

# Literature

Literature operates through a system of language in which the words themselves trigger our understanding.

## Genres

Like many of the other arts, we approach literature first through the formal door of its genres. These are fiction, poetry, biography, and essay.

*Fiction* is a work created from the author's imagination rather than from fact. Normally, it takes one of two approaches to its subject matter: realistic—the appearance of observable, true-to-life details—or nonrealistic—fantasy. Other literary forms, such as narrative poetry, however, can also be fiction, and fictional elements can be introduced into forms such as biography and epic poetry. Traditionally, fiction is divided into novels and short stories.

*Poetry*, on the other hand, is a type of work designed to convey a vivid and imaginative sense of experience. It uses concentrated language, selected for its sound, suggestive power, and meaning, and employs specific technical devices such as meter, rhyme, and metaphor. Poetry can be divided into three major types: *narrative*, which tells a story, *dramatic*, which utilizes dramatic form or technique, and *LYRIC*, which consists of brief, subjective treatments employing strong imagination, melody, and feeling to create a single, unified, and intense impression of the personal emotion of the poet.

Over the centuries, *biography*, a written account of a person's life, has taken many forms, including literary narratives, simple catalogues of achievement, and psychological portraits. Biographies of saints and other religious figures are called hagiographies.

Traditionally, the *essay* is a short literary composition on a single subject, usually presenting the personal views of the author. Essays include many subforms and a variety of styles, but they uniformly present a personal point of view

with a conscious attempt to achieve grace of expression. Characteristically, the best essays are marked by clarity, good humor, wit, urbanity, and tolerance.

## Point of View, Character, and Plot

In writing fiction, authors usually employ one of four *points of view*: (1) first person; (2) epistolary (the use of letters written by the characters); (3) third person; or (4) stream of consciousness (wherein a flow of thoughts and feelings come from a specific character's psyche).

As in theatre, *character* also represents an important focus. The people in the work and their struggles with some important human problem give literature much of its appeal.

*Plot* in a work of literature may be a major or subordinate focus. Like theatrical plots, literary plots unfold the structure of the work and may come to a climax and resolution or leave the characters in a convenient place, allowing us to imagine their future lives continuing as their characters dictate.

## Theme and Language

Most good stories have an overriding idea or *theme* by which the other elements are shaped. Although some critics argue that the quality of a theme is less important than what the author does with it, the best artworks are often those in which the author has taken a meaningful theme and developed it exceptionally.

In poetry, *language* that includes imagery—figures, which take words beyond their literal meaning, and *METAPHORS*, which give new implication to words—also provides an important focus.