# ENGLISH LITERATURE

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION — THE MEANING OF LITERATURE

Hold the hye wey, and lat thy gost thee lede.
Chaucer's *Truth*

On, on, you noblest English, . . .
Follow your spirit.
Shakespeare's *Henry V*

**The Shell and the Book.** A child and a man were one day walking on the seashore when the child found a little shell and held it to his ear. Suddenly he heard sounds, — strange, low, melodious sounds, as if the shell were remembering and repeating to itself the murmurs of its ocean home. The child's face filled with wonder as he listened. Here in the little shell, apparently, was a voice from another world, and he listened with delight to its mystery and music. Then came the man, explaining that the child heard nothing strange; that the pearly curves of the shell simply caught a multitude of sounds too faint for human ears, and filled the glimmering hollows with the murmur of innumerable echoes. It was not a new world, but only the unnoticed harmony of the old that had aroused the child's wonder.

Some such experience as this awaits us when we begin the study of literature, which has always two aspects, one of simple enjoyment and appreciation, the other of analysis and exact description. Let a little song appeal to the ear, or a noble book to the heart, and for the moment, at least, we discover a new world, a world so different from our own that it

seems a place of dreams and magic. To enter and enjoy this new world, to love good books for their own sake, is the chief thing; to analyze and explain them is a less joyous but still an important matter. Behind every book is a man; behind the man is the race; and behind the race are the natural and social environments whose influence is unconsciously reflected. These also we must know, if the book is to speak its whole message. In a word, we have now reached a point where we wish to understand as well as to enjoy literature; and the first step, since exact definition is impossible, is to determine some of its essential qualities.

**Qualities of Literature.** The first significant thing is the essentially artistic quality of all literature. All art is the expression of life in forms of truth and beauty; or rather, it is the reflection of some truth and beauty which are in the world, but which remain unnoticed until brought to our attention by some sensitive human soul, just as the delicate curves of the shell reflect sounds and harmonies too faint to be otherwise noticed. A hundred men may pass a hayfield and see only the sweaty toil and the windrows of dried grass; but here is one who pauses by a Roumanian meadow, where girls are making hay and singing as they work. He looks deeper, sees truth and beauty where we see only dead grass, and he reflects what he sees in a little poem in which the hay tells its own story:

**Artistic**

Yesterday's flowers am I,
And I have drunk my last sweet draught of dew.
Young maidens came and sang me to my death;
The moon looks down and sees me in my shroud,
The shroud of my last dew.

Yesterday's flowers that are yet in me
Must needs make way for all to-morrow's flowers.
The maidens, too, that sang me to my death
Must even so make way for all the maids
That are to come.
And as my soul, so too their soul will be
Laden with fragrance of the days gone by.



The maidens that to-morrow come this way
Will not remember that I once did bloom,
For they will only see the new-born flowers.
Yet will my perfume-laden soul bring back,
As a sweet memory, to women's hearts
Their days of maidenhood.
And then they will be sorry that they came
To sing me to my death;
And all the butterflies will mourn for me.
I bear away with me
The sunshine's dear remembrance, and the low
Soft murmurs of the spring.
My breath is sweet as children's prattle is;
I drank in all the whole earth's fruitfulness,
To make of it the fragrance of my soul
That shall outlive my death.[1]

One who reads only that first exquisite line, "Yesterday's flowers am I," can never again see hay without recalling the beauty that was hidden from his eyes until the poet found it.

In the same pleasing, surprising way, all artistic work must be a kind of revelation. Thus architecture is probably the oldest of the arts; yet we still have many builders but few architects, that is, men whose work in wood or stone suggests some hidden truth and beauty to the human senses. So in literature, which is the art that expresses life in words that appeal to our own sense of the beautiful, we have many writers but few artists. In the broadest sense, perhaps, literature means simply the written records of the race, including all its history and sciences, as well as its poems and novels; in the narrower sense literature is the artistic record of life, and most of our writing is excluded from it, just as the mass of our buildings, mere shelters from storm and from cold, are excluded from architecture. A history or a work of science may be and sometimes is literature, but only as we forget the subject-matter and the presentation of facts in the simple beauty of its expression.

[1] From *The Bard of the Dimbovitza*, First Series, p. 73.

The second quality of literature is its suggestiveness, its appeal to our emotions and imagination rather than to our intellect. It is not so much what it says as what it awakens in us that constitutes its charm. When Milton makes Satan say, "Myself am Hell," he does not state any fact, but rather opens up in these three tremendous words a whole world of speculation and imagination. When Faustus in the presence of Helen asks, "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?" he does not state a fact or expect an answer. He opens a door through which our imagination enters a new world, a world of music, love, beauty, heroism, — the whole splendid world of Greek literature. Such magic is in words. When Shakespeare describes the young Biron as speaking

**Suggestive**

> In such apt and gracious words
> That aged ears play truant at his tales,

he has unconsciously given not only an excellent description of himself, but the measure of all literature, which makes us play truant with the present world and run away to live awhile in the pleasant realm of fancy. The province of all art is not to instruct but to delight; and only as literature delights us, causing each reader to build in his own soul that "lordly pleasure house" of which Tennyson dreamed in his "Palace of Art," is it worthy of its name.

The third characteristic of literature, arising directly from the other two, is its permanence. The world does not live by bread alone. Notwithstanding its hurry and bustle and apparent absorption in material things, it does not willingly let any beautiful thing perish. This is even more true of its songs than of its painting and sculpture; though permanence is a quality we should hardly expect in the present deluge of books and magazines pouring day and night from our presses in the name of literature. But this problem of too many books is not modern, as we suppose. It has been a problem ever since Caxton brought the first printing press

**Permanent**



from Flanders, four hundred years ago, and in the shadow of Westminster Abbey opened his little shop and advertised his wares as "good and chepe." Even earlier, a thousand years before Caxton and his printing press, the busy scholars of the great library of Alexandria found that the number of parchments was much too great for them to handle; and now, when we print more in a week than all the Alexandrian scholars could copy in a century, it would seem impossible that any production could be permanent; that any song or story could live to give delight in future ages. But literature is like a river in flood, which gradually purifies itself in two ways, — the mud settles to the bottom, and the scum rises to the top. When we examine the writings that by common consent constitute our literature, the clear stream purified of its dross, we find at least two more qualities, which we call the tests of literature, and which determine its permanence.

**Tests of Literature.** The first of these is universality, that is, the appeal to the widest human interests and the simplest human emotions. Though we speak of national and race literatures, like the Greek or Teutonic, and though each has certain superficial marks arising out of the peculiarities of its own people, it is nevertheless true that good literature knows no nationality, nor any bounds save those of humanity. It is occupied chiefly with elementary passions and emotions, — love and hate, joy and sorrow, fear and faith, — which are an essential part of our human nature; and the more it reflects these emotions the more surely does it awaken a response in men of every race. Every father must respond to the parable of the prodigal son; wherever men are heroic, they will acknowledge the mastery of Homer; wherever a man thinks on the strange phenomenon of evil in the world, he will find his own thoughts in the Book of Job; in whatever place men love their children, their hearts must be stirred by the tragic sorrow of *Œdipus* and *King Lear*. All these are but shining examples of the law that only as a

**Universality**

book or a little song appeals to universal human interest does it become permanent.

The second test is a purely personal one, and may be expressed in the indefinite word "style." It is only in a mechanical sense that style is "the adequate expression of thought," or "the peculiar manner of expressing thought," or any other of the definitions that are found in the rhetorics. In a deeper sense, style is the man, that is, the unconscious expression of the writer's own personality. It is the very soul of one man reflecting, as in a glass, the thoughts and feelings of humanity. As no glass is colorless, but tinges more or less deeply the reflections from its surface, so no author can interpret human life without unconsciously giving to it the native hue of his own soul. It is this intensely personal element that constitutes style. Every permanent book has more or less of these two elements, the objective and the subjective, the universal and the personal, the deep thought and feeling of the race reflected and colored by the writer's own life and experience.

Style

**The Object in studying Literature.** Aside from the pleasure of reading, of entering into a new world and having our imagination quickened, the study of literature has one definite object, and that is to know men. Now man is ever a dual creature; he has an outward and an inner nature; he is not only a doer of deeds, but a dreamer of dreams; and to know him, the man of any age, we must search deeper than his history. History records his deeds, his outward acts largely; but every great act springs from an ideal, and to understand this we must read his literature, where we find his ideals recorded. When we read a history of the Anglo-Saxons, for instance, we learn that they were sea rovers, pirates, explorers, great eaters and drinkers; and we know something of their hovels and habits, and the lands which they harried and plundered. All that is interesting; but it does not tell us what most we want to know about these old ancestors of ours, —



not only what they did, but what they thought and felt; how they looked on life and death; what they loved, what they feared, and what they reverenced in God and man. Then we turn from history to the literature which they themselves produced, and instantly we become acquainted. These hardy people were not simply fighters and freebooters; they were men like ourselves; their emotions awaken instant response in the souls of their descendants. At the words of their gleemen we thrill again to their wild love of freedom and the open sea; we grow tender at their love of home, and patriotic at their deathless loyalty to their chief, whom they chose for themselves and hoisted on their shields in symbol of his leadership. Once more we grow respectful in the presence of pure womanhood, or melancholy before the sorrows and problems of life, or humbly confident, looking up to the God whom they dared to call the Allfather. All these and many more intensely real emotions pass through our souls as we read the few shining fragments of verses that the jealous ages have left us.

It is so with any age or people. To understand them we must read not simply their history, which records their deeds, but their literature, which records the dreams that made their deeds possible. So Aristotle was profoundly right when he said that "poetry is more serious and philosophical than history"; and Goethe, when he explained literature as "the humanization of the whole world."

**Importance of Literature.** It is a curious and prevalent opinion that literature, like all art, is a mere play of imagination, pleasing enough, like a new novel, but without any serious or practical importance. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Literature preserves the ideals of a people; and ideals — love, faith, duty, friendship, freedom, reverence — are the part of human life most worthy of preservation. The Greeks were a marvelous people; yet of all their mighty works we cherish only a few ideals, — ideals of beauty in

perishable stone, and ideals of truth in imperishable prose and poetry. It was simply the ideals of the Greeks and Hebrews and Romans, preserved in their literature, which made them what they were, and which determined their value to future generations. Our democracy, the boast of all English-speaking nations, is a dream; not the doubtful and sometimes disheartening spectacle presented in our legislative halls, but the lovely and immortal ideal of a free and equal manhood, preserved as a most precious heritage in every great literature from the Greeks to the Anglo-Saxons. All our arts, our sciences, even our inventions are founded squarely upon ideals; for under every invention is still the dream of *Beowulf*, that man may overcome the forces of nature; and the foundation of all our sciences and discoveries is the immortal dream that men "shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."

In a word, our whole civilization, our freedom, our progress, our homes, our religion, rest solidly upon ideals for their foundation. Nothing but an ideal ever endures upon earth. It is therefore impossible to overestimate the practical importance of literature, which preserves these ideals from fathers to sons, while men, cities, governments, civilizations, vanish from the face of the earth. It is only when we remember this that we appreciate the action of the devout Mussulman, who picks up and carefully preserves every scrap of paper on which words are written, because the scrap may perchance contain the name of Allah, and the ideal is too enormously important to be neglected or lost.

**Summary of the Subject.** We are now ready, if not to define, at least to understand a little more clearly the object of our present study. Literature is the expression of life in words of truth and beauty; it is the written record of man's spirit, of his thoughts, emotions, aspirations; it is the history, and the only history, of the human soul. It is characterized by its artistic, its suggestive, its permanent qualities. Its two tests are its universal interest and its personal style. Its



object, aside from the delight it gives us, is to know man, that is, the soul of man rather than his actions; and since it preserves to the race the ideals upon which all our civilization is founded, it is one of the most important and delightful subjects that can occupy the human mind.

**Bibliography.** (NOTE. Each chapter in this book includes a special bibliography of historical and literary works, selections for reading, chronology, etc.; and a general bibliography of texts, helps, and reference books will be found at the end. The following books, which are among the best of their kind, are intended to help the student to a better appreciation of literature and to a better knowledge of literary criticism.)

***General Works.*** Woodberry's Appreciation of Literature (Baker & Taylor Co.); Gates's Studies in Appreciation (Macmillan); Bates's Talks on the Study of Literature (Houghton, Mifflin); Worsfold's On the Exercise of Judgment in Literature (Dent); Harrison's The Choice of Books (Macmillan); Ruskin's Sesame and Lilies, Part I; Matthew Arnold's Essays in Criticism.

***Essays.*** Emerson's Books, in Society and Solitude; Dowden's The Interpretation of Literature, in Transcripts and Studies (Kegan Paul & Co.), and The Teaching of English Literature, in New Studies in Literature (Houghton, Mifflin); The Study of Literature, Essays by Morley, Nicolls, and L. Stephen, edited by A. F. Blaisdell (Willard Small).

***Criticism.*** Gayley and Scott's An Introduction to the Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism (Ginn and Company); Winchester's Principles of Literary Criticism (Macmillan); Worsfold's Principles of Criticism (Longmans); Johnson's Elements of Literary Criticism (American Book Company); Saintsbury's History of Criticism (Dodd, Mead).

***Poetry.*** Gummere's Handbook of Poetics (Ginn and Company); Stedman's The Nature and Elements of Poetry (Houghton, Mifflin); Johnson's The Forms of English Poetry (American Book Company); Alden's Specimens of English Verse (Holt); Gummere's The Beginnings of Poetry (Macmillan); Saintsbury's History of English Prosody (Macmillan).

***The Drama.*** Caffin's Appreciation of the Drama (Baker & Taylor Co.).

***The Novel.*** Raleigh's The English Novel (Scribner); Hamilton's The Materials and Methods of Fiction (Baker & Taylor Co.).