

What is Literature, and Why Does It Matter?

With the latest financial crisis came budget cuts, and with budget cuts came questions - why do we funnel money into the arts? Why does the study of English literature matter? It doesn't prepare students for a trade, or even an obvious career path. What relevance can old books have on the lives of today's students? And for the matter, what exactly is English literature anyway?

The list of resources below can be used to answer questions, stir up debate, and hopefully convince those who didn't grow up loving literature that it is in fact a concrete discipline of studies, and that it is infinitely worthwhile. Because great writers really do inspire.

Links in the text point to resources in the Great Writers Inspire site. The resources can also be found via the 'What is Literature?' start page [1]. Further material can be found via [our Library](#) [2] and via the various authors and theme pages.

"What is a Great Writer?" Panel Discussion

Talk: ([audio](#) [3] | [video](#) [4])

In this panel discussion from the Great Writers Inspire Engage Event workshop, four Oxford academics speak about the criteria for what makes a great writer, often through the lens of their personal great writer. Seamus Perry chooses Samuel Taylor Coleridge, inspired as he is by the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and its myriad possible interpretations. Margaret Kean chooses John Milton, who used his *Paradise Lost* to position himself in the canon of great writers during his lifetime. Peter McDonald talks about who decides who is considered to be a great writer, suggesting literary agents, prize judges, editors, reviewers, critics, librarians, and ordinary readers. Finally, Ankhi Mukherjee discusses the greatness of V S Naipul, who was critical of the existing literary canon and so set out to create his own kind of great literature.

What is a Classic? Panel discussion from the *English Graduate Conference* (2012)

- **Talk 1:** ([audio](#) [5] | [video](#) [6])

In the opening talk of the 'What is a Classic?' panel, Dr. Ankhi Mukherjee examines the residual influence of the Eurocentric literary canon in the age of world literature and emergent formations of canons and classics.

- **Talk 2:** ([audio](#) [7] | [video](#) [8])

In the second talk Judith Luna, the Senior Commissioning Editor at Oxford World's Classics, gives a publisher's perspective on what makes a classic. Since its inception, the focus of the Oxford World Classics has shifted from a means for the general reader to build up a personal library to a series that provides texts and accompanying critical apparatus for university students. The demands of the marketplace determine what Oxford World Classics can publish, and so for Judith Luna, a classic is a book that people still want to read (and buy) today.

- **Talk 3:** ([audio](#) [9] | [video](#) [10])

In the third talk, Baroness Helena Kennedy QC explains what a classic is from her perspective as a trustee of the Booker Prize and as a judge for many other literary prizes, such as the Orange Prize, Samuel Johnson Prize, and The Guardian's First Book Prize. When considering what makes a great book, she looks for writing that is transformative and reaches beyond the banal.

Literature and Form Series

Dr. Catherine Brown offers a wonderful series introducing different writing forms and their use in great novels:

- **Unreliable Narrators:** ([audio](#) [11]) and ([video](#) [12])
In the first lecture, Brown discusses the use of the unreliable narrator, particularly in Nabokov's *Lolita* and McEwan's *Atonement*.
- **Chapters:** ([audio](#) [13]) and ([video](#) [14])
In the second lecture, Brown talks about the ways in which writers choose to break up their works into chapters, parts, and volumes.
- **Multiple Plotting:** ([audio](#) [15]) and ([video](#) [16])
In the third lecture, Brown discusses the different ways writers plot their work, whether multi-plotted works like James Joyce's *Ulysses* or double plotted works like George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*.
- **What is "Comparative Literature"?** ([audio](#) [17]) and ([video](#) [18])
In the final lecture, Brown debates the philosophy defining Comparative Literature and how literature can be studied in comparison with other works.

More...

- **The Concept of 'literariness' or 'the literary':** [Part 1](#) [19] and [Part 2](#) [20]
Dr Katie Mullan and Professor Francis O'Gorman discuss the notion of the literary, whether or not 'literariness' is a helpful idea, and how the literary is determined.
- **Beyond AC Bradley and FR Leavis - The Critics and How to Handle Them:** [Part 1](#) [21] and [Part 2](#) [22]
Dr. Alaric Hall of the University of Leeds gives concrete advice for A-level students on how to understand and incorporate literary criticism into their own writing.
- **Introduction to Theory of Literature:**
Watch this [online course](#) [23] from Yale's Professor Paul H. Fry for a more detailed understanding of literary theory and its critics.
- **The Future of Books:** ([article](#) [24])
University of Cambridge Professor John Thompson writes on the drastic changes the publishing industry has undergone in the past few decades, its impact on the success of different kinds of books, and the future of the book.

Source URL (modified on 08/12/2013 - 18:30): <http://writersinspire.org/content/what-literature-why-does-it-matter>

Links

- [1] <http://writersinspire.org/themes/feminist-approaches-literature>
- [2] <http://writersinspire.org/library>
- [3] <http://writersinspire.org/content/what-great-writer-academic-panel-discussion>
- [4] <http://writersinspire.org/content/what-great-writer-academic-panel-discusses-question>
- [5] <http://writersinspire.org/content/what-classic-english-graduate-conference-2012-panel-debate-talk-1>

- [6] <http://writersinspire.org/content/what-classic-english-graduate-conference-2012-panel-debate-talk-1-0>
- [7] <http://writersinspire.org/content/what-classic-english-graduate-conference-2012-panel-debate-talk-2-0>
- [8] <http://writersinspire.org/content/what-classic-english-graduate-conference-2012-panel-debate-talk-2>
- [9] <http://writersinspire.org/content/what-classic-english-graduate-conference-2012-panel-debate-talk-3-0>
- [10] <http://writersinspire.org/content/what-classic-english-graduate-conference-2012-panel-debate-talk-3>
- [11] <http://writersinspire.org/content/literature-form-1-unreliable-narrators>
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- [21] <http://writersinspire.org/content/beyond-ac-bradley-fr-leavis-critics-how-handle-them-pt1>
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