense takes precedence over form. In fact the instructive element conveyed by prose makes it hard to recall exact words as opposed to meaning, which is continually being reconstructed by the mind, as it should be in a living text. This does not mean that prose is not artful, but unlike poetry it should not call attention to itself.

As to poetry there is much of that in Shakespeare, although, apart from the Sonnets, his main concern were plays. For one thing his plays, as those of his contemporary Ben Jonson, are written in blank verse, further developed by Milton. Once again the metric constraint being the norm in all kinds of literary writing until the classical period, with writers such as Defoe and Swift more concerned with straight-forward reportage. Poetry, like opera, was for a long time a matter of wide public enjoyment and appreciation, and the skill, even expected among amateurs, to turn out a pleasant collection of lines, were generally appreciated. But the predominance of poetry eventually waned, and experimental poetry of the 20th century may have had some influence, now poetry remains basically in the public mind in the form of popular songs, something that can be deplored as vul-

garization, on the other hand its vitality nevertheless cannot be denied, as opposed to the more esoteric and academic pursuit of the classical tradition. A case which finds its parallel in classical music.

The regular novel did not come into existence in the English realm until the 18th century, and apart from the aforementioned writers, its beginnings were rather awkward. Defoe probably did not think of 'Robinson Crusoe' as a novel, but as the spinning of an exemplary tale, and Swift of course wrote as a satirist. In other words their works should be thought of as elaborated pamphlets. The awkwardness referred to above is shown by the tentativeness of form. In the beginning the epistolary novel was predominant, adapting a commonly known form, endowing it with fictional content. Authors such as Fielding and Smollett, fit into this rather elaborate tradition. Goldsmith's 'The Vicar of Wakefield' made a splash at the time, with repercussions well beyond the English scene. Goethe, for one thing, reports in his autobiographical writings, about its impact on the German scene. Towards the end of the century the Gothic novel made its appearance, creating a mass market, and contributing to the idea that the reading of novels was detrimental to character building and a sign of indolence and escape from reality. True, most of what was produced, was eminently perishable, no doubt written in a formulaic approach. Still as a phenomenon it provided inspiration for satire and parody as in the early work of Jane Austen. Her work is an excellent illustration of the emergence of classics. One striking character of classic writing is its apparent modernity, just compare the works by Austen to her contemporaries. One may either think of this as a case of uncanny anticipation of the taste and expectations of a distant future, or perhaps more tautologically as a shaping of the same. Austen is very popular today her works the subject of endless dramatizations as films or serializations, occasionally disparaged as so called 'costume dramas'. While Scott, whose impact at the time was far greater, is considered more outdated. The verdict of posterity is not always just, let alone fixed, and Scott may be up for a revival yet. The greatness of Scott is his invention of the historical novel which paved the way for the great tradition of Victorian novels. Just as Goethe in his youth had been enthusiastic about Goldsmith, in old age he always spoke appreciatively about Scott (at least to Eckermann). As to the Victorian Novel, Dickens stands out. He started a tradition that still survives to this day in the form of soap-operas<sup>2</sup>. Crucial to its development was the cheapening of the printing process and the subsequent proliferation of newsprint. The tradition of first appearing in serial form and only later to be issued as a book, previous success a guarantee for the success of the later venture, became established. Henry James, with the ambition of creating a more sophisticated version of the Dickensian novel, still adhered to that format being the last major writer to do so, if not with the same resounding success as with his British predecessor.

The 20th century saw the gradual decline of literature among the wider public. It became more esoteric and experimental, more of writers literature than readers. Writers such as Joyce and Woolf became proponents of the new idea of 'stream of consciousness' incidentally a term coined by William James, the older brother of the aforementioned

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<sup>2</sup> A term predominant in the States after the fifties and the advent of TV, but did not enter Swedish usage until the 80's, the phenomenon at first generating confusion as exemplified by the translation into 'Lödder' of an early adaptation.

Henry, in his great opus on the Principles of Psychology. There are of course many more writers today than in any previous historical period, but they have to compete to catch the attentions of a shrinking population of readers in a time when reading has so many rivals for attention. Reading is no longer a prerequisite for narrative experiences, yet to speak of the decline of literature is premature, there are simply too many hopeful writers. On the other hand literature cannot survive if it is only read by fellow writers. Then the average readership of books will converge to the ratio of books read by a writer and those written by him.

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