



Topic  
Literature  
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English Literature

# The Art of Reading

Course Guidebook

Professor Timothy Spurgin  
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## Timothy Spurgin, Ph.D.

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Professor Timothy Spurgin grew up in Mankato, Minnesota. He graduated magna cum laude from Carleton College, where he wrote his senior thesis on the role of realism in the English and American novel. During his senior year, he was also elected to Phi Beta Kappa and chosen as the student commencement speaker. On

the encouragement of his teachers at Carleton, he applied for and received a Mellon Fellowship in the Humanities. He went on to do his graduate work at the University of Virginia, earning an M.A. and a Ph.D. in English Literature. Dr. Spurgin's doctoral dissertation focused on the novels of Charles Dickens.

Since 1990, Dr. Spurgin has taught at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. His teaching includes courses on romanticism and contemporary critical theory, as well as a course on the English novel. While at Lawrence, Dr. Spurgin has received two awards for teaching: the Outstanding Young Teacher Award and the Freshman Studies Teaching Prize. He has twice served as director of Lawrence's freshman program, recognized as one of the best in the nation, and has three times received the Babcock Award, voted on by Lawrence students for the person who "through involvement and interaction with students has made a positive impact on the campus community."

Dr. Spurgin's writing has appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Dickens Studies Annual*, and *Dickens Quarterly*. He previously published a course with The Great Courses called *The English Novel*. He lives in Appleton with his wife, Gretchen Revie, and their wheaten terrier, Penny. ■



# Table of Contents

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## INTRODUCTION

Professor Biography .....	i
Course Scope .....	1

## LECTURE GUIDES

### LECTURE 1

Artful Reading and Everyday Reading .....	4
---	---

### LECTURE 2

Authors, Real and Implied .....	7
---------------------------------	---

### LECTURE 3

Narrators—Their Voices and Their Visions .....	10
--	----

### LECTURE 4

Characters—Beyond Round and Flat.....	14
---------------------------------------	----

### LECTURE 5

Descriptions—People, Places, and Things .....	17
---	----

### LECTURE 6

Minimalists to Maximalists to Lyricists .....	20
---	----

### LECTURE 7

Explosive Devices—Irony and Ambiguity .....	23
---	----

### LECTURE 8

Reading for the Plot—Five Simple Words .....	26
--	----

### LECTURE 9

Master Plots—The Stranger and the Journey .....	29
---	----

## Table of Contents

---

<b>LECTURE 10</b>	
The Game Is Afoot—Sherlock Holmes .....	32
<b>LECTURE 11</b>	
The Plot Thickens—Scott and Brontë .....	35
<b>LECTURE 12</b>	
The Plot Vanishes—Faulkner and Woolf .....	39
<b>LECTURE 13</b>	
Chapters, Patterns, and Rhythms .....	42
<b>LECTURE 14</b>	
Scene and Summary, Showing and Telling .....	45
<b>LECTURE 15</b>	
Subtexts, Motives, and Secrets .....	48
<b>LECTURE 16</b>	
Dialogue—The Good, the Bad, the Ugly .....	51
<b>LECTURE 17</b>	
Metafiction—Fiction about Fiction .....	54
<b>LECTURE 18</b>	
Adaptation—From Fiction to Film .....	58
<b>LECTURE 19</b>	
Realism Times Four .....	61
<b>LECTURE 20</b>	
Thumbs Up?—Interpretation and Evaluation .....	65
<b>LECTURE 21</b>	
A Long Short Story—“Runaway” .....	68
<b>LECTURE 22</b>	
A Classic Novel— <i>The Age of Innocence</i> .....	71

## Table of Contents

---

### LECTURE 23

A Baggy Monster— <i>War and Peace</i> .....	74
---	----

### LECTURE 24

Picking Up the Tools .....	78
----------------------------	----

### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Timeline .....	82
Glossary .....	85
Biographical Notes .....	88
Bibliography.....	103
Credits .....	111



# The Art of Reading

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## Scope:

**W**e all know how to read, but how many of us know how to read well? This course is designed to encourage the habit of artful reading. Its purpose is not so much to impart information as to sharpen skills and inspire confidence. By the end of the course, you should be ready to dive into almost any work of fiction—no matter who the author may be—since you will have gained a deeper understanding of how such works can be approached and enjoyed.

Throughout the course, we consider big ideas and juicy examples, ranging from the classic to the contemporary and back again. We not only look at Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy, but also stop to consider the works of Lorrie Moore and Jhumpa Lahiri. We also bring authors together in surprising new ways, working through comparisons and contrasts, close reading, and playful questioning.

The course begins by exploring the differences between artful reading and everyday reading. How, we ask, does reading a short story or novel differ from reading a memo, a recipe, or a newspaper? How does it differ from other kinds of serious reading? Can you approach a biography or a work of history in the same way that you approach a work of fiction—and if not, why not?

In the opening lecture, and throughout the entire course, we challenge two common misconceptions: first, that smart, sensitive readers are born, not made; and second, that sophistication and intelligence are the sworn enemies of pleasure and delight. From start to finish, it should be clear that the art of reading can be taught—and that mastering this art is both exciting and rewarding.

After defining the art of reading, we examine the figure of the author. How much do we need to know about an author before we can begin to appreciate her work? How do authors approach the task of writing? Do they begin with

big themes and big ideas—or with characters, situations, and images? Why are so many authors surprised by their own creations? Should a writer not know how the story will come out?

Building on such questions, we shift our attention from the author to the narrator or storyteller. (We will also see why we should not confuse the author with the narrator.) We may remember the difference between first- and third-person narrators, but we probably have not considered the larger implications of these devices. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach? Why would an author use multiple narrators or create a narrator who seems inadequate or dishonest?

As we refine our questions and explore the most basic elements of storytelling—characterization, description, style; the use of irony and ambiguity—we shift our focus to the crucial issue of narrative structure. In these lectures, we consider two different theories of plot and plotting, contrasting the views of Aristotle with those of the Russian formalists. Later lectures deepen our understanding of plot and plotting. It has been said, for example, that there are really only two master plots—“the hero takes a journey” and “a stranger comes to town.” Can that possibly be true? And why, in any case, do those two basic plots continue to fascinate and satisfy us?

As we wrap up the first half of the course, we apply our new insights to a set of increasingly complex examples. A lecture on the Sherlock Holmes stories prepares us for a discussion of *Ivanhoe* and *Jane Eyre*, and that discussion in turn gets us ready for an encounter with modernist masterpieces by Faulkner and Woolf. We will see that our new understanding of the art of reading can help us to make better sense of books that might once have seemed forbidding—and deepen our enjoyment of more familiar works.

The second half of the course introduces the other major building blocks of fiction: chapters, scenes and summaries, subtext, and dialogue. This part of the course also features a lecture on cinematic adaptation, taking off from the familiar and often justified complaint that the movie is never quite as good as the book. As these lectures unfold, we also consider the rise of highly self-conscious fiction, often called metafiction, focusing on the delightful examples of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino.

These later lectures complicate our sense of what it means to read closely and carefully. Indeed, these lectures will confront us with a number of important theoretical and philosophical questions. Should we expect every work of fiction to be realistic? And what do we mean by “realism,” anyway? What is the role of the reader? How are readers affected by their encounters with fictional characters? To what extent are readers merely passive observers, and to what extent are they active participants in the production of literary meaning?

As the second half of the course nears its end, we take up a second series of increasingly challenging examples, beginning with a contemporary short story (Alice Munro’s “Runaway”), moving on to a classic novel celebrated for its emotional restraint (Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*), and closing with a work notorious for its narrative excesses (Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*). By examining works of increasing length and complexity, we see how the most basic narrative structures and literary devices can be employed, extended, and elaborated. In our discussion of each example, we also give close, careful attention to small details—shifts in tone, modulations of voice, the selection and arrangement of words—noting their contribution to the work as a whole.

Thus, although this course raises many complex issues, its largest aim is its simplest and most enduring: to enhance our enjoyment of literature by making us better, more sensitive, and thus more artful readers. ■

# Artful Reading and Everyday Reading

## Lecture 1

**Do you approach a new book with a feeling of anticipation? When you get a chance to read, do you make the most of that opportunity? I hope that after listening to these lectures, you'll be more likely to say "yes."**

**T**his introductory lecture will take on the questions raised by our title: Is there any such thing as an "art of reading"? Isn't reading a practical skill, something most of us master in grade school? If you know the words and can make sense of the sentences, what more do you really need to do? To answer such questions, we will need to take a brief look at the history and science of reading. Then we will explore the many differences between artful reading and everyday reading. In this lecture, then, and throughout the rest of the course, we will learn that it is never too late to begin reading well and discover what generations of book lovers have always know: Artful readers have more fun.

We begin by taking a close look at the phrase that will lie at the heart of these lectures: "the art of reading." What exactly do we mean by that phrase? In developing this thought, I would offer three initial points.

- First, when you think about reading as an art, you begin to take it a little more seriously.
- Second, the idea of artful reading may suggest that there is a difference between reading and reading well.
- Finally, the idea of artful reading suggests that you are doing something for its own sake. This sort of reading is its own reward.

In the end, our reservations about the art of reading should give way to a sense of possibility and potential.

Having offered an initial comment on the idea of artful reading, I extend my argument in a couple of directions. First, note that the act of learning to

read is no simple matter. Second, there is a difference between artful reading and what we might call everyday reading. In everyday reading, your goal is simply to extract information. Artful reading is what you do with a work of fiction—when you stop to take note of an elegant phrase or a striking image.

So what, then, are the goals of our course? To make sure that everyday reading is not the only kind of reading we can do, to give ourselves the chance to read

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**Artful reading is what you do with a work of fiction—when you stop to take note of an elegant phrase or a striking image.**

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in ways that go beyond extraction and disposal, and to discover what generations of book lovers have always known—that artful readers have more fun.

Having laid out our goals, we are ready to talk about the contents and methods of the course. We start with the contents. Our British

authors will include many of my all-time favorites: Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, and Virginia Woolf, to name just a few. Our American writers will include Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Finally, in addition to our selections from the United States and the United Kingdom, we will look at a few writers from other parts of the world. In addition to classics, we will look at contemporary works.

My goal in assembling these materials is twofold. First, I want you to be aware of how much great stuff there is out there—and how much great stuff is still being produced today. In addition, I want you to feel confident of your ability to read, enjoy, and appreciate almost any book that comes your way.

What is the method? For our purposes, the best approach is likely to be a formalist approach. When you take a formalist approach, you tend to focus more on questions of form or technique. Like all committed formalists, we will do a lot of close reading, or giving close, careful attention to the words on the page.

Now for the organization of our course: How will the lectures be arranged? Our first few lectures will familiarize us with various elements of fiction. In Lectures 10, 11, and 12, we will see how all of the elements come together in particular works of fiction, and we will make the transition from short stories to novels. In the second half of our course—Lectures 13 to 24—we will move in a similar way. We will begin with a lecture on chapters. Then we will move on to lectures on a number of closely related topics: the use of scene and summary, the importance of subtexts, and the role of dialogue. Later in this sequence, we will turn to some larger questions about reading.

People often ask me why they cannot just read for fun. When they do, I like to tell them that although I am an English teacher, I have nothing against fun. Indeed, my aim is to expand your definition of fun, to show that it can include thinking and talking—not to mention reading, reading, and more reading! ■

### Suggested Reading

Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*.

Wolf, *Proust and the Squid*.

### Questions to Consider

1. What are your initial reactions to a phrase like “the art of reading”? If reading can be artful, then what about listening to music or looking at a painting?
2. Do you feel obligated to finish every book you start? If so, what keeps you going? How often are you pleasantly surprised? How often do you find that an unpromising book turns out to be a pretty good read?

# Authors, Real and Implied

## Lecture 2

**No matter what your teachers or your professors may have told you, writers almost never begin with a theme or a message. When they talk about writing, they do not present themselves as all-knowing, all-seeing masterminds. Instead, they speak of asking questions, exploring new possibilities, and losing control.**

**W**hen reading a good book, we seem to be in touch with another person. This person, the author, appears to speak to us directly. He anticipates our questions, keeps us in suspense, and eventually satisfies our expectations—and all he asks in return is that we keep turning the pages. But are such relationships really so simple? How much can we learn about an author from his books? And how, finally, should we understand our relationship with the author—who may be long dead, and who in any case knows next to nothing about us? Such questions will be a springboard for this lecture, helping us to see how the intelligent, artful reader conceives of the complex and contradictory figure of the author.

I have had a chance to meet a few authors, and I can tell you that the experience is often thrilling; however, sometimes it can be very disappointing. How do we get to know an author? What is the relationship between the person we think we know from the books and the real-life person we might meet? What do authors have to say about authorship? Here is our plan for exploring this topic. We will start with a passage from a familiar story. Then we will explore the ideas of two literary theorists. Finally, we will see what authors typically have to say about the creative process. A couple of ideas will be important throughout. The possibility that authors are in some ways more like characters than creators. Writers almost never begin with a theme or a message.

Our first example is the opening paragraph of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. You might already notice a few things about Dickens's writing. The figure materializing before you is a storyteller and, perhaps, also an

entertainer; he wants you to ask questions; and he also wants you to see that he loves his job. If we read on, it is not only to find out more about Marley and Scrooge—it is to deepen our relationship, our connection, to this author.

I advise readers to think about the author not as a creator but rather as a character.

**Just as the artful reader understands the difference between the implied author and flesh-and-blood author, he or she understands that authors do not necessarily begin with a theme or message.**

What we see here is what we will be seeing throughout the course: There is more to reading fiction than simply extracting information. And there is more to it than simply meeting the characters and following the story to its conclusion.

In the second part of this lecture, we consider the ideas of two influential critics. The first is T. S. Eliot. Eliot argues that the author’s personality is largely irrelevant to the production of her work. He advanced

these claims in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In this essay, Eliot sets up a contrast between the “man who suffers” and the “mind that creates.” The “man who suffers” is the person who goes to the grocery store and the gym. The “mind that creates” is the mind that drives and shapes and inhabits the writing itself. Eliot’s ideas are reassuring and helpful. They give us a way to enjoy the books without expecting too much of the real-life author.

The second theorist is Wayne C. Booth. In his classic study, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth extends and refines some of Eliot’s thinking on the subject of authorship. Booth is interested in the contrast between the real-life author and the “implied author.” The implied author is the figure who materializes in the book itself, the man or woman whose personality is implicit in the story and the storytelling. Booth’s very deliberate use of the word “implied” suggests that his real concern is with what the author leaves unspoken or unsaid.

Just as the artful reader understands the difference between the implied author and flesh-and-blood author, he or she understands that authors do not necessarily begin with a theme or message. We conclude with the next-to-last

paragraph in Dickens's most famous story. It contains seven repetitions of the word "good," and it also distinguishes between two different forms of laughter. Dickens was not always able to live that way himself, but what matters is the words on the page, the figure or character of the storyteller, and the spirit or feeling he inspires in us. The message of *A Christmas Carol*, though admirable, is not really all that special. What we will never tire of hearing, though, is the voice of this storyteller—or, if you like, this implied author. ■

### Suggested Reading

Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, chaps. 3, 6.

The Paris Review, *The Paris Review Interviews*.

### Questions to Consider

1. If you could get your favorite writers on the phone, what would you want to ask them?
2. Are you surprised to hear writers like Morrison and Faulkner describe the creative process as one of discovery? Do you believe them when they say that they tend not to start with a message or moral?

# Narrators—Their Voices and Their Visions

## Lecture 3

**A first-person narrative can become a bit like a monologue or a soliloquy. The narrator may begin by talking to us—but before long, he’s talking to himself. He’s struggling to understand his own behavior and his own feelings.**

**W**e begin this lecture with a simple rule: Do not confuse the author with the narrator. *Jane Eyre* is not Charlotte Brontë, despite the superficial resemblance between them, and *Huck Finn* is not always a mouthpiece for Mark Twain. As we sort out the distinction between the author and the narrator, we will return to our abiding concern with reading: How does the reader fit into all of this? What does a good reader look for in a narrator? How do we relate to different sorts of narrators? By the end of the lecture, we will see why good readers always pay close attention to the narrator: The choice of a narrator or narrative strategy not only shapes, but actually determines, a host of larger meanings and effects.

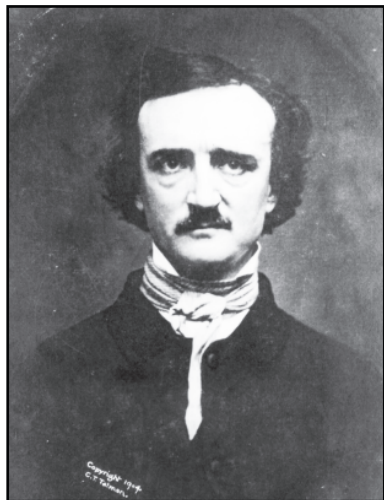
Let’s begin with the distinction between first- and third-person narration. A first-person narrator is an “I” narrator. This type of narrator is one of the characters—a participant or at least a close observer of the action. A third-person narrator is a “they,” “he,” or “she” narrator. This sort of narrator tends to stand outside or above the characters, reporting their actions and moving in and out of their minds. Everyone tells you to remember the difference, but no one tells you why.

There are pros and cons to each kind of narration. We look at examples from two classic American writers: Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Poe is most famous for his tales of terror. Almost all of them are told by first-person narrators, and as soon as the narrator starts talking, you just cannot tear yourself away. We can see one of the big advantages of first-person narration in the opening paragraphs of “The Tell-Tale Heart”: It can make a very powerful first impression. The tradition of the first-person narrator goes all the way back to Chaucer.

If Poe is drawn to the first-person narrator, then Hawthorne is drawn to the third-person narrator. Hawthorne actually wants to put some distance between his readers and his characters. We look at one of Hawthorne's most famous tales: "Young Goodman Brown." At no point does the narrator explain the point or purpose of Goodman Brown's journey. As Goodman Brown ventures into the dark forest, he meets some very strange characters; the narrator steadfastly refuses to explain what they are doing. This narrator gives us the feeling that he knows more than he is letting on. Indeed, he suggests that he may never tell us everything we want to know. As long as the narrator withholds an explanation, he forces us to consider the possibility that what occurred was not a mirage or a figment of Goodman Brown's imagination—and we begin to get a little uncomfortable. At the end, the narrator is no longer playful, no longer evasive, and he tells us exactly what happened—in no uncertain terms.

There are some distinct advantages to third-person narration. With a third-person narrator, there may be a loss of immediacy and intensity—but a writer might want to distance us from the characters. There are other times when the writer would like to provide some information or insight that is unavailable to the characters themselves.

Are there ways to enjoy the advantages of both forms of narration at the same time? Yes, a third-person narrator can borrow little bits of language from one or more of the characters. Those words do not have to be set off in quotation marks or identified with some sort of tag. This is called free indirect discourse or free indirect style. Free indirect discourse is most closely linked to Gustave Flaubert, as seen in *Madame Bovary*. This form of



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**Edgar Allan Poe's chilling tales generally featured first-person narrators.**

narration is one of the best and most important.

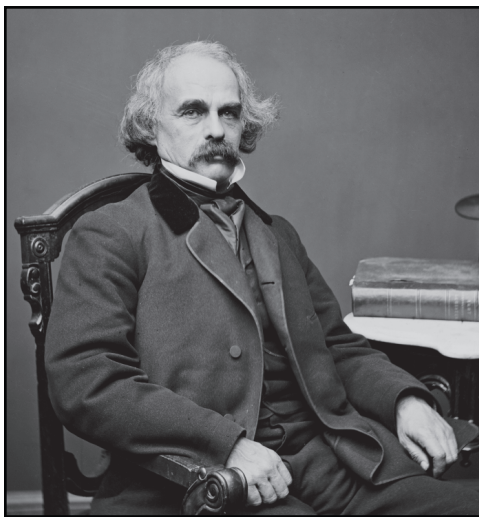
Is there anything besides first-person, third-person, and free indirect discourse? Yes, there is—though these other possibilities are not nearly as common. It is possible to shift between first- and third-person narrators, as Dickens does in *Bleak House*. It is also possible to shift among several first-person narrators, as Faulkner does in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. It is even possible to create a second-person narrator, a “you” narrator. That is what Lorrie Moore does in some of her early short stories. To extend our survey of unusual narrative possibilities, we might also consider the use of a “we” narrator—that is, a first-person plural narrator.

The choice of a narrator is often crucial to the larger effect of a story. The next time you are 9 or 10 pages into a new book, ask yourself a few simple questions: Is this in first person or third person? How would it be different if it were the other way around? In the end, it is not a simple matter of classifying or categorizing the narrator, but rather a more challenging and rewarding task. ■

### Suggested Reading

LaPlante, *The Making of a Story*, chap. 6.

Wood, *How Fiction Works*, chaps. 1–2.



**Nathaniel Hawthorne made effective use of the third-person narrator.**

## Questions to Consider

1. Do you prefer first-person narratives to third-person narratives? Given a choice between two versions of the same story—one told by a participant and the other told by an outside observer—which would you be more likely to read?
2. In recent years, journalists and biographers have used free indirect discourse to create a stronger sense of what their subjects were thinking and feeling. Do you see any danger in that? Do you think that the use of this device should be confined to fiction alone?

# Characters—Beyond Round and Flat

## Lecture 4

**We should get in the habit of monitoring our responses to the characters. ... What are our first impressions? Do our feelings ever change—and if so, what might account for that development? When and how does the story ask us to reconsider our views?**

**F**or many readers, nothing is more important than the characters. Do we like these people? Can we root for them or relate to them? Are they good role models? If the answers to those questions are in any way disappointing, many readers will conclude that the entire work is boring or pointless. The aim of this lecture will be to develop a wider and more intelligent range of responses to literary characters. For the artful reader, we will discover, the real question is not whether the characters are likable; it is whether they embody a sensitive, intelligent understanding of human motivation, memory, and desire.

Many of our greatest writers hardly ever write about nice people. Look, for instance, at Fyodor Dostoevsky or Philip Roth. I hope to enlarge your sense of what makes a character interesting or worth reading about. Here are some questions and caveats that we will consider. Questions: How far should we go with this niceness thing? What makes a character interesting? Caveats:

- We will be talking about the lead character.
- We will be talking about literary fiction.
- There are different rules and different expectations for different kinds of books.
- We are dealing with characters from the last 200 years or so; novelistic characters are essentially different from the figures we usually find in Homer or Shakespeare.

We look at an example from Anton Chekhov, the great Russian short story writer. Chekhov is admired most especially for his characters. He has a reputation for treating his characters generously, and he tries to encourage the same sort of generosity in his readers. A perfect example is a story called “The Lady with the Dog,” in which our development as readers subtly parallels the development of the characters themselves. What can we take away from this example?

**For the artful reader, we will discover, the real question is not whether the characters are likable; it is whether they embody a sensitive, intelligent understanding of human motivation, memory, and desire.**

- A character does not have to be likable or admirable to be interesting.
- An unlikable character can change and grow.
- Change and growth do not necessarily ensure a character’s happiness.
- We should get in the habit of monitoring our responses to characters.

We move on to some broader generalizations about characters and characterization. Round characters, which are dynamic, complex, and unpredictable, are more interesting than flat ones. This distinction comes to us from E. M. Forster’s book *Aspects of the Novel*. After introducing the distinction between flat and round characters, Forster says, “The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way.”

Can we go beyond roundness and flatness and extend our thinking about characters and characterization? Yes, there are certain qualities or attributes common to many interesting fictional characters. There is some sort of internal conflict or struggle. There has to be a crisis. The crisis often includes some sort of reckoning with the past and may also require a reckoning with the self. ■

## Suggested Reading

Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, chap. 4.

Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, chap. 5.

## Questions to Consider

1. Do you ever find yourself drawn to flawed or even unsavory characters? Are there some sorts of characters you simply would rather not read about—no matter how well the story is told?
2. Can you apply Forster's theory of characterization to the real world? Is your family or your office full of round characters? Do you think you know any flat characters—people whose behavior often strikes you as predictable or typical?

# Descriptions—People, Places, and Things

## Lecture 5

**If you're the kind of reader who usually skips over descriptions, you need not despair—for you're not alone. In some works, especially older works, descriptions can seem to go on forever. It's as if the narrator hits the "pause button," stopping the action to tell us about every single tree in the forest.**

**L**ong descriptions may be full of meaningful symbols and beautiful phrases, but at times they seem to go on forever. What are descriptions meant to do for the reader? Why should we think twice before skipping over them? In pursuing such questions, we will consider two classic short stories from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: "Pigeon Feathers," by John Updike, and "Revelation," by Flannery O'Connor. For both Updike and O'Connor, as for many other writers, description not only sets the stage for later events; it trains our senses and awakens our spirits. To look closely and describe carefully may indeed be an act of devotion, a source of deeper understanding and genuine self-knowledge.

In this lecture, our aim will be to find an alternative to skipping descriptions. We will see that a good description not only creates a vivid impression; it also raises questions and opens up new possibilities. We start with Updike's "Pigeon Feathers." The central character is David Kern, whose family has just moved from a small town to the farm where his mother was raised. He is not happy about the move, and the opening descriptions help us to see why. The first thing to be described in detail is a book: a volume from *The Outline of History*, by H. G. Wells. The description helps to convey David's feelings toward his parents—and toward all adults. A good description not only helps to set the scene or create a vivid impression. It also serves a larger purpose, helping us to understand how the world looks and feels to the characters. You cannot always deal with descriptions separately. You also need to look for patterns or connections. The descriptions of the father and grandmother work to reinforce the earlier association of the book with the ugly, decaying adult world.

David’s crisis is a spiritual crisis. The resolution is conveyed largely through detailed descriptions. In this case, the descriptions focus on the bodies of animals: the family dog and then pigeons. Is everything in the story described in such great detail? Interestingly, no. In addition to noticing what is described, you should also notice what is not described. Whether a description is omitted on purpose or by accident, its absence can be very revealing.

**Sometimes things that seem trivial or cosmetic or even ornamental—like passages of description—are directly connected to the largest, most urgent issues in fiction.**

In Flannery O’Connor’s work, detailed description of people, places, and things is always an essential part of the drama. We turn to a story called “Revelation.” The initial setting for this story is the waiting room of a doctor’s office. The room is described in some detail, but most of our

attention is focused on the people. Introduced first are the Turpins—Clay and his wife. Mrs. Turpin is a major character—indeed, everyone and everything else in the waiting room is described through her “bright black eyes,” narrated through free indirect discourse.

What general conclusions can we draw from O’Connor’s initial descriptions? Like Updike, she seems to understand that it is more interesting to show things from a particular point of view. As the first part of the story unfolds, we are introduced to nine other characters—each of them is seen and judged by Mrs. Turpin. These examples show us that in some cases, descriptions do not simply add to the story—they tell the story. In a sense, they are the story. O’Connor was never afraid to acknowledge that detailed descriptions were vitally important to her work.

But what is the controlling purpose in this particular story? First she wants us to see what Mrs. Turpin is like. Then she wants to trick us into behaving like Mrs. Turpin to convince us that the story is something more than a satirical look at a fat, foolish lady. As in the case of the Updike story, there is something that is not described. We do not hear what the people

are wearing. That is because it no longer matters and has never mattered. This is Mrs. Turpin's revelation. And now she has a chance—and a choice. For both Updike and O'Connor, observation and description have a spiritual dimension.

Let's review. It is OK to skip descriptions when they seem formulaic or slow down the action. But skipping is not OK, or at least not advisable, in most other cases. In those cases, details are not merely presented, they are presented from a particular point of view. They help us to see what the characters see, and so they may also lead us to rethink our place in the story. In conclusion, sometimes things that seem trivial or cosmetic or even ornamental—like passages of description—are directly connected to the largest, most urgent issues in fiction. ■

### Suggested Reading

O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction."

———, "Writing Short Stories."

Updike, "Why Write?"

### Questions to Consider

1. How much description is too much? How much is too little? Could you do without physical descriptions of the major characters, for example? Or do you find that they are somehow crucial to your reading experience?
2. "It is a good deal easier for most people to state an abstract idea than to describe and thus re-create some object that they actually see." Or so said Flannery O'Connor. Do you agree? Would you find it easier to expound upon the beauties of nature or describe the scene outside your window?

# Minimalists to Maximalists to Lyricists

## Lecture 6

We begin by noting a paradox. On one hand, stylish writers are thought to be gifted. They seem to have been blessed with an instinctive sense of how to put words together. ... On the other hand, great stylists are also accused of working too hard. ... So if you're one of these stylish writers, you can't win for losing. Either you're a savant-like genius, endowed with almost freakish gifts—or you're an obsessive-compulsive, whose search for the perfect word or phrase makes no real difference in the end.

Style is often opposed to substance, as if stylishness were indistinguishable from superficiality. In this lecture, we will see what it really means to say that a writer is stylish. Our examples will come from the works of three influential American authors: Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. As we analyze the work of each author, we may also discover that their styles are more varied and flexible than we first thought; these styles make possible a wide range of meanings and effects.

What are the elements of style? Does it really make a difference? Which style is the best? We begin by noting a paradox: On one hand, stylish writers are thought to be gifted. On the other hand, great stylists are accused of working too hard. Our aim is to come up with better, more interesting ways of thinking about style. First we review the elements of style: diction and syntax. "Diction" means "word choice." "Syntax" means "word order." Though not everyone is stylish, everyone does have a style. No one style is better than the others. For some examples, we look at writers famous for their achievements as stylists: Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. As we look at each of those writers, we will ask if there is anything you can do with one style that you cannot do with the others.

We start with Hemingway. Our examples come from "Big Two-Hearted River." The main character is Nick Adams, who has come to northern Michigan to do some camping and fishing. He is trying to remain in control

and focus on the here and now. For the task of following such a character and describing his situation, a minimalist style is a perfect choice. Pay attention to the narrator's diction: The verbs are all one-syllable action verbs: slipped, lay, and looked. As we look at Hemingway's style, we notice lots of other things: If he finds a good word, he is not afraid to repeat it. He also makes a point of using words that others might avoid.

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**Stylistic analysis can be both rewarding and fun.**

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If there are good reasons to be a minimalist, then why do all authors not use that style? This question takes us to Faulkner. His style is actually a natural outgrowth of his larger concerns, in particular his concern with history. Consider the case of Ike McCaslin in a short novel called *The Bear*. We look at a passage from the second paragraph of *The Bear*, in which Ike thinks back on past hunting trips. The first three sentences are short ones. The next sentence is a doozy, which reflects Ike thinking about the conversations that he heard or overheard on his earlier hunting trips. Did Faulkner have to write it up in this way? One final example from *The Bear* is from the very next sentence. This sentence begins like the last one. While we may have thought we had finished talking about the hunters' conversation, it turns out that topic is not yet exhausted.

Despite the differences between Hemingway and Faulkner, there are at least two similarities. Both authors choose their styles deliberately, and both connect style and substance.

Stylistic analysis can be both rewarding and fun. Find a writer whose style interests or intrigues you, and pick two or three pages at random and get started on a basic inventory. If you can get in the habit of asking questions about style, you will begin to appreciate the distinctive qualities of particular styles.

We take a quick look at F. Scott Fitzgerald, who works in a lyrical, or poetic, style. Fitzgerald uses many of the devices chiefly associated with the poetry of writers like Shakespeare and Keats. We can see a great example

of Fitzgerald's poetic style as he introduces the title character at the very beginning of his novel *The Great Gatsby*. ■

### Suggested Reading

Mullan, *How Novels Work*, chap. 8.

Prose, *Reading like a Writer*, chaps. 1–3.

### Questions to Consider

1. What styles—besides the ones we have mentioned here—have you encountered in your recent reading? Which current writers seem to be working with the styles developed by Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald?
2. Do you have your own style? If you looked back at all the things you have written in the last month—including interoffice memos and e-mails—would those writings have anything in common?

# Explosive Devices—Irony and Ambiguity

## Lecture 7

**With just a little bit of practice, you can begin to heighten your sensitivity to the presence of irony and ambiguity. When you develop some confidence in your ability to recognize these devices, you should be able to see why I’m labeling them as “explosive.” They explode all kinds of things, in my opinion—including vanity, pretension, and self-righteousness.**

**I**rony is one of the most important terms in the entire literary lexicon—and also, as it happens, one of the most elusive. We start this lecture with a simple, straightforward definition of irony: If there is a discrepancy between what you say and what you mean, you are probably being ironic. The most common form of irony is sarcasm (“nice tie”), but it is the subtler, more complex forms that will concern us here. Exploring the effects of irony reveals the powerful and enduring connection between irony and ambiguity: As we will see in our readings of Katherine Mansfield stories like “Bliss,” ambiguity is the end result—and indeed, the desired result—of an ironic approach to storytelling.

We begin with “Bliss,” the title story in Mansfield’s second collection. Let me start with the title. What should we expect from a story called “Bliss”? The possibility of irony is reinforced by the name of the central character: Bertha Young (who is 30 years old). With this in mind, we look at the opening paragraph. There seems to be an ironic discrepancy between the title and the rest of the story. “Bliss” is an interesting and tricky case. One complicating factor is the narrator’s heavy use of free indirect discourse, which makes it harder for us to tell what the narrator thinks. The title, the name of the central character, and the opening paragraphs—with their heavy use of free indirect discourse—all point in the direction of irony.

I hope you have noticed my heavy use of the word “discrepancy.” It is time for us to move on to the new terminology. Verbal irony is what you get when words do not quite match their uses. Dramatic irony is a discrepancy between the characters and the reader or the audience. We deal with different kinds

of irony in very different ways. Stable irony is usually a matter of simple reversal, where there is no doubt about the meaning or intention. In cases of unstable irony, we never reach a final conclusion, though we detect the presence of irony. We shrink the term “irony” back down again and start to look for possible connections to ambiguity. The best way to shrink irony back down is by applying some of our new terminology to “Bliss.” Bertha’s last line is completely open ended, and that is where our second device, ambiguity, really comes into play.

**Some ironies may be obvious at first, and others may not emerge until a second or third reading.**

What else have we learned from the story—and from the lecture as a whole? There is more than one kind of irony, and several different kinds may be present in the same story. Some ironies may be obvious at first, and others may not emerge until a second or third reading. Some ironies are relatively easy to deal with, while others may never be resolved completely. In the case of the most unstable ironies, the end result may be a larger sense of ambiguity or open-endedness. I might note one further irony: Bertha’s final question is the same question that we ask whenever we pick up a book or a story. ■

### Suggested Reading

Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*.

Muecke, *Irony*.

### Questions to Consider

1. It is often said that we are living in an age of irony: No one takes anything seriously; everyone adopts an attitude of detachment or disengagement; and so on. Do you think that is true? And if so, why do you suppose that would be?

2. Is it possible for a story to be too ambiguous? Do you find yourself getting impatient with authors like Mansfield, or do you admire their refusal to settle for easy answers?

# Reading for the Plot—Five Simple Words

## Lecture 8

**Plot is where almost everything comes together. Plot is what hooks us at the beginning—and keeps us reading through to the end.**

In the next two lectures, we will turn our attention to the crucial issue of narrative structure. As we grapple with this issue, we will need to consider some very tricky questions. What tends to happen at the beginning of a story? What has to happen before a story can end? And what holds a story together, giving it a larger sense of coherence and direction? Our pursuit of these questions will take us in two very different directions.

We are now ready to deal with plot in some detail. Plot is the story: the arc, shape, or structure of the piece. This is an enormous subject, but for now, we focus our attention on the essentials. We need to remember five words: “beginning,” “middle,” “end,” “plot,” and “story.” By the end of this lecture, we will see what the words mean, find out where they come from, and gain a better sense of what they can do for you.

I want you to look for larger patterns, to notice underlying shapes and overarching structures. Our example will be “A Temporary Matter,” the first story in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Interpreter of Maladies*. We begin with “beginning,” “middle,” and “end.” Those words come to us from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Much of the *Poetics* is devoted to the subject of plot. Aristotle makes some very interesting points: A plot is not unified simply because it relates the experiences of a single person. In a well-made plot, nothing can be eliminated, transposed, or rearranged. Each new event should happen because of—not just after—the earlier events. Behind all of Aristotle’s points, we can discover a disdain for episodic plots.

In moving from Aristotle’s general rules to our particular example, we see that Lahiri’s plot is by no means episodic. There are six sections in the story, and if you eliminated any one of them, the entire structure would collapse. If you rearranged the sections, it would change the entire mood

and feeling of the story. Instead of “What is wrong?” the story makes us ask “What is next?”

What does Aristotle have to say about “beginning,” “middle,” and “end”? What are beginnings, and how do they work? At the beginning, we are introduced to the characters and their situation—which, at this point, is relatively stable. But before long, a destabilizing event occurs, and it knocks the

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**I want you to look for larger patterns, to notice underlying shapes and overarching structures.**

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characters off balance, preventing them from going on with life as usual. Lahiri’s beginning features two destabilizing events, pulling in opposite directions: separation and renewed connection. There is the death of the baby and the arrival of a notice from the power company that forces

the couple out of their regular routine. The middle is where complications arise, and we get a better sense of what the characters are up against. As she takes us through the middle, Lahiri continues to balance two very different possibilities: separation and reunion. What can happen next? My advice is to make a habit of asking such questions.

The ending is where the conflicts exposed at the beginning—and explored through the middle—are finally worked out. Traditionally, plots resolved themselves in one of two ways: comically or tragically. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writers have been drawn to the idea of an open ending that may leave some questions unanswered. Lahiri’s ending follows all of the rules laid down by Aristotle.

Now we move on to the last two words of the five: “plot” and “story.” These probably seem interchangeable, and in many situations, they are indeed used interchangeably. I would like to stick with the most famous definitions, established by the Russian formalists: “Plot” is the list of events in order of their presentation to the reader. “Story” is the same events listed in chronological order, the order of their original occurrence. How can this help us to get more out of our reading? It helps us to realize that events could have

been presented to us in several different ways. So, if you are Lahiri working on “A Temporary Matter,” you have to think not only about the death of the baby but about lots of other past events as well. Each of those past events needs to be placed or positioned for maximum effect.

How, as a reader, do you keep track of this stuff? On your first time through, maybe you cannot really notice all of these things. But that does not mean that your first reading is empty or useless. If you are really interested in such things—and do not mind rereading—you can go back and make a list of what happens in each section and list references to past events.

Near the beginning of the *Poetics*, Aristotle says that we all delight in imitation. We learn our earliest lessons through imitation, he explains, and we take great pleasure in listening to stories and looking at pictures. All of this is natural, he believes. And so, he implies, is the wish to understand those stories—to take them apart and see how they were made. By now, it should be obvious that I agree with him completely. As we move into the middle of our course, I sincerely hope you are beginning to see why. ■

### Suggested Reading

Burroway and Stuckey-French, *Writing Fiction*, chap. 7.

Cobley, *Narrative*.

### Questions to Consider

1. What makes for a really good beginning? Are there any short stories or novels that have grabbed you right from the start? If so, what do those works have in common?
2. What makes for a good ending? It has been said that the ending is the hardest part of a story to get right. Do you agree? Can you think of works with strong beginnings, interesting middles—and weak or disappointing endings?

# Master Plots—The Stranger and the Journey

## Lecture 9

As we begin to think about master plots, a number of very interesting questions come into play: Why have these stories lasted so long? What is the source of their enduring appeal? Are they culturally specific—that is, firmly rooted in particular histories and traditions? Or are they, instead, universal? Do they reflect the needs and concerns, the anxieties and fantasies, of all people at all times and places?

As we move into this lecture, our exploration of plot and plotting will take a somewhat fanciful turn. Instead of looking at the carefully crafted arguments of thinkers like Aristotle, we will consider a sweeping generalization attributed to any number of writers and teachers, that there are really only two master plots: “the hero takes a journey” and “a stranger comes to town.” As we consider the implications of this claim, our first question will be the obvious one: Can it really be true? Are there really only two master plots? And if that is not true, what gives it the ring of truth? We may not succeed in identifying all of our examples with one of those two master plots, but we will have fun trying—and will learn more about narrative structures and readerly desires along the way.

We extend our discussion of stories and plots by observing that the stories we like best are often very familiar. Think about the Cinderella story, the rags-to-riches story, or the love-conquers-all story. These stories are sometimes called cultural myths, master narratives, or master plots. We also need to consider the closely related issue of genre. How can we learn to recognize master plots and genres? Master plots are not exclusively literary. Master plots are in many ways culturally specific. There is often a historical dimension to all of this; master plots go in and out of fashion. It is also possible to describe some master plots as more or less universal. One version of this universalizing approach to master plots can be found in the advice of creative writing teachers—there are really only two basic stories or plots in all of human culture. One thing to point out here: The enormous popularity of these two master plots attests to the importance of a destabilizing event somewhere in the beginning of the narrative.

Genre is the literary critical term for “kind,” “type,” or “category.” We can also speak of generic distinctions when talking about other media and art forms. The most basic generic distinction in the literary world is the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Nonfiction deals with the truth—it gives us the facts. Fiction, by contrast, puts us in touch with larger, often emotional, truths. At this stage in our discussion of genre, I need to make a couple of other points. First, as the terms “fiction” and “nonfiction” imply, genres are usually defined in opposition (or at least in distinction) to each other. Westerns are different from horror stories; legal thrillers are different from time-travel sagas. Some critics and scholars like to talk not only about particular genres but also about larger genre systems. My second point is that although the boundaries between genres are pretty well established, they are not always well policed.

Throughout this lecture, we have made passing references to various fictional genres, and in practice it is not very difficult to tell them apart. How do we know? The author’s name may be a signal. Signals can also be sent by titles and cover art. What you are doing, as you process those signals, is assigning each of those books to a genre. One interesting thing to note here is that as writers have become more and more interested in crossing boundaries and mixing genres, publishers and booksellers seem to have grown more and more determined to use genres as marketing devices. More than those clues mentioned above, it is the opening sentences that help us to recognize the place of an unfamiliar work in the larger genre system. ■

### Suggested Reading

Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*.

Frow, *Genre*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Which of our two master plots (“stranger” or “journey”) do you enjoy more? What are your favorite examples of each?

2. What sorts of characters, settings, and story lines would you expect to find in works with the following titles: *Objection Sustained*; *Saddle Up!*; *Dark Matter*; *Distant Planet*; *Death Takes a Sabbatical*; and *Return to Ravenwood*?

# The Game Is Afoot—Sherlock Holmes

## Lecture 10

**While it's fun to look at the elements of fiction in isolation—and even more fun to consider their effects on our experience of reading—we shouldn't forget that these elements are supposed to come together in the end. They're supposed to add up to something larger and greater than the sum of their parts.**

**I**n earlier lectures, we have examined the basic elements of fiction. As we move through the next three lectures, we will apply our new insights to a series of increasingly complex examples. Our first examples will come from the casebook of Sherlock Holmes. Working with a number of Holmes stories—including “A Scandal in Bohemia,” where the great detective is bested by a woman—we will confront some closely related questions: Why are the stories almost always told by Dr. Watson, rather than by Holmes himself? What psychological theories seem to underlie and organize the presentation of these characters? Why do these highly formulaic stories never seem repetitious or boring? And what, most importantly, can the stories tell us about the acts of reading and writing?

The character of Holmes has often been described as both a reader and a kind of writer, and it is not hard to see why. He begins his detective work by examining and interpreting the clues left behind by his adversaries, and he almost always ends it by reconstructing the story of the original crime. It may be, then, that these stories are not merely great whodunits but little allegories of reading, demonstrations of how the intelligent reader trains his eye and engages his imagination.

This lecture will attempt a synthesis of the elements of fiction. We start with some of the most basic elements of fiction: the author and the implied author, the narrator, and the characters themselves. The author and creator of Sherlock Holmes is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle did not invent the detective story, but he should be recognized for his contribution to the development of serial fiction. Doyle's output was not limited to detective stories.

What about the implied author? Doyle seems to have a bit in common with his famous detective. His politics are somewhat more obscure, largely because political matters seldom figure into the stories directly. Now for the narrator: Only one of the Holmes stories is told in the third person; two

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**The character of Holmes has often been described as both a reader and a kind of writer.**

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are narrated by Holmes himself; and all the rest are narrated by John H. Watson, M.D. Watson is a thoroughly reliable narrator: the embodiment of common sense, decency, and domesticity. He serves as a counterbalance to the

other characters and to Holmes himself. He also serves as a surrogate for the reader. The two stories narrated by Holmes are not very good, since Watson's absence is felt and Holmes often seems to be concealing something.

To examine the characters, we start with the issue of flatness and roundness. Watson's predictability—his flatness—is part of what makes him so endearing and is perhaps crucial to his effectiveness as the narrator. Holmes has a number of eccentricities and a dark side, but he never really surprises us. The next item is description: When Holmes's clients enter the scene, they are often described from head to toe. Holmes will use these descriptions to begin putting together the facts of the case. As we read over the initial descriptions of Holmes's clients, we wonder which details will turn out to be most important.

Next we review style, irony and ambiguity, plot, and genre. The style is perfectly efficient. Doyle is not a minimalist, but rather his style moves us through the story as smoothly and efficiently as possible. He hardly ever makes use of verbal irony. In terms of plot, these stories are highly formulaic.

At this point, you may have some questions: How did the stories get to be so popular? Why do these plots deserve close attention? Even the most rigid formula can leave some room for subtle variation. Although in many ways predictable, the plots are not necessarily simple. If we are going to follow the detectives, we have to begin in the middle and then make our way to the end—all while working to reconstruct events from the past. As critics like

Peter Brooks have noted, in almost any sort of detective story, the business of the plot is always the recreation of the story.

Brooks takes us from plot and story to genre—and maybe beyond it, too. According to Brooks, almost every sort of story includes some reckoning with the past—some attempt to reconstruct or recreate what happened back then. All of this brings us back to the point that Sherlock Holmes is not only a reader but also a kind of writer. ■

### Suggested Reading

Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, chap. 1.

Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, chap. 5.

### Questions to Consider

1. Would the stories be better if Watson were smarter? Would they be better if Watson were female? Imagine the following recastings of Dr. Watson and see what you think of each: Watson is an American or a Frenchman or a Russian; Watson is blind; Watson is a member of the royal family. (If you can think of others, feel free to consider them too!)
2. Doyle was responsible for popularizing the detective series, in which each episode presents us with a new puzzle to solve. Why does this form remain so popular? Do you see traces of the original Sherlock Holmes formula in recent detective, cop, or doctor shows?

# The Plot Thickens—Scott and Brontë

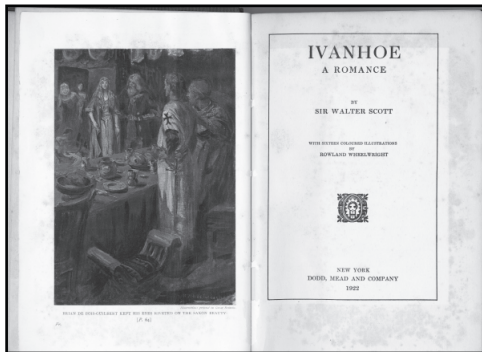
## Lecture 11

**Novels are like symphonies, and some of them are like symphonies by Beethoven or Mahler. They can get big—really big. Short stories, more like chamber music: smaller; more intimate; less ambitious, perhaps, but more likely to achieve perfection.**

In this lecture, we turn our attention to longer and more challenging works of fiction, applying what we have learned about writing and reading to a pair of classic texts. In the first of these works, *Ivanhoe*, by Sir Walter Scott, the emphasis is on spectacle and action. The narrator describes his medieval settings and characters in rich, vivid detail. What is more, he organizes the story around a series of highly dramatic events: a jousting tournament, the siege of a castle, and the trial of one of his most appealing female characters. He does not, however, supply much in the way of emotional or psychological analysis.

For a more complex investigation of human desire and a more complex plot, we turn to our second example, *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë. The action in Brontë's novel, though always gripping, is almost always psychological. The real story here is Jane's development—emotional, moral, and spiritual—from childhood to maturity. So,

although we are curious to know what Jane will do, our main concern is with her feelings: Will she ever fit in or find a place where she belongs? Will she find a partner who recognizes her many virtues? What does she really want out of life, and does she have the strength to get it?

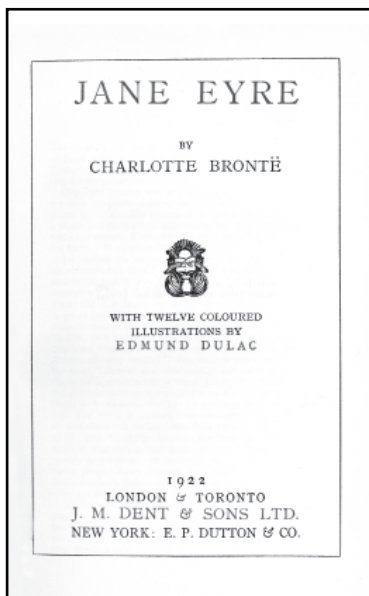


**Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* focuses on action and description.**

Our agenda for this lecture is to take what we have learned about reading and test ourselves against really hefty books. Both *Ivanhoe*, by Sir Walter Scott, and *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë are at least 400 pages long and are classic British novels written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Ivanhoe* is a historical novel set in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and the emphasis is largely on spectacle and action. *Jane Eyre* is set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the story is of Jane's move from the margins to the center, with the main focus on her feelings.

The length of the work does make a difference. Short stories tend to focus on one or two characters; novels can include dozens of people. A short story tends to focus on a limited period of time; a novel can span decades and take the main character from birth to death. Short stories almost never include any subplots; novels offer multiplots. Novels are like symphonies; stories are like chamber music. How do these formal differences affect our reading experience? A short story can, and probably should, be read in a single sitting. Novel reading can stretch over days or weeks, and details might be forgotten. How can you make reading a novel more like reading a short story? Get in the habit of prereading. Then dive into the opening chapters of the book. Spend at least half an hour with the new book. When you get 50 or 60 pages in, go back and reread the first 10 or 12 pages.

What might it be like to start reading a novel like *Ivanhoe* or *Jane Eyre*? If you do some prereading of *Ivanhoe*, you will see that the book is divided into three parts, or volumes. What else is revealed by a prereading of *Ivanhoe*? The first volume of the novel is preceded by an announcement and



***Jane Eyre* is primarily a story of the protagonist's internal journey.**

a “dedicatory epistle.” We do not really need to bother with them, because they are often more trouble than they are worth.

After prereading *Ivanhoe*, you are ready to take on the first few chapters. Here you will find a destabilizing event caused by a stranger that comes to town. The novel begins by locating us in England, which is still reeling from the invasion of the Normans in 1066. The narrator introduces a swineherd and a jester. In the next chapter, we witness the arrival of 10 men—all of them new to these parts. Two of these travelers are a Cistercian monk and a Knight Templar. The beginning of *Ivanhoe* covers about five or six chapters where the two new strangers make their way to the home of Cedric the Saxon. Through these chapters, we are also introduced to some other strangers: There is a pilgrim, and there is Isaac, a Jewish traveler. Here we have a good example of how subplots are introduced and developed.

Do any of our old tricks work with *Jane Eyre*? Of course they do. As a result of our prereading, we know that the novel makes use of the three-part format. The novel begins with Brontë using our other major master plot: the hero takes a journey. The story is written in the first person, and we feel an immediate connection with this narrator and with the book itself. We are told about the setting, and we connect this description to the characterization of the unpleasantness of Jane’s situation. What about her journey? It starts on that very first page, when we see that she will never find a secure, comfortable place with the Reeds. The journey begins in earnest, however, at the start of chapter 5 when Jane goes away to school. What can we make of all this? We can still find a simple, familiar structure in this novel: the hero takes a journey. Without knowing the ending, we can already identify Jane’s journey as a quest for self-mastery, self-respect, and self-acceptance. ■

### Suggested Reading

Flint, “The Victorian Novel and Its Readers.”

Tulloch, “Introduction.”

## Questions to Consider

1. Which would strike you as the more impressive artistic achievement: an ambitious but flawed novel of 600 pages or a brilliant, virtually perfect story of 15 pages?
2. Would you rather read a novel published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or one published last month? Whose recommendation would you be more likely to take seriously: that of a professor, that of a bookstore clerk, or that of a close friend?

# The Plot Vanishes—Faulkner and Woolf

## Lecture 12

**If I were you, I would try to respect the wishes of these Modernist authors. Instead of trying to fit their books into a busy schedule, save the books for a long weekend—or some time when you can devote two or three consecutive days to really heavy reading.**

In this lecture, we explore two highly original, almost experimental works of fiction from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the age of modernism. These works—*As I Lay Dying*, by William Faulkner, and *The Waves*, by Virginia Woolf—deliberately and dramatically break with the traditions established by authors like Scott and Brontë. At times, in fact, these works may appear to dispense with conventional approaches to characterization and plotting: It is often difficult to tell who is who, to see what is going on, or to separate fact from fantasy. For many readers, the first response to such works is confusion—and unfortunately, frustration, resignation, and defeat. What is the purpose of these literary experiments? And why should we stick with books like these? What do they tell us about how reading works and what reading can do for us?

In dealing with both Faulkner and Woolf, I am going to stress the value of prereading. How might you apply this technique to *As I Lay Dying*? You could start with the title. Who is the “I” in *As I Lay Dying*? What do we see as we begin to look over the text itself? The book is divided into small pieces; already we can sense that the world of this novel is fragmented. The opening paragraphs in two of three of those first few sections help us to get a handle on narration and style. It looks like first-person narration after all, and this work has multiple narrators. That is a lot to get out of a little prereading, but the first few pages of a novel like *As I Lay Dying* are almost always the most challenging.

On to Woolf and what prereading might do for our initial understanding of *The Waves*. The title reminds you of the ocean. The ocean seems to have no beginning and no ending, but the whole point of a story is that it takes us from beginning to middle to end. How does this fit? The text is alternating short

sections in italics and longer sections in regular type—a pattern reminiscent of waves. There are no chapter headings like in *As I Lay Dying*, but she does seem to be doing something with those typefaces. What do we see when we take our first look at the nonitalicized sections? Those sections appear

**If the author intended to confuse and disorient us, should we not respect those intentions and submit to that confusion—for a little while, at least?**

to be composed almost entirely of dialogue; there is no description or narration. We can tell that the novel will work largely through contrasts, and we also sense that the natural world of the short, italicized sections will be played off against the human world of longer, nonitalicized ones.

If the author intended to confuse and disorient us, should we not respect those intentions and submit to that confusion—for a little while, at least? If you wanted to wait and do your prereading after taking a

first pass through the opening chapters or sections, that would not bother me. But I would not want you to think of prereading as cheating. I think of it as being responsible. In support of that point, we return to *The Waves*—and in particular to the longer, nonitalicized sections of the novel.

I conclude with three larger points:

- Modernist works are difficult. They do not obey the conventions established in earlier periods.
- Modernist works are not completely unconventional. They establish their own conventions.
- Modernist works are not really unreadable.

Does the fact that you can read these authors really mean that you should read them? Absolutely. For one thing, they do amazing things with language. In addition, these writers offer amazing insights into human psychology. ■

## Suggested Reading

Smiley, *13 Ways of Looking at the Novel*, chap. 7.

Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf*, chap. 3.

## Questions to Consider

1. Are you able to enjoy a book that you do not understand completely? Would it bother you to know that there are some passages in Faulkner and Woolf that no one seems to understand completely? If so, why?
2. Why would a writer use multiple narrators? What would happen if you took a work with a single narrator—like *Ivanhoe* or *Jane Eyre*—and rewrote it as a work with multiple narrators? Would the story get more interesting, or would it simply get more confusing?

# Chapters, Patterns, and Rhythms

## Lecture 13

Dickens likes to start with a bang. He introduces a sequence or series of five or six chapters with a single, surprising, dramatic event. Cather moves much more slowly. She's not afraid to take her time—and maybe take her cues from larger, natural rhythms.

Why are books divided into chapters? Some of the reasons are obvious. Chapter divisions give us a chance to rest, pointing out places where we might easily take a break from our reading. They may also keep the contents of a book from running together, making it easier for us to keep track of the story or the characters. Other reasons for chapters and chapter divisions are less apparent, however, and that will be the subject of this lecture. As we consider examples from Charles Dickens and Willa Cather, we discover that chapters often serve a variety of purposes. Chapters may initiate or advance the plot, as they do in Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Chapters may also provide a clue to the author's larger aesthetic values, as they do in Cather's *My Ántonia*. In such cases, chapters are not simply pieces of a larger puzzle but impressive and moving works of art.

In fleshing out our understanding of chapters, we begin with three major assumptions: Chapters must be connected and coordinated, different writers tend to prefer different ways of arranging their chapters, and the logic behind an author's choices can be teased out and made clear. Here are a few quick points about the history of chapter divisions: The most famous chapter divisions are those in the Bible (current divisions of the Bible into chapter and verse go back to 1205). Commentators may have begun using chapters around the 5<sup>th</sup> century. By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the use of chapters was well established. Chapters in older works may be preceded by epigraphs.

Our first example, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, was published in weekly installments of one or two chapters apiece. This format presented Dickens with a few organizational challenges. Dickens had to think about chapters, installments, and parts. Chapters 1, 7, 13, and 18 stand out as especially

important. The big events of this novel are spread out pretty evenly. Chapter 1 introduces us to the central character, Pip, and the destabilizing event—Pip’s meeting with the convict. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 are the aftermath of the destabilizing event.

In chapter 7, the cycle starts up again, beginning with a single dramatic event. This time Pip meets Miss Havisham. He also meets a beautiful young girl and falls deeply in love with her. In chapter 13, he is cast out of Miss Havisham’s house and apprenticed to his uncle. In chapter 18, we discover that Pip has a mysterious benefactor who wants to send him to London and make him a gentleman. So if you take a break and look back at the chapters

you have just read, the pattern may begin to reveal itself.

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**There is an underlying pulse or rhythm in a novel, and it is not always easy to pick up at first.**

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Our second example, *My Ántonia*, was published in the age of modernism. Cather gives us a single storyteller: a first-person

narrator named Jim Burden. A brief introduction by an unnamed writer that is an old friend of Jim’s serves a couple of important purposes. It allows us to hear Jim tell his friend that he did not take time to arrange his memories, and it lets us see Jim in the act of giving his work a title. Keep in mind that no single view of the characters can ever be complete.

With all of that in the background, we are ready to examine Cather’s arrangement of the chapters in *My Ántonia*. The book is not long, and a prereading reveals that it has been divided into five unequal parts: The first and second parts are the longest; the third, fourth, and fifth parts are all very short. The parts are also divided into chapters: 19 in the first part; 15 in the second; then 4, 4, and 3 chapters for each of the other parts.

What happens if you look at Cather in the way we were looking at Dickens—by looking at the first part? It will not be quite so easy, and the results may not be in line with your original expectations. The key chapters are 1, 2, and 3; then 13 and 14; and finally, 18 and 19. There are three clusters and no predictable rhythm. We start with the first three chapters. In chapter 1, the setting changes. Jim heads from Virginia to Nebraska. Chapter 2 presents

us with two major characters: Jim's grandmother and grandfather. Chapter 3 introduces us to Jim's neighbors, and among them is *Ántonia*. In chapter 13, Jim and *Ántonia* have their first big disagreement. And in 14, they are reconciled by the sudden death of her father. The same sort of thing happens in chapters 18 and 19.

What does our study of these chapters tell us about the novel as a whole? Although Jim cherishes his connections to Nebraska and *Ántonia*, he will be the one to sever those connections. It also reveals the novel's unusual, remarkable pacing. By making chapters 18 and 19 look like chapters 13 and 14, Cather also reveals her interest in repetition and cyclical movement.

Here is what we have learned. There is an underlying pulse or rhythm in a novel, and it is not always easy to pick up at first. If you let yourself take a break and if you take some time to look for the key chapters and big events, you will begin to feel the beat. Once that happens, you will not only rush to finish up the story but also gain a fuller appreciation of the storytelling itself. ■

### Suggested Reading

Foster, *How to Read Novels like a Professor*, chap. 8.

Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, chap. 36.

### Questions to Consider

1. Does it surprise you to learn that there may not be a big event in every chapter? Why not cut out the material in between the big events? Would that not leave you with a more exciting, more satisfying plot?
2. Throughout our course, we have often made analogies between reading and listening to music. What, for you, are the similarities and the differences between those two activities? What do you make of the fact that although people enjoy listening to the same piece of music over and over again, they often feel reluctant to reread a work of fiction?

# Scene and Summary, Showing and Telling

## Lecture 14

**Everything in a work of fiction—and I do mean everything—qualifies as scene or summary. So in studying the use of these devices, we will deepen our appreciation of how short stories and novels are constructed.**

Scenes are dominated by dialogue, and they help readers to feel that they are observing the characters directly—without any intervention by the narrator or author. Summaries are dominated by comments from the narrator, and they may serve a number of purposes: setting the scene, bringing the reader up to date, generalizing, analyzing. How, then, do these two modes figure into the works of different writers? How does a writer get us from scene to summary and back again? Are there better and worse ways—more and less interesting ways—of playing this particular game of show and tell? This time, our examples will come from two compelling novels: *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, by Thomas Hardy, and *Disgrace*, by J. M. Coetzee.

Let's explore the layout of individual chapters. We will be looking for scene and summary. Scenes are made up largely of dialogue, whereas summaries come from the narrator. There is a kind of prejudice against summary. Consider the beginning of the first chapter from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. In the first paragraph, the narrator begins by telling us the setting, characters, what they are doing, and how they are dressed. Almost immediately, we see one of the chief advantages of summary: It can move quickly and convey a lot of information in just a few words. Summary also helps to activate our senses. It is not easy to replace summary with scene. When watching a scene, we are often left to our own devices.

Look now about a third of the way into the chapter. This is where the tension builds quickly. The conversation in the tent turns to the subject of marriage, and the narrator begins to give us some longer speeches from the man, whose name is Michael. There is a lull in the action. You will get more out of a scene if you begin to break it down into stages, or beats. Those divisions

give you a chance to stop and think about the characters' actions. You also get a sense of how the narrator and author are building tension.

During the pause, Michael talks about auctioning off his wife. No one wants a summary at this point. The drama of this moment is largely a product of its placement in the chapter. The power is enhanced because these are some of the characters' first words. There is another brief pause before Michael invites the other guys to go right ahead. Michael insists that it is not a joke, and there is another pause. We don't generally think of pauses as part of a

scene. Here we need a summary—this pause lasts for 15 minutes.

**I would encourage you not only to look for big scenes, but also to think about how each of those scenes is constructed.**

Michael brings it up again! The woman says that she wishes someone would make him an offer! With the exception of a few speech tags, it is almost all dialogue. From

this point on, the pace never slackens; there are no more pauses. A sailor has agreed to pay for Michael's wife; when the wife bids him good-bye, the scene is finished. The narrator does not break for a new chapter at this point. He goes back into summary; then another quick scene; then one last speech from Michael. Finally, there is a paragraph of summary.

*Disgrace* begins in Cape Town—where the central character, David Lurie, is a university professor. The first chapter is largely devoted to summary. The second chapter is where we find our first big scene. In the second chapter, we see Coetzee adopting and adapting Hardy's techniques. The chapter begins with David and his student, Melanie Isaacs. Eventually, he asks her to sleep with him. As we move through this scene, we have a pretty good sense of what David is up to. What we do not know is when and how he will go about it.

Once we get to David's apartment, we see the scene unfold in four stages. The first stage begins with a bit of summary, and we learn about his second thoughts through free indirect discourse. Stage 2 is very brief, and he backs off a bit. Stage 3 unfolds as they are eating supper and she asks the questions. In stage 4, he works to prolong the encounter and asks her

to spend the night. Through all of these stages, we have gotten little bits of summary from the narrator. Occasionally, the narrator provides stage directions, because body language is a crucial guide to what the characters may be thinking and feeling. Summary is an important part of this episode. As he moves through these stages, the narrator also continues to make use of free indirect discourse. A further observation is that the narrator offers us little insight into Melanie's feelings.

Through both *Disgrace* and in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, we watch as a man digs his own grave. Questions about why this happens are forced on us by the scenes in both. The power of those questions has a good deal to do with the layout and design of key chapters—and, more specifically, with the authors' masterful use of both summary and scene. In your future reading, I would encourage you not only to look for big scenes, but also to think about how each of those scenes is constructed. ■

### Suggested Reading

Bentley, *Some Observations on the Art of Narrative*, chaps. 3–5.

Lodge, “Mimesis and Diegesis in Modern Fiction.”

### Questions to Consider

1. How would you account for the prejudice against summary? Are there any good reasons for it?
2. What about the prejudice in favor of scenes? What do readers tend to like about scenes, and why should a writer not indulge our taste for them?

# Subtexts, Motives, and Secrets

## Lecture 15

**What does each character bring to the scene? What is each character hoping to achieve or accomplish? What changes over the course of the scene? Does the same character seem to dominate the conversation from start to finish, or are there subtle shifts in power or control? Those are the sorts of questions we'll pursue in this lecture.**

**H**aving considered the distinctive roles of scene and summary in the construction of fictional narratives, we are ready to consider the shaping or making of individual scenes. How does a scene get going, and how does tension or excitement build throughout the course of a great scene? How can we tell what is really at stake for the characters involved in the scene, and what should we have learned about the characters and their relationship by the time a scene is over? In working toward the answers to such questions, we will return to the scenes from Thomas Hardy and J. M. Coetzee that we explored in our last lecture and try to advance a few general claims about scenes by looking for ways of getting at the emotional subtext of a scene. We will try to bring it all together by looking at *Persuasion*, by Jane Austen, the greatest maker of scenes. Her efforts will show that in a well-crafted scene, the principal characters need not mention the real subject of their conversation and do not even need to address one another at all!

A great scene can deepen our insight into the main characters. We return to the scene from *Disgrace* where David Lurie tries to seduce his student, Melanie Isaacs. On the surface, David wants to sleep with Melanie. At a deeper level, he is suffering from a kind of identity crisis. Melanie's motives are not so obvious. We have to guess at her motives from her behavior and language. What do Melanie's words seem to reveal about her feelings? There's an unmistakable shift or modulation in her language. She may be dealing with her own identity crisis. This technique will work with almost any character in any well-made scene. Compare a speech from the beginning of a scene with speeches from the middle and the end. If you see a difference in diction and syntax, you know that something has changed.

In the scene from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Michael gets drunk and auctions off his wife. Michael is not happy with his wife, and this is his chance to say so. This time the other men play along, and he did not expect this. Then he redefines his goals. We detect these changes by taking a close look at his language. On the surface, we see his frustration with marriage and family life. At a deeper level, we may also detect the presence of feeling powerless.

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**A great scene can  
deepen our insight into  
the main characters.**

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You can see what these characters have in common. They do not really know what they are trying to accomplish. They seem to be driven by forces that they do not quite understand. In both scenes, the characters try to use language as a way of revising their goals and getting what they want. We are ready to make five generalizations:

- Every character enters the scene for a reason.
- Not every character knows what he wants.
- Most characters will prefer to keep their goals hidden.
- There is a good chance that the scene will involve miscommunication, misunderstanding, and some kind of disappointment.
- The characters have one main tool at their disposal: language.

How can this help us to see what is really happening in a big scene? It gets us in the habit of thinking about the subtext. The subtext is whatever lies behind or beneath the words and the actions in a scene. It is what the characters are not saying or doing, but might like to say or do.

As we move forward, we discuss a tricky scene from *Persuasion*. It must have been hard to handle for three reasons: (1) Our heroine, Anne Eliot, is nearly totally silent; (2) the scene is crowded with important characters, each with a slightly different agenda; and (3) there is a sense of randomness and triviality. It might help to zero in on the most active character, Captain

Frederick Wentworth. At the beginning of the scene, Wentworth is talking with two prospective brides. He has entered this scene because he thinks he might like to marry one of them. He wants to know if they feel the same way. Wentworth jokes about the first ship he has ever commanded, but when interrupted by Admiral Croft, he redefines his goals by altering his language. The sisters do not seem to appreciate the change, and they try to get him going again. Throughout all of this, Anne Eliot remains silent. Even though this scene is almost 200 years old, it still exhibits all of our general principles. ■

### Suggested Reading

Baxter, *The Art of Subtext*.

Shurtleff, *Audition*, chap. 2.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why does there need to be a subtext? Why can everything not be out in the open? Would most scenes not be better—more dramatic—if the characters laid it all on the line?
2. Is the subtext always known and understood by the characters themselves? Must it be? How comfortable are you with the idea that characters do not exactly know what they are doing?

# Dialogue—The Good, the Bad, the Ugly

## Lecture 16

**Characters don't always say what they mean. They hint around. They may even fumble around. They may shift from one way of speaking to another—sometimes accidentally, sometimes on purpose.**

In the last few lectures, we have talked about chapters, the use of scene and summary, and the relationship between text and subtext. We have also seen that dialogue can be deceptive because characters do not always say what they mean. They may hint or fumble around. They may also shift from one way of speaking to another—sometimes accidentally, sometimes on purpose. In this lecture, we take up dialogue and treat it at greater length. We explore what makes for good, convincing, even delightful dialogue and what makes for flat or boring dialogue. We see how dialogue is related to the other elements of fiction and how it aids in characterization.

We look at some examples of dialogue in the form of a game. I describe three characters, all from the same novel. Then I read three short speeches, one from each character. Your job is to match them up. From the examples from P. G. Wodehouse's *Right Ho, Jeeves*, we have learned that in a passage of really good dialogue, no two characters should sound exactly alike. Each character should have a distinctive vocabulary and cadence. The distinctive qualities of each character's speech should be a reflection or an expression of his personality.

What are the tell-tale signs of bad dialogue? All of the characters sounding alike or wordiness. At this point, I think it might make sense to look at a negative example. The example comes from an early chapter of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Robert Langdon is talking to a policeman who is investigating the death of a curator at the Louvre. He has just realized that the curator's body was arranged to look like the *Vitruvian Man* drawing, and he is trying to explain this strange coincidence. Langdon's speech strikes me as flat and lifeless. It also takes us to a third tell-tale sign of bad dialogue: In trying to avoid summary, you end up with a scene in which the characters make speeches instead of talking and interacting with each other.

We can connect dialogue to genre by noting the differences between comic dialogue and naturalistic dialogue. By recognizing the different sorts of dialogue that tend to appear in different sorts of novels, we can connect dialogue to genre. In both sorts of dialogue, each character should have his or her own particular way of speaking, but in comic dialogue, the differences among the characters are often exaggerated. In a Wodehouse novel, there

is no way to mistake a speech by Bertie Wooster for a speech by Gussie Fink-Nottle. What is more, it is the collision between those worlds and those languages that makes for much of the comedy. By “naturalistic dialogue,” I mean the sort of dialogue you find in most of the serious, literary fiction. This

dialogue has the appearance of spontaneity and immediacy. This dialogue often leaves the impression that something has gone unsaid—it is all about the subtext.

Some very gifted writers are able to produce both sorts of dialogue in the very same scene. One example is from Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*. Alsana and Neenah, who are Indian, and Clara, who is Jamaican, are having lunch in a park. In the first parts of the scene, we get some wonderful examples of comic dialogue, because each character speaks with a distinctive accent and seems to inhabit a very different world. In only a few pages, Smith somehow modulates out of this comic dialogue and into a naturalistic speech. Like the other masters of naturalistic dialogue, Smith wants us to see that her characters are using words as tools—ways of getting what they want. ■

### Suggested Reading

Amend, “Dialogue.”

Carlson, “Writing Dialogue,” in *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How many of your friends have distinctive ways of speaking? If you saw a transcript of a conversation between two or three of them—without any names attached—how long would it take you to identify the speakers?
2. Can you come up with your own examples of bad dialogue? If so, do you think they could be improved, or are they really just hopeless?

# Metafiction—Fiction about Fiction

## Lecture 17

**Metafiction is fiction about fiction—fiction that calls attention to its own devices. Unlike much of what we’ve read so far, metafictional works make no attempt to be realistic.**

Chances are you have never read anything like *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. The title looks like a fragment, and the opening sentence (“You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*”) is downright weird. What, you might ask, is the point of such a book? Is this sort of book meant to annoy or frustrate the reader? Or does it have some other, possibly higher, aim or purpose? We will use those questions as the launching pad for a wide-ranging discussion of metafiction—helpfully defined by at least one guidebook as “fiction about fiction.” When issued skillfully—as in the case of Calvino or Jorge Luis Borges—metafiction can have an undeniable appeal. Both fascinating and amusing, these works can be seen as welcome invitations to reflect on the powers and limits of reading.

The topic of metafiction presents us with lots of new challenges. We will explore the logic behind metafictional works and look for ways to approach them productively. Our two examples are Jorge Luis Borges’s “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” and Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. Let’s refine our definition of “metafiction.” The prefix “meta” is often taken to mean something like “beyond.” In that passage from Calvino, he is not describing his characters or placing them in time and space. Instead, he is reflecting on the psychology of reading. He is particularly interested in the detachment involved.

It makes sense to associate metafiction with abstraction and generalization. It also makes sense to associate it with self-consciousness and self-reflexivity. Metafiction talks about itself, about us, and about reading. The prefix “meta” can also mean something more like “later” or “after.” Early editors of Aristotle’s works believed that you were supposed to begin with his writings about the physics and then move on to his writings about

the metaphysics. Similarly, our study of fiction was a prerequisite for our current discussion of metafiction. The boundary between fiction and metafiction is not hard and fast.

Borges's "Pierre Menard" raises almost all of the questions associated with metafictional writing. Consider the full title: "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." This story does not look much like a story. There is no description of the setting or the characters, no scenes, and no dialogue. There is not even a plot. Yet there is a narrator.

What has our initial encounter with Borges taught us about reading metafiction?

- We should look for certain themes.
- We should expand our definition of what a story can be.
- We should pay attention to the narrator.
- We should not give up!

What about the second part of Borges's title: "Author of the *Quixote*"? Menard wanted to compose the *Quixote* itself—"word for word." Menard's original plan, according to the narrator, was basically "be Miguel de Cervantes" in order to accomplish his goal. One of the things that make the project so original is its focus on issues of originality. Like Borges, most metafictional writers are fascinated by issues of originality. For his part, the narrator insists on the difference between Cervantes and Menard. We are almost inclined to agree with the narrator. Yet it still seems crazy. One last thing here is that it is possible that Menard has played a trick on the narrator.

Now we move on to our second example: *If on a winter's night a traveler*, by Italo Calvino. What do we find in the first 53 pages? This book takes us to places associated with books and reading. Calvino means to make a comprehensive survey of reading. In addition, we find some of the themes we saw in Borges: originality, attribution, and authorship. Although Borges has much to say about reading, Calvino takes the theme even further.

The main character of Calvino’s novel eventually becomes known as Reader, and we follow his quest to read. Reader is constantly being interrupted by unforeseen circumstances, from his first attempt to read. We not only read about these frustrations; we experience them ourselves. A number of questions emerge that we have come to associate with metafiction. In light

**Metafiction talks about itself, about us, and about reading.**

of Reader’s situation, however, the real question may be, why not just give up?

Why do readers continue with their reading in spite of all the obstacles in their way? We read in hope of making contact with other readers. To dramatize this situation, Calvino introduces the Other Reader, Ludmilla. After meeting Ludmilla, Reader’s reading takes on a new sense of purpose. Although metafiction does not always portray social relationships in the most realistic ways, it still has a good deal to say about them. Not all of the book’s readers are human. Here, Calvino thinks reading and writing are best left to human beings. He suggests that what makes us human is our reading and writing. In this book, then, we may see an image of human life. At its best, that is what metafiction has to offer. ■

**Suggested Reading**

Calvino, “Jorge Luis Borges.”

Waugh, *Metafiction*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. Do you suppose that there could be things like “metamusic” or “metapainting” or “metadance”? Or is the self-reflexiveness of metafiction really only possible in writing?

2. Which of the metafiction discussed in this lecture seems most interesting to you? What are the attractions of “Pierre Menard”? Of *If on a winter's night a traveler*?

# Adaptation—From Fiction to Film

## Lecture 18

If we're interested in the art of reading, we'll want a sharper, clearer sense of what books have to offer. The best way for us to get it is by contrasting books with some other medium. Books and movies may seem to do the same thing—they both tell stories; they both take us to faraway places and introduce us to fascinating characters—but each approaches the act of storytelling in a different way.

The movie is never as good as the book. Almost everyone agrees on that, and in this lecture we will try to figure out why film versions of literary works are often so disappointing. We will imagine writing a screen adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, the classic novel by Joseph Conrad. We will see that while some elements of a novel can simply be transferred to film, other elements must be translated or adapted for the screen. Dialogue can be lifted straight from the book—but what about the voice of the narrator? Must that voice get lost in translation, or is there some way of incorporating it into a movie? We also consider two strikingly different adaptations of this film. We weigh the pros and cons of several different approaches and in so doing discover what novels can do that films cannot.

There is good reason to wonder about the lackluster performance of literary adaptations. To figure out why, try to imagine what it would be like to adapt a classic novel for the screen. Books and movies may seem to do the same thing, but each approaches the act of storytelling in a different way. Imagine we have been hired to write the screenplay for a new adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad. The book has already been adapted at least twice. One adaptation, made for TV in the 1990s, preserves most of the original characters and plotline. The other adaptation is much looser. It is *Apocalypse Now*.

Our first task is to figure out which parts of the book can be transferred to the screen; perhaps the easiest thing to transfer is dialogue. Consider Charlie Marlow's opening speech, which is very long. Even though the speech can be transferred to the screen, it will probably need to be condensed. The plot

might also be transferred. That seems to be true, but while the opening is only eight pages, it includes at least four locations, and the main events are still to come. We are once again faced with the question of what to cut.

Can the setting be transferred? We could film the opening scenes on the Thames and the rest of the movie in Africa. However, London does not look anything like it did when the novel was published, and Africa is not much easier. In addition, there are some things that set designers will not be able to

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***Apocalypse Now* captures many of the most powerful qualities of Conrad's book.**

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get on film. Are characters difficult to transfer? Although Marlow is not described in great detail, we have to find someone who can convey the right impression. To cast Mr. Kurtz, however, is nearly impossible. For Kurtz, we need an actor capable of

conveying both great idealism and total corruption and who is endowed with incredible, undeniable charisma. It may be that the success or failure of our film depends on the casting of Kurtz.

Consider the efforts of actual filmmakers. We begin with the more literal adaptation made for TV in the 1990s. It stars Tim Roth as Marlow and John Malkovich as Kurtz. This version keeps the title, the main characters, and the basic plotline. Many other things are changed, however, and not necessarily for the better. *Apocalypse Now* is a major work of art. The director is Francis Ford Coppola, and the film exists in two versions: the original from 1979 and a reedited version from 2001. Neither version offers a particularly close adaptation of Conrad's book. Most obviously, the action has been shifted from Africa to Vietnam, and the story has also been moved from the 1880s or 1890s to the 1960s or 1970s. Many of the characters have also been reimagined. But *Apocalypse Now* captures many of the most powerful qualities of Conrad's book.

I wonder if it is really possible to get *Heart of Darkness* on film. The trip up the river is perfect for the movies. But how would you get into a movie Marlow's narration? Closely related to this set of difficulties is the challenge of presenting Marlow's inner life. The inner life is the central subject of

many 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels, and it is a subject that is not easily brought into the movies.

In closing, I might underscore a couple of points. A loose adaptation can sometimes be more effective than a more “faithful” one. Movies and books tend to be good at different things. By comparing books and movies, you discover what makes each medium exciting and distinctive. ■

### Suggested Reading

Desmond and Hawkes, *Adaptation*.

Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Do you tend to stay away from movies based on books? How often are you disappointed by those movies?
2. Have you ever found that a movie has spoiled a book for you? Once you have seen the movie version of a book, are you able to get those actors and locations out of your head?

## Realism Times Four

### Lecture 19

**A psychological realist tries to give us a persuasive account of how the characters think and feel. Psychological realists often trace feelings back to past experiences, suggesting that the human personality is formed in childhood and early adolescence.**

It has been said that all writers think of themselves as realists. If that is true, then the difference would seem to come in the definition of reality itself. For some, reality is material, and a realistic novel must offer vivid descriptions of its setting and its characters. For others, reality is largely in the eye of the beholder. From this perspective, the important thing is not to provide an image of the outside world, but rather a mapping of some more private, interior landscape. As we move through this lecture, we will explore competing definitions of both realism and reality, focusing on the work of C. S. Lewis and H. G. Wells. With the help of C. S. Lewis, we will see that there is actually more than one kind of realism. Then we will look at a writer who may not seem to fit any reasonable definition of realism: H. G. Wells.

When it comes to realism, there seem to be two sorts of people. To some people, realism is no big deal. They mostly want to be entertained. To other people, realism is a great big deal.

The fact of the story's fictionality is itself a major stumbling block. Why do we need to know that there is more than one kind of realism? It helps us to see why it can be difficult to label some books as either realistic or unrealistic. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, C. S.

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**Works of moral realism do not ask us to dispense with morality; they just want us to move beyond snap judgments.**

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Lewis contrasts “realism of presentation” with “realism of content.” Realism of presentation depends on how things are presented to us. Realism of content is expressed through plotting.

We consider two additional forms of realism: psychological realism and moral realism. Psychological realism is closely tied to the treatment and development of characters. A psychological realist tries to give us a persuasive account of how the characters think and feel. Psychological realists often trace feelings back to past experiences, suggesting that human personality is formed in childhood and early adolescence. What about moral realism?

**Psychological realism is closely tied to the treatment and development of characters. A psychological realist tries to give us a persuasive account of how the characters think and feel.**

In works fitting this description, characters who appear to be selfish usually turn out to be motivated by insecurity or fear. Works of moral realism do not ask us to dispense with morality; they just want us to move beyond snap judgments.

We are ready to look at *The War of the Worlds*. H. G. Wells is the sort of writer who might easily be dismissed as unrealistic, but I think

it is possible to argue that he is practicing his own sort of realism. He is a master of presentational realism. He seems to be a practitioner of moral and psychological realism. *The War of the Worlds* is the story of a Martian invasion in the suburbs of London. The book is full of things that do not really exist. Yet the descriptions of those things are so precise and powerful that you begin to believe in their existence, almost in spite of yourself. By choosing to set the story in modern England, then the most powerful nation in the world, Wells asks his readers to imagine themselves as suffering from an attack.

So we have presentational realism and moral realism. More importantly, we can see why the question of realism is a tricky one. What, then, about psychological realism? Wells explores the psychology of the mob and the experience of panic and fear. Note that in his handling of these matters, Wells anticipates many later writers.

What about realism of content? C. S. Lewis might agree that there is realism of content. In talking about works like the *Iliad* or *King Lear*, he speaks of “hypothetical probability—what would be probable if the initial situation occurred.” This is exactly the sort of probability that Wells is going for. What Wells wants is for us to agree that this is how people would behave under such circumstances. If Wells still strikes you as an unlikely realist, I would ask you to consider another interesting possibility: Perhaps no work of fiction is entirely realistic, and realism is more like an ideal than a reality. ■



The Teaching Company Collection

**English novelist H. G. Wells used psychological, presentational, and moral realism.**

### Suggested Reading

Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, chap. 7.

Robbe-Grillet, “From Realism to Reality.”

### Questions to Consider

1. Alain Robbe-Grillet, a French writer and theorist, once said that “all writers believe they are realists.” Do you think that is true? Or can you imagine a writer who strives to be unrealistic? What about H. G. Wells? Do you agree that he should be described as a realist?

2. Near the end of the lecture, we talked about the difficulty of beginning a history of the Civil War. Would you encounter the same difficulties if trying to write your own life story? Where does the story of your life really begin? With your birth? The night of your conception? The first meeting of your parents?

# Thumbs Up?—Interpretation and Evaluation

## Lecture 20

**Interpretation frequently involves the discovery or description of a subtext. We sense that a character is keeping something to himself. He isn't putting all of his cards on the table, and so we look for places where he tips his hand—places where his true feelings are exposed or betrayed.**

**A**re all interpretations created equal? And if not, how do you tell a good interpretation from a bad one? When we pose such questions, we are really asking about the role of the reader. Does the good reader serve the text, respecting its intentions and honoring its achievements? Or does she challenge the text, exposing its buried contradictions and questioning its hidden assumptions? We have an instinctive sense that there are—and must be—limits on the freedom and creativity of the reader. And yet at the same time, we also know that the value of reading—and perhaps much of the fun of it—lies in its ability to inspire idiosyncratic personal reflections. To focus our discussion of these issues, we will take up the case of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, a book that continues to provoke widely varied readings. In the end, does it really just come down to the personal tastes or preferences of the individual reader?

We start with a definition. To “interpret” something is to “explain” or “tell the meaning” of it. The meaning must not be obvious, and a good interpretation does not merely state the obvious. Interpretation is often associated with unlocking a secret or solving a mystery. Often, interpretation involves the discovery or description of a subtext. We sense that a character is keeping something to himself, and we look for places that may be revealing. An example of this sort of interpretation is near the beginning of *Brideshead Revisited*, when Charles and Sebastian are driving up to Sebastian's family home. Because interpretation takes us past the obvious, we should not be surprised when interpretations come into conflict. Disagreement is not a sign that something is wrong. It can indicate that you are actually getting somewhere.

Now we consider the many disagreements surrounding the evaluation of *Brideshead Revisited*. For some, it is a brilliant and affecting work of art, but for other readers, the book is vulgar and even schlocky. This novel is loved because of its aristocratic settings and characters; its nostalgic, even elegiac

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**The book wants to tell us that its hero moves from doubt to faith, but maybe, without really meaning to, it betrays some doubts of its own.**

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tone; and its subtle treatment of Charles's conversion experience.

This novel is hated because for some readers it is an expression of snobbery, the nostalgia for youth is hopelessly sentimental, and Charles's conversion is unconvincing. This shows us something about evaluation: Two groups of readers can see the very

same thing and have entirely opposite reactions to it. We may be tempted to ask who is right and who is wrong. But we are likely to learn more about reading if we resist the temptation to settle the dispute and instead try to understand the reasoning behind it.

We try to uncover the reasons for these readers' disagreement. If you admire this novel, you are likely to hold at least one of these assumptions: that reading gives us the chance to experience things vicariously or that the most interesting works of art are those that draw on long-established traditions or those that deal with weighty themes. What assumptions might lie behind a dislike for *Brideshead Revisited*? Living vicariously can be dangerous, and *Brideshead* feeds an unhealthy obsession with the doomstruck aristocracy. The attempt to take on big themes, like the loss of youth or the workings of Providence, almost always gets an author into trouble. Writers should play to their strengths.

We also should say a bit about the working of divine grace. What assumptions might lie behind a negative response to that theme? In a few cases, you get the feeling that people are disappointed by the very presence of religion in the novel. In most cases, the problem is that Waugh fails to dramatize the religious themes effectively. In making the claim that Waugh takes the easy way out by leapfrogging over the years that actually brought Charles to the church, you would refuse to play a passive role. You would be looking for

the subtext of the novel and working to refine your interpretation of the work. You are not really trying to see if the novel is good or bad but trying to see what is going on in the book.

In the final part of the lecture, we have a number of new questions to consider. What are we to make of the fact that Waugh chose not to dramatize his hero's conversion? Moving along the same lines, we might ask why Sebastian is exiled in the middle of the book. The book wants to tell us that its hero moves from doubt to faith, but maybe, without really meaning to, it betrays some doubts of its own. For some of you, these ideas will seem exciting and provocative; for others, they will seem finespun or far-fetched. By now, I hope that you welcome the opportunity to consider these problems—and to think about what you want your experience of reading to be. ■

### Suggested Reading

Amis, "Waugh's Mag. Op."

Richter, *Falling into Theory*.

### Questions to Consider

1. A question for those who have not read *Brideshead Revisited*: Does it sound like the kind of book you would enjoy? If not, why not?
2. A question for those who have read *Brideshead*: What, for you, is the book's greatest strength? What about its greatest weakness? What is your final assessment or evaluation of the book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Would you recommend it to all of your friends—or only to a select few? Do you think a great book should appeal to everyone, or are you comfortable with the idea that its appeal may be more limited than that?

# A Long Short Story—“Runaway”

## Lecture 21

With an author as meticulous as Alice Munro, it seems unlikely that the length of the sections is arbitrary. As I look at the shortest sections in the story (including the two-line section), I find that they often have a big impact—and I can’t help but think that it’s because of their compression.

We will end the second half of this course as we ended the first: by moving through a series of increasingly complicated examples. This time, we will begin with a story by Alice Munro, who is often described as one of our greatest living writers. In Munro’s “Runaway,” we see a masterful use of scene and summary, and subtext and dialogue. We also see a quiet determination to use fiction as an instrument of moral reflection: The design of Munro’s narrative forces us to reconsider our judgments of the characters—and with them, our confidence in our own abilities as interpreters. We start with chapters, then review scene and summary, subtext, and dialogue. We also consider metafiction and realism, and interpretation and evaluation. I hope that by drawing these issues together, we can deepen our appreciation of authors like Munro.

Chapters may seem to have little application to Munro, but “Runaway” does include blocks of text separated by extra white space. There are 21 sections in “Runaway.” Their length varies greatly, from two lines to six or seven pages. The lengths of the sections are not arbitrary. As we move into the first section, we are introduced to the third-person omniscient narrator, the setting of a small farm, and our three main characters: Carla; her husband, Clark; and their neighbor, Sylvia Jamieson. The destabilizing event is the return of Sylvia. We also have lots of questions. The questions raised in section 1 are mostly answered by the end of section 6. Clark and Carla are short on cash—and he has been pressuring her to blackmail Sylvia. He wants Carla to say that Sylvia’s late husband used to make unwanted sexual advances. By the end of section 6, then, the original questions have been answered—but also replaced with more questions.

Our next major topic is the use of scene and summary. In “Runaway,” you might start with section 2. It runs about four pages and is dominated by summary. In the midst of that summary, there is one little scene—but it is a killer. Further proof of Munro’s skill in blending scene and summary comes in section 3. In this section, we get her first big scene. It unfolds in three stages, and those stages are separated from each other by short bits of summary. Let me tell you what it accomplishes. It creates a sense of what writers sometimes call staging. By breaking up the speeches, Munro builds suspense.

Can what we have learned about subtexts also be applied to this story? In Carla’s case, the subtext might include feelings of confusion. For Clark, his need to reassert his masculinity may be the subtext for much of his behavior. Clark is not only pressuring Carla but also testing the limits of his authority.

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**The design of Munro’s narrative forces us to reconsider our judgments of the characters—and with them, our confidence in our own abilities as interpreters.**

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Our next topic is dialogue. Munro is writing naturalistic dialogue. The speeches are short and crisp, and none of them are more than two lines long. Each character has a distinctive tone and vocabulary. Clark can be sarcastic and cutting,

and he often turns his words into weapons. Carla’s speeches can be tentative or assertive; she asks for understanding but also gets defensive.

At this point, I hope you can see a few things: You really need to read Munro, and all of the topics we are discussing are closely related. Stopping about a third of the way through to do a little bit of analysis can have an enormous payoff. We talked about metafiction and realism. Metafiction is “fiction about fiction,” and this story has a metafictional dimension. Munro presents us with characters who tell stories—to themselves and to each other. Munro qualifies as both a moral and psychological realist. I interpret “Runaway” as a story about issues of class and gender and see it as a story about storytelling—and violence. As for evaluation, I think Munro is terrific, and I believe this story is one of her best. ■

## Suggested Reading

Franzen, "Alice's Wonderland."

Merkin, "Northern Exposures."

## Questions to Consider

1. Had you heard of Alice Munro before? Why do you suppose some writers become famous while others remain relatively obscure? Can obscurity be a good thing for a writer or an artist?
2. Munro presents the scene between Clark and Carla from Carla's point of view, using free indirect discourse to align her readers with Carla. Would it be possible to present the same scene, using the same dialogue and the same staging, from Clark's point of view? Would it be possible to use free indirect discourse as a way of generating sympathy for Clark? Or is there just no way to keep him from looking like a bully?

# A Classic Novel—*The Age of Innocence*

## Lecture 22

**Think about how that paragraph presents the setting and the characters. Think, too, about the social world of the novel. Who are these people, and what matters to them? Finally, think about the narrator, who makes a strong impression from the start. What kind of voice is speaking here? Is that voice sophisticated or down-to-earth? Is it mature or naive?**

The second work in this series of examples is *The Age of Innocence*, by Edith Wharton. In this classic novel, Wharton offers a fresh look at familiar themes: love, marriage, money, and status. She also employs all of the devices we have discussed in earlier lectures: Her treatment of the characters is relentlessly ironic, and her use of both scene and summary is consistently intelligent. Finally, her narrator may be the most compelling figure in the entire book. In a world in which the “real thing is never said or done,” she is essential to the novel and has the especially important role of saying what the characters are unable to say for themselves. There may be novels in which the narrator is supposed to set the scene and get out of the way, but this is not one of them. First, we consider the setting, characters, and narrator. Second, we look at the arrangement of chapters, the use of scene and summary, the presence of a subtext, and so on. Finally, we consider Martin Scorsese’s 1993 film adaptation.

We start with the opening chapter. The first paragraph answers many questions. The story takes us to New York in the 1870s. The characters are from old, established families. Beneath the surface, these people are a rather anxious lot. What does our close reading tell us about the narrator? She is intelligent and sophisticated, and her observations seem to be informed by a lifetime of experience. She is a reliable narrator. She is amused by the characters and their world, but she will connect their worries to our own.

As we move into the opening chapter, we’re introduced to the main character, a young man, Newland Archer. “New land” makes him sound like the embodiment of America itself, while “Archer” suggests that he is aiming at something. Newland is the first character named in the novel, and the first

to be described in any detail. That alerts us to his importance. In the opening pages, the narrator must accomplish two things at once. She must locate us in a particular place and time, and she must convince us that the characters will not be entirely foreign to us. What happens as we are invited to take a closer look at Newland? Newland is engaged to May Welland, and he has plans to improve and refine her. The narrator is skeptical and invites us to see Newland's plan as flawed and self-aggrandizing. Newland Archer is not so different from you and me. Most of us hope that we can stand apart from our friends, family, and neighbors. Most of us hope to participate in this world without being swallowed up by it.

We review some of the topics covered in recent lectures, starting with chapters. There are 34 chapters, grouped into two "books." The first book takes up to the marriage of Newland and May; the second book covers the early years of the marriage—with the

final chapter jumping ahead in time. If you are finished with book 1 and want to take stock of what has happened so far, you might pull out a sheet of paper and make a few notes about each chapter. You could list the main locations and events. You might make a "cast list" for each chapter, which would help you see when major characters are introduced and where other characters move in and out of the story.

We move on to our next issue: the use of scene and summary. The prejudice against summary might easily lead to a negative evaluation of *The Age of Innocence*. To forestall a negative evaluation, we can identify the narrator as an engaging, attractive character in her own right. We can show how many things are accomplished through summary: description, exposition, and introspection. Those thoughts and feelings cannot come out in a scene, because Newland is an isolated figure. In a world where the "real thing is never said or done," the narrator has to play an important role by saying what the characters are unable to say for themselves. Summary is therefore essential to this book. Wharton is capable of writing a compelling scene too. Look at chapter 12.

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**Newland is the first character named in the novel, and the first to be described in any detail. That alerts us to his importance.**

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We evaluate the 1993 film adaptation. I cannot say it is as good as the book, but it is not because it changes the story or leaves out important characters. When the film falls short, it is usually because the tone is just a little off. This novel is not an especially promising candidate for adaptation, because it devotes pages to Newland's inner life; that this film so often succeeds in capturing Newland's thoughts is to its great credit. ■

### Suggested Reading

Gornick, *The End of the Novel of Love*.

Updike, "The Age of Innocence."

### Questions to Consider

1. What are the potential risks and rewards of setting a story in the past? Do we tend to look down on people from the past? If so, is there anything a writer can do to counteract that tendency?
2. Wharton's narrator suggests that we no longer live in a "hieroglyphic world." Do you agree? Is it now possible for the "real thing" to be said or done or thought? Or must we continue to rely on "arbitrary signs"?

# A Baggy Monster—*War and Peace*

## Lecture 23

**We'll need to develop some strategies for dealing with works that go on for hundreds and hundreds of pages—and we'll need to ask some questions, too. Do these books really need to be that long? Is reading them really going to be worthwhile?**

**F**ew novels are as forbidding as the final work in this series of examples, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Recent paperback editions of the novel are 1,400 pages long. The plot covers a period of 15 years, and the characters, ranging from teenage boys and girls to emperors and czars, number in the hundreds. What is more, the novel can seem shapeless and incoherent—in the words of Henry James, a “large, loose, baggy monster.” How, then, can our new insights into the art of reading help us to meet the challenges of such a work? We will use this lecture as an opportunity to bring together almost everything we have learned about reading. For the alert reader, this most intimidating of novels is also a uniquely rewarding and exciting work of art. *War and Peace* differs from the other works in our course because it was not originally written in English and it is much longer than any of the books we have studied so far. After discussing those issues, we will explore Tolstoy's major themes by considering each word in his title.

Let's start with the issues of translation and length. The first translation into English was done in the 1880s, but the first great rendering into English did not come until 1904. We have multiple translations because each new translator wants to improve on earlier versions. Also, expressions that seemed fresh in 1904 may seem stale today. Choosing a translation can be personal, but the main criterion is readability. Although translations do not lend themselves to certain kinds of close reading, most of the techniques in this course should apply.

Now we consider length. We discuss the challenges of reading a 1,300-page novel. Prereading can help you to develop some initial sense of the design or structure of the work. If you find lists of characters, chapter summaries, historical materials, and explanatory notes, do not be afraid to rely on these

materials. Do not be afraid to make notes. Think about making your initial reading session fairly long. Does the book really have to be so long? The book covers many years that were crucial in Russian history, so it is no surprise that it takes Tolstoy hundreds of pages to tell that story. The work also traces the fortunes of several families, and we see a movement from one generation to the next. Tolstoy's aim is not to produce an elegant work of art, but to create something almost encyclopedic.

Now we come to his title. We consider the implications of each word in the title, starting with "war." We know that Tolstoy is dealing with the Napoleonic wars and that he is trying to advance a new way of thinking about the movement of peoples and the collision of armies. Tolstoy is also trying to give us a sense of what it might be like to be in the midst of a war zone. His treatment of war has a psychological dimension as well as a political or philosophical one. Although you might expect him to rely heavily on summary, you will find that he is always looking for ways to work in dialogue. The characters often speak in distinctive voices, and all of this helps to create a sense of realism.

Tolstoy shows that there is a lot of boredom in wartime and that battles can be incredibly confusing; however, his characters stop, in the midst of a battle, to notice the sunshine on a river or the beauty of the sky. The most famous example of this is in a chapter on the Battle of Austerlitz. Instead of worrying about himself, Prince Andrey thinks about the other soldiers and reflects on the beauty of the sky. The interesting thing is that Prince Andrey might never have had this insight if he had not been drawn into battle.

What, then, about "peace"? Tolstoy's characters' peacetime concerns include love, sex, and money. In love is respect, sympathy, and shared understanding. In sex is excitement, passion, and maybe even a sense of danger. In money is comfort, safety, and financial and social security. The challenge, in peacetime, is to get all three of these things to line up. Peace in Tolstoy is never entirely peaceful, and many of his characters are discontented or restless. In the opening chapter, Anna Scherer and Prince Vasily Kuragin speak about the future of one of his sons, for whom Anna has a plan to marry off. If this deal goes through, the son will get money, but at this point, no one is too concerned about love or sex. This "peace" is not entirely peaceful, because the subtext here is that the

characters feel themselves to be in danger and are attempting to protect their positions by bargaining with each other. In this exchange, you might also look for the things we have discussed in recent lectures. There is a wonderful blend of scene and summary. The dialogue has a fresh, natural quality. The narrator breaks up the dialogue with short summaries to create an impression of the prince as both insincere and standoffish. We are also learning that the narrator will tell us what he thinks we need to know—but not at first and not all at once.

**The dialogue has a fresh, natural quality.**

Now for a few words about “and.” The word “and” works to create a connection between Tolstoy’s two great subjects; it makes us wonder how peace turns into war—and how war eventually gives way to peace again. Tolstoy suggests several different ways of connecting war and peace. War casts a shadow over peacetime, making it seem silly and trivial. At the same time, peace turns out to be a bit like war, full of tactics and strategies, advances and retreats.

At the beginning of the lecture, I asked if reading a massive novel like this one was worthwhile. I hope you can see that it is and also see how our course has prepared you for a book like this. ■

### Suggested Reading

Morson, “*War and Peace*.”

Samet, *Soldier’s Heart*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How do you feel about reading works in translation? Do you understand why some people might caution against it? Do you agree that something is always lost in translation—and if so, do you think those losses are insurmountable?

2. What is the longest book you have ever read? What was it like to get started on the book? Did you ever feel like quitting or setting the book aside? And when did you know—really, really know—that you were going to get to the end?

# Picking Up the Tools

## Lecture 24

**In time, this sort of reading inevitably forces you to confront yourself. You see that you have underestimated a character in a story by Chekhov, or Mansfield, or O'Connor—and you ask yourself how you let that happen. What set of prejudices or presuppositions was operating there? What made you feel superior to that sort of person? What made you so sure that your own life was so different?**

**I**n our final lecture, we look at the conclusions from *Huckleberry Finn* and *Persuasion* to see how they help us understand the benefits of reading. But before we get to those endings, we will need a beginning and middle. We begin by clarifying some assumptions, for example, that artful reading is the only kind of reading you should do, that every book you read from now on should be one of the classics, and that good readers are born and not made. We also pack up and arrange our tools that we have gathered throughout these lectures to form a kind of checklist so that you will have a convenient, sensible place to start artful reading for any book. When we turn our attention to conclusions, endings, and the benefits of reading, we will see that what is satisfying about these endings is that these writers tell us that it is possible to feel more than one thing at a time—that it is possible to be happy and comfortable with the multiplicities within us.

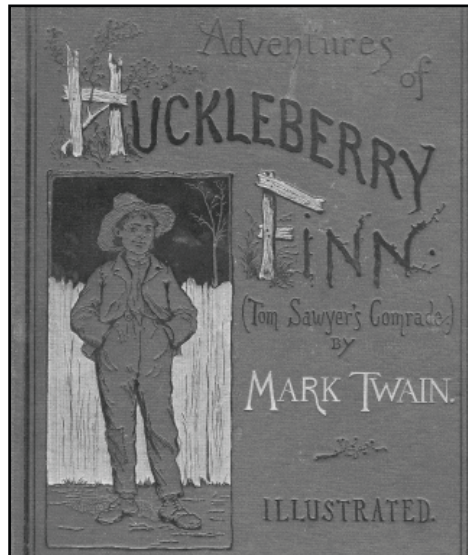
A course in reading literature can give you the feeling that there is something wrong with other kinds of reading. The problem is that they tend to make artful reading seem like a chore. As I have tried to show, we can continue to enjoy both artful and everyday reading. Consider the time commitment involved in artful reading. You should not try to apply every one of our lessons to books. Instead, let yourself play it by ear when deciding what to focus on. What about the assumption that readers are born, not made? Many people find their way to reading as adults. As adults, they often find that they get more out of reading; Italo Calvino makes this point in “Why Read the Classics?”

We move on to setting things in order and packing up our toolbox. Let's review: Prereading is to eyeball the entire book to get some initial sense of its larger design. The 50-page test is to give the book a chance to draw you in; after 50 pages, you can then put it aside. You may eventually be drawn back to that same book. You have to be in the right mood for a book. The destabilizing event is the event that in the first few pages knocks the characters off balance. It sets the entire plot in motion. Closely related to this idea is the stranger or journey game.

At this point, we might say a bit about book clubs. In a club, you are under some obligation to finish the book. You also need to go into the meeting with an open mind, so work on generating good questions. Questions should indicate a willingness to learn from others.

There are only a couple more tools for us to put away. There is stopping a third of the way through—to take stock, formulate questions, and make predictions. You might think about the characters and plot. You may also take time to reread the first chapter to see if they seem different this time. The other tool is close reading, which is looking at a passage and thinking about the language. The two most useful words in a good reader's vocabulary may be "what" and "if." These skills may prove especially valuable to those of you who are still in school or interested in fiction writing.

We turn our attention to conclusions, endings, and the benefits of reading. To focus our discussion, we examine the closing passages from *Huckleberry Finn* and



Courtesy Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

**Huck is rough and untutored, while Austen's narrator is smooth and sophisticated.**

*Persuasion* and do a little bit of comparing and contrasting. Mark Twain lets us know that Huck's future happiness depends on his ability to escape

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**You should not try to apply every one of our lessons to books. Instead, let yourself play it by ear when deciding what to focus on.**

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from the "trouble" of making books and being civilized. Huck needs to "light out for the Territory." This conclusion feels right, for all kinds of reasons—especially its irony—because the critique of civilization is itself the product of a highly intelligent and civilized mind. The further irony is that if we were to follow Huck out to the Territory,

we would also have to renounce the pleasures of reading a book like *Huck Finn*. Twain's conclusion reconciles us to the contradictions we must bear within ourselves.

The very beginning of the final chapter of *Persuasion* is a delightful, breezy paragraph, and at first, we might be struck by the differences between this and *Huck Finn*. Huck is rough and untutored, while Jane Austen's narrator is smooth and sophisticated. Huck seeks independence. Anne and Wentworth seek community and connection. But we may see that both books are playful and ironic, allowing us to perceive several truths at once. In Twain, our quintessentially American wish for freedom can be set against our human delight in the fruits of civilization. In Austen, our knowledge that art is predictable and conventional can be balanced by our need to see those conventions upheld. These writers tell us that it is possible to feel more than one thing at a time and be happy and comfortable with the multiplicities within us. The concluding sentences of *Persuasion* take us back to the scene where Anne listens quietly while others speak about life in the Navy. Anne is proud of Wentworth, and though she dreads the thought of a future war, she does not let that anxiety "dim her sunshine completely." Austen's conclusion is satisfying because she's reconciling us to ourselves.

I would also like to add some immediate, practical benefits to this sort of reading. It sensitizes you to language and makes you more alert to verbal nuance and texture. This in turn can feed back into your own writing.

It inevitably forces you to confront yourself. Finally, it helps you to accept yourself. ■

### Suggested Reading

Calvino, “Why Read the Classics?”

Franzen, “Why Bother?”

### Questions to Consider

1. Do you have any guilty pleasures? Are there books you would not own up to having read and enjoyed? Books that you are afraid others might look down on you for enjoying?
2. What for you are the chief benefits of reading? Have you ever enjoyed any practical benefits? Has reading helped to sensitize you to language or enabled you to improve your own writing? What about personal benefits? Has a book or story ever taught you something about yourself—something you did not know before you began reading?

## Timeline

- 1771..... Sir Walter Scott born in Edinburgh, Scotland.
- 1775..... Jane Austen born in Hampshire, England.
- 1812..... Charles Dickens born in Hampshire, England.
- 1816..... Charlotte Brontë born in Yorkshire, England.
- 1818..... *Persuasion*, Jane Austen.
- 1819..... *Ivanhoe*, Sir Walter Scott.
- 1828..... Leo Tolstoy born in Tula Province, Russian empire.
- 1835..... Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) born in Missouri.
- 1840..... Thomas Hardy born in Dorset, England.
- 1843..... Henry James born in New York City.
- 1843..... *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens.
- 1847..... *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë.
- 1852–1853..... *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens.
- 1857..... Joseph Conrad born in Berdichev, Ukraine.
- 1859..... Sir Arthur Conan Doyle born in Edinburgh, Scotland.
- 1860–1861..... *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens.
- 1862..... Edith Wharton born in New York City.

- 1865–1869..... *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy.
- 1866..... H. G. Wells born in Kent, England.
- 1873..... Willa Cather born in Virginia.
- 1881..... P. G. Wodehouse born in Surrey, England.
- 1882..... Virginia Woolf born in London, England.
- 1885..... *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain.
- 1886..... *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy.
- 1887..... *A Study in Scarlet*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.
- 1890..... *The Sign of Four*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.
- 1892..... *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*,  
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.
- 1894..... *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*,  
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.
- 1896..... F. Scott Fitzgerald born in Minnesota.
- 1897..... William Faulkner born in Mississippi.
- 1898..... *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James.
- 1898..... *The War of the Worlds*, H. G. Wells.
- 1899..... *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad.
- 1903..... Evelyn Waugh born in London, England.

- 1918..... *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather.
- 1920..... *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton.
- 1923..... Italo Calvino born in Cuba.
- 1925..... Flannery O’Connor born in Georgia (U.S.).
- 1925..... *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald.
- 1930..... *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner.
- 1931..... *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf.
- 1934..... *Right Ho, Jeeves*, P. G. Wodehouse.
- 1940..... J. M. Coetzee born in Cape Town, South Africa.
- 1945..... *Brideshead Revisited*, Evelyn Waugh.
- 1951..... *The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger.
- 1964..... “Revelation,” Flannery O’Connor.
- 1979..... *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, Italo Calvino.
- 1999..... *Disgrace*, J. M. Coetzee.

## Glossary

**ambiguity:** Uncertainty of meaning. An ambiguous line or passage is one that can be interpreted in at least two ways.

**beginning, middle, and end:** Essential elements of any narrative, according to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Beginnings introduce us to important characters and suggest the presence of buried conflicts. Middles feature the complications of those conflicts. And endings present their resolutions.

**destabilizing event:** The event that kicks off a narrative, usually by exposing a problem and knocking the characters off balance.

**formalist approach:** Focuses on the formal elements of a work, including its plot, structure, and style. Often distinguished from biographical and historicist approaches.

**free indirect discourse (f.i.d.):** A term used to describe passages in which a third-person narrator appears to borrow words or phrases from the characters. Often used to give the reader a sense of how a character is reacting to an unfolding scene.

**genre:** Literary critical term for “kind” or “type” or “category.” Types, or genres, of prose fiction include detective stories, westerns, legal thrillers, and family sagas.

**implied author:** Term coined by theorist Wayne C. Booth to describe the authorial figure created or constructed in a work of literature. Our most important relationship is to this figure, Booth argues, and not to the actual, flesh-and-blood writer.

**irony:** Like ambiguity, a device that allows for the possibility of multiple shades of meaning. Theorists usually distinguish between verbal irony (a property of words) and dramatic irony (a property of the events or scenes in a narrative). Verbal irony results from a discrepancy between the usual meaning of a word and the meaning intended by some particular speaker.

Dramatic irony results from another sort of discrepancy. In this case, the tension is between the characters' limited understanding of a situation and the reader's more accurate view.

**master plot:** A recurring story or narrative, also known as a master narrative or cultural myth. Classic examples might include "hero takes a journey" and "stranger comes to town."

**modernism:** An early 20<sup>th</sup>-century movement in the arts marked by intensive, sometimes radical, formal experimentation. Modernist fiction includes works by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner.

**narrator:** The storyteller. Most narrators are first person (as in *Jane Eyre* or *Huck Finn* or *The Catcher in the Rye*) or "third person" (as in *Ivanhoe* or "Runaway" or *The Age of Innocence*). Other possibilities exist, however, including first-person plural and second-person narration.

**prereading:** A tool for gathering impressions of a book's larger shape, design, or structure. Look at the following: Is it divided into smaller parts? If so, how many are there? How long are they? Are the parts numbered or titled? What does their arrangement or layout imply about the work as a whole?

**realism:** Generally defined as fidelity to real life, realism is one of the trickiest terms in the literary lexicon. C. S. Lewis distinguished "realism of presentation" (expressed through physical description) from "realism of content" (expressed largely through plotting). Other sorts of realism might include psychological realism and moral realism.

**round characters:** Characters possessing emotional depth or psychological complexity. For E. M. Forster, who invented this phrase, there was a simple test for roundness: Is the character capable of "surprising in a convincing way"?

**scene and summary:** Basic building blocks of fictional narrative. Scenes are dominated by dialogue, while summaries are dominated by narration.

Summaries might include physical descriptions, background information, and stage directions.

**story and plot:** Terms devised (or perhaps refined) by the Russian formalists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. If you list the events of a narrative in the order of their original occurrence, you get the “story.” If you list those same events in the order of their presentation to the reader, you get the “plot.” In many narratives (*As I Lay Dying* or “Runaway” or the Sherlock Holmes stories) the reader’s most immediate task is to rearrange the events of the plot into something like a coherent story.

**subtext:** Emotions lying behind the words and actions in a scene. The subtext is what drives the characters, whether they know it consciously or not.

## Biographical Notes

**Aristotle** (384–322 B.C.E.): One of the foundational figures in Western philosophy. His works address a wide variety of subjects, including ethics, logic, poetics, political theory, and natural science. Born in Stagira, Greece, he was the son of a medical doctor named Nichomachus. Nichomachus died when Aristotle was about 10 years old, leaving him in the care of Proxenus of Atarneus, who continued the boy's education. At age 17, he entered Plato's Academy in Athens. After completing his studies, Aristotle became a teacher at the Academy, holding this post for about 20 years. He left around the time of Plato's death in 347 B.C.E. and traveled to the island of Assos, where he conducted biological research. He returned to Athens, founded a school, and devoted himself to teaching and writing until his retirement in 323 B.C.E. He died of a digestive illness the following year. Among his most important works are *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Metaphysics*. Especially important for students of literature is the *Poetics* (c. 335 B.C.E.), in which he unfolds his influential theory of catharsis.

**Austen, Jane** (1775–1817): The most beloved of all novelists. Austen is admired by general readers as well as her fellow artists, and her work has been the subject of countless film and television adaptations. Austen was born in Hampshire, England, the sixth of seven children. Her father was a clergyman. She grew up in a family of devoted novel readers and showed an early talent for satire and parody. Austen began her first serious literary projects while in her 20s, producing early versions of what would later become *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Other major works include *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1815). *Persuasion* (1818) reflects her great admiration for the Navy—in which two of her brothers served. It was the last novel she finished before her death. Given her interest in courtship, it is worth noting that Austen never married. She did accept one proposal, from a younger man with a considerable fortune. But, for reasons that will probably always remain unclear, she withdrew her acceptance the next day.

**Borges, Jorge Luis** (1899–1986): Argentine short story writer, poet, and essayist. Borges grew up in Buenos Aires and moved to Geneva, Switzerland, at the beginning of World War I. He learned English before Spanish and acquired French and German while in Geneva. In 1921, he returned to Buenos Aires and published his first book of poetry. He began writing fiction in the 1930s, producing most of his best work after the death of his father in 1938. Some of his most important stories appeared in *Fictions* (1944), which included “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” “The Circular Ruins,” and “The Library of Babel.” Borges worked at the Buenos Aires library until he was dismissed for political reasons when Juan Perón came to power. After Perón was ousted, Borges was appointed director of the national library and given a professorship at the University of Buenos Aires. By the mid-1950s, a congenital affliction left Borges completely blind. His late works, such as *Dreamtigers* (1960) and *The Book of Sand* (1975), retained a sense of the surreal while effacing the borders between genres.

**Brontë, Charlotte** (1816–1855): Novelist and poet famous for *Jane Eyre* (1847) and other novels featuring strong heroines at odds with social circumstances. Patrick Brontë, Charlotte’s father, was an evangelical Anglican minister who encouraged his children to study natural history and explore the moors surrounding the village. Brontë’s mother died when she was five years old. In her adult life, Brontë earned money by teaching in order to help her brother and sisters. In 1846, she published a book of poems along with her sisters Emily and Anne under the pseudonym Currer Bell. She continued to use this pseudonym for her first two novels. In the early 1850s, after the deaths of her three remaining siblings, Brontë traveled to London three times, where she met important literary figures such as William Makepeace Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Harriet Martineau. She rejected three proposals before marrying in 1854. She died the following year, most likely due to complications resulting from pregnancy.

**Calvino, Italo** (1923–1985): Italian short story writer and novelist known for his formally inventive stories and his use of fable and folktale. Calvino was born in Cuba and grew up in San Remo, Italy, on the Italian Riviera. In 1943, Calvino joined the Italian Resistance and fought against the Germans in the Ligurian Mountains. After the war, he studied literature at the University of Turin. In the 1950s, he began writing fantastical and allegorical stories. He

gained fame for three novels published in this period: *The Cloven Viscount* (1952), *The Baron in the Trees* (1957), and *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959). He also traveled Italy collecting folktales, which he published as *Italian Folktales* (1956). In the late 1960s, Calvino became interested in semiotics and moved to Paris, where he associated with an avant-garde literary group known as Oulipo. In his later works, Calvino employed elaborate constraints to construct novels that address the issues of chance, change, and the act of reading. For example, *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979) recounts the frustration of you, the reader, attempting to read Italo Calvino's latest book. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1985.

**Cather, Willa** (1873–1947): American novelist whose work centers on the experiences of settlers in the American West. She was born in Virginia but moved to Nebraska at age nine, where she first met the immigrant settler groups that would factor heavily in her fictions. She attended the University of Nebraska, where she excelled at journalism and story writing. Upon graduating, she supported herself with editorial jobs at various magazines. After writing about cosmopolitan life in her unspectacular debut novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), Cather turned to the pioneer landscape of her childhood for inspiration. Her second novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), examines the strength of women on the frontier. She returned to this theme in her greatest work, *My Ántonia* (1918), which focuses on the story of a Bohemian immigrant girl who meets with hardships on the Nebraska prairies. Her novel *One of Ours* (1922) won the Pulitzer Prize. Cather began a romantic relationship with the editor Edith Lewis in the early 1900s. The two lived together from 1912 until Cather's death in 1947.

**Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich** (1860–1904): One of the greatest modern playwrights and short story writers. As a child, Chekhov endured frequent beatings and worked long hours for his father, a grocer who struggled and failed to make a living. After his father went bankrupt, the teenage Chekhov began publishing comic sketches and journalistic pieces in order to support his family while he studied to become a doctor. His stories gradually became more serious over the course of the 1880s, culminating in "Steppe" (1888) and "A Dreary Story" (1889). His most famous story is "The Lady with the Dog" (1899). Chekhov was also a brilliant playwright, and in the period from 1896 to 1903, he produced four dramatic masterpieces:

*The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *Three Sisters* (1901), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1903). He continued to practice medicine throughout his life, claiming, “Medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my mistress.” He died of tuberculosis in 1904. Chekhov’s thematic concerns are remarkably various, but his works are unified by formal inventiveness and an unsentimental concern for the mundane aspects of characters’ lives.

**Coetzee, J. M. (John Maxwell)** (b. 1940): South African novelist and essayist whose writing frequently addresses issues of colonialism. Coetzee grew up in Cape Town and attended the University of Cape Town, where he studied English and mathematics. He then went on to earn a doctorate from the University of Texas at Austin. He started writing fiction in 1969, publishing his first novel, *Dusklands*, in 1974. His second novel won South Africa’s highest literary prize, the CNA, but it was his third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), that established his reputation internationally. Coetzee was the first writer to win two Booker Prizes, first for *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and again for *Disgrace* (1999). *Disgrace* follows a South African university professor as he moves to his daughter’s farm after being publicly shamed in a sex scandal. In addition to writing fiction, Coetzee has had a distinguished career as an academic, holding professorships at SUNY Buffalo, the University of Cape Town, Johns Hopkins, Harvard, Stanford, and the University of Chicago. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003. He currently resides in Adelaide, Australia.

**Conan Doyle, Arthur** (1859–1930): Novelist and short story writer best known for his Sherlock Holmes detective stories. Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh and studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh, where he began writing stories. He worked as a physician in Southsea, England, and wrote while waiting for patients, eventually producing his first novel, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), in which the character of Sherlock Holmes first appeared. The character became enormously popular as Conan Doyle began to write serialized stories featuring Holmes. Hoping to turn to other concerns, Conan Doyle killed Holmes in a story of 1893, but he later resurrected the character due to public outcry. Conan Doyle’s writings were remarkably diverse, including propaganda defending the imperial venture in the Boer War, for which he was knighted in 1902; a six-volume *History of the British Campaign in France and Flanders* (1920); a two-volume *History*

*of Spiritualism* (1926); historical novels; science fiction stories; poems; and plays. He died of a heart attack on July 7, 1930. A curious episode from his life, in which he had a chance to play detective, is the basis for Julian Barnes's novel *Arthur and George* (2005).

**Conrad, Joseph** (1857–1924): A crucial figure in the transition into modernism, valued for his experiments with narrative form and his reflections on the nature of storytelling. Though his parents were both Polish, he was born in Ukraine. He effectively lost his parents at age 5, when they were exiled to a village in northern Russia. Conrad went to sea at 16, visiting the West Indies and Venezuela while serving in the French merchant marine. He later sought work on British ships and became an English subject in 1886. The most important journey of his career came in 1890, when he sailed to the coast of Africa and steamed up the Congo River. This journey would become the basis for his most famous and influential work, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which would later serve as the inspiration for the film *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Closely associated with other major figures, including Henry James and Ford Madox Ford, Conrad would publish several other important works of fiction, including *Almayer's Folly* (1895); *Lord Jim* (1900); *Nostromo* (1904); *The Secret Agent* (1907), now celebrated as one of the first novels to take up the issue of urban terrorism; and *Under Western Eyes* (1911).

**Dickens, Charles** (1812–1870): Prolific novelist often considered the greatest writer of the Victorian era. He was born into a middle-class family in Hampshire, England, and moved to Chatham in his infancy. Dickens's father disastrously mismanaged the family's finances. As a result, he was jailed for debt in 1824, and the 12-year-old Charles was taken out of school to work in a factory. As a young adult, Dickens worked as a journalist for various publications. His first stories appeared in magazines in 1832. In 1837, he serialized his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, which vaulted him into celebrity and made him the most popular writer of his day. His most famous piece of fiction, *A Christmas Carol*, appeared in 1843. Later novels like *David Copperfield* (1849–1850), *Bleak House* (1852–1853), *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857), and *Great Expectations* (1860–1861) augmented his fame and marked major innovations in English literature. Dickens was renowned for his charismatic public readings, which drew massive audiences. His works are characterized by a concern for industrial laborers and the suffering of

children, comic elements and caricatures, and mastery of dialogue in many dialects.

**Faulkner, William** (1897–1962): Nobel Prize–winning American novelist and short story writer. Faulkner grew up in Oxford, Mississippi, where he learned to ride horses and hunt. He left high school before graduating and joined the British Royal Air Force during World War I after failing to meet U.S. military requirements, but the war ended before he finished training. He returned to Oxford, where he would live for the rest of his life. In 1924, he published a book of pastoral poetry, though he quickly shifted his focus to fiction. His first major breakthrough came in 1929 with *The Sound and the Fury*, which collects four separate stream-of-consciousness monologues. Subsequent novels, such as *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), built on this development, employing multiple narrators and eschewing narrative closure. In the 1930s and 1940s, Faulkner occasionally supplemented his income by writing screenplays for Hollywood films. His widely anthologized work, *The Bear*, can be found in *Go Down, Moses* (1940). After winning the Nobel Prize in 1950, he wrote less and began to drink more heavily. He died of a heart attack at age 64.

**Fitzgerald, F. Scott** (1896–1940): American novelist and short story writer of the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota and attended Princeton University. At Princeton, he became an active part of the theatrical and literary life of the university. He performed poorly, however, and flunked out in 1917. After a brief return to Princeton, he joined the army and was stationed in Alabama, where he met Zelda Sayre and began writing his first novel. Fitzgerald fell in love with Zelda, and the two were engaged when he set off to find success in New York. Shortly thereafter, she broke off the engagement, prompting Fitzgerald to return to St. Paul to finish his novel. Published in 1920, *This Side of Paradise* brought him fame and prosperity. He and Zelda married later that year and had a daughter soon after. In 1924, the family moved to the French Riviera, where Fitzgerald wrote his greatest novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Over the next several years, Fitzgerald sank into alcoholism, and Zelda had two mental breakdowns, from which she never fully recovered. In 1937, with his wife in a sanatorium, Fitzgerald moved to Hollywood to become a scriptwriter, remaining there until his death of a heart attack at age 44.

**Hardy, Thomas** (1840–1928): English novelist and poet known for his darkly pessimistic writing. Hardy grew up in Dorset, England, and spent much of his childhood exploring the surrounding countryside. He dreamed of attending Cambridge and entering the clergy, but instead his parents apprenticed him to an ecclesiastical architect. In the mid-1860s, he turned his attention to literature. Finding his first poems poorly received, Hardy began writing novels. He abandoned architecture in 1872 and published his first major novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in 1874. Of the five novels he published in the following decade, only one, *The Return of the Native* (1878), achieved distinction. His next success came with *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), which addresses class issues and the conflict between urban modernization and rural traditionalism. After the success of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Hardy returned to his first love, poetry. He wrote in a wide variety of forms and meters, including ballads, lyrics, dramatic monologues, and even epic.

**Hawthorne, Nathaniel** (1804–1864): American novelist and short story writer best known for *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *House of the Seven Gables* (1851). Hawthorne was born into a prominent Puritan family in Salem, Massachusetts. His father died when he was four years old. Much of his young life was spent reading and writing fiction. After graduating from Bowdoin College, Hawthorne gained a measure of fame through his short stories but was unable to achieve financial independence through his writing alone. He took a job at the Boston Custom House, eventually saving enough money to marry Sophie Peabody and rent a house in Concord, where he met Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. When his stories continued to sell poorly, he returned to Salem, where he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*. From there, he moved to Lenox, where he befriended Herman Melville and wrote *House of the Seven Gables*. His later writing is undistinguished and shows signs of psychological troubles. In his final two years, he suffered frequent nosebleeds and began writing the number 64 obsessively. He died in his sleep in 1864.

**Hemingway, Ernest** (1899–1961): Novelist and story writer known for his spare, minimalist style. Born in a suburb of Chicago, Hemingway spent his childhood summers hunting and fishing at a family home in northern Michigan. After graduating from high school in 1917, Hemingway worked

as a reporter before leaving to join the war effort. Rejected from the army due to his poor vision, he became a volunteer ambulance driver for the Red Cross. He was injured in 1918 while delivering supplies to troops. While recovering at a hospital in Milan, he fell in love with a nurse who rejected his marriage proposal. In 1921, Hemingway moved to Paris, where he received advice and encouragement from Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. His first literary success came in 1925, with the publication of *In Our Time*, a collection of stories including “Big Two-Hearted River.” In the following year, he published his first major novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, which tells the story of disaffected expatriates in postwar France and Spain. Hemingway actively supported the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War and flew missions for the Royal Air Force in World War II. The themes in his books mirror his passions in life: bull-fighting in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), war in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), and hunting and fishing in *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Plagued by depression throughout his life, Hemingway shot himself in 1961.

**James, Henry** (1843–1916): Known later in life as the Master, and with good reason. One of the most important figures in the history of Anglo-American fiction, he produced the first major body of theoretical writing on the novel form. Born in New York City, he spent much of his childhood traveling in Europe. He attended Harvard Law School for a year and was drafted into the army during the American Civil War, but he was exempted from service because of a medical disability. While living in Paris during the mid-1870s, he became acquainted with some of Europe’s contemporary novelists; his friends in this period included Ivan Turgenev and Gustave Flaubert. James’s early works include *The American* (1877); “Daisy Miller” (1878); and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1882), considered by many his greatest work. He published his most famous story, *The Turn of the Screw*, in 1898. He is said to have experienced a creative rebirth in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, producing three astounding novels—*The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904)—all celebrated for their close attention to the workings of human consciousness. He lived in England for over 40 years and became a British citizen in 1915. Recently, he has become the subject of other people’s fiction, taking the lead role in two interesting novels: Colm Tóibín’s *The Master* (2004) and David Lodge’s *Author, Author* (2004).

**Lahiri, Jhumpa** (b. 1967): Short story writer and novelist known for her treatment of the immigrant and postcolonial experience. Born in London, she moved to the United States at the age of three. “I wasn’t born here,” she once said, “but I might as well have been.” Lahiri grew up in Rhode Island and was educated at Barnard College and Boston University, where she received four advanced degrees, including an M.A. in Creative Writing and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. Her first collection of stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), enjoyed great success, winning the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Hemingway Award. It was also named The New Yorker Debut of the Year. Later publications have included a novel, *The Namesake* (2003), and another collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Lahiri has held teaching positions at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design. She lives with her family in Brooklyn, New York.

**Lewis, C. S. (Clive Staples; 1898–1963)**: Novelist, critic, and scholar famed for his Christian-themed children’s fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. After his mother died when he was nine, Lewis attended several schools in England and Ireland. He served in the Somerset light infantry division during World War I and was injured in 1918. He received a scholarship to study classics at Oxford after the war. Upon graduating, he began a teaching career at Oxford and Cambridge that spanned nearly four decades. While at Oxford, Lewis was a member of the literary group known as the Inklings, which also included J. R. R. Tolkien and Nevill Coghill. Many of Lewis’s works are defenses of his Christian faith, most notably *The Problem of Pain* (1940) and *The Screwtape Letters* (1942)—the latter a satiric work composed of letters from an elderly devil instructing a novice in the art of tempting Christians. His critical works include *The Allegory of Love* (1936) and *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961). Lewis married Joy Gresham in 1956, but she died of cancer in 1960. He wrote movingly of his loss in *A Grief Observed* (1961).

**Mansfield, Katherine** (1888–1923): Major writer of the modernist period celebrated for her subtle, psychologically sophisticated stories. Born Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp, she grew up in New Zealand, where her father was a wealthy and influential businessman. She finished her education at Queens College in London and traveled to Paris and Brussels before returning to New Zealand. In 1908, she left New Zealand permanently and moved back to London. After conceiving a child, Mansfield married George

Bowden, but she left him after the ceremony. She returned to her previous lover for a month and had a miscarriage shortly thereafter. Hearing of her daughter's licentious behavior and marriage, Mansfield's mother spirited her away to a Bavarian spa. It was here that Mansfield wrote the stories that would compose her first collection, *In a German Pension* (1911). After her brother died in 1915, Mansfield began writing the stories collected in *Prelude* (1918), which focus on family memories in New Zealand. In the last years of her life, she wrote the stories collected in *Bliss* (1920) and *The Garden Party* (1922), which include much of her best work. She died of tuberculosis in 1923.

**Munro, Alice** (b. 1931): Preeminent Canadian short story writer. Munro was born in southwestern Ontario, where she sets most of her stories. She wrote her first stories as a teenager and first published while studying at Western Ontario University. She left school to get married and move to British Columbia. She and her husband had three children and opened a bookstore. Her first story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), won the Governor General's Award, Canada's highest literary honor, which she has received twice more. In 1972, Munro and her husband divorced, and she moved back to Ontario. She remarried in 1976 and moved to a farm outside Clinton, Ontario. Noteworthy among her 15 published works are *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998) and *Runaway* (2004), both winners of Canada's prestigious Giller Prize. Her stories have frequently been published in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Paris Review*.

**O'Connor, Flannery** (1925–1964): Catholic novelist and short story writer whose theologically motivated gothic works often blend humorous, violent, and grotesque elements. O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, and attended the Georgia State College for Women, graduating in 1945 with a degree in social science. She attended the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, where she earned an M.F.A. in Creative Writing. Thereafter, she spent three years working on her novel in New York and Connecticut. On a train ride home to the South in 1950, she became seriously ill and was hospitalized in Atlanta. She was diagnosed with lupus, the same disease that had killed her father. After several months of treatment, she moved to a dairy farm with her mother. Her first novel, *Wise Blood*, appeared in 1952, followed by the classic story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955).

O'Connor described the themes of these stories as the workings of grace and original sin. She wrote two more books while her health continued to degenerate. She died of kidney failure in 1964 after her lupus reacted badly to an abdominal surgery.

**Poe, Edgar Allan** (1809–1849): American short story writer and poet; inventor of the modern detective story and master of macabre fiction. Poe's parents were traveling actors. His father died when he was a year old, leaving his mother to care for him until she died a year later. He was taken into the care of John Allan of Richmond, Virginia. Poe entered the University of Virginia but was forced to leave after amassing large gambling debts. Allan helped him secure a position at West Point, but he was expelled for refusing to participate in drills and classes. By 1831, Poe had published three books of poems, none of which had been commercially successful. As editor of such periodicals as the *Southern Literary Messenger* and *Graham's Magazine*, he published many of his most successful fictions, including "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1842), and "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1845). He married his 13-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm in 1836. In later years, lack of steady work left the two in desperate financial circumstances. Virginia died of tuberculosis in 1847, two years before Poe died under mysterious circumstances.

**Scott, Walter** (1771–1832): Scottish poet and novelist credited with the invention of the historical novel. As a young man, Scott apprenticed to become a lawyer, but he preferred to spend his time reading in the six languages he had learned by his midteens. He began his literary career as a translator of Goethe and Bürger, German romantic poets who had a decisive influence on him. His collection of Scottish border ballads, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–1803), brought him his first taste of literary fame. Shortly thereafter, he began publishing a series of long narrative poems, including *The Lay of the Minstrel* (1805) and *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), his masterpiece of poetic romance. These poems are marked by their Scottish settings, depth of feeling, and striking descriptions of landscape. In 1814, Scott wrote his first novel, *Waverley*, which tells of a young man reaching maturity during the Jacobite uprising in Scotland in 1754–1756. Its popularity prompted Scott to produce a spate of historical novels, including

the masterpieces *Rob Roy* (1817) and *Ivanhoe* (1819). He suffered four strokes in his final years, but he continued to write until his death.

**Smith, Zadie** (b. 1975): Most famous for her images of multiracial, multicultural London, she is also known for her wit, her sensitivity, and her brilliant dialogue. Born to an English father (an advertising executive) and a Jamaican mother (a child psychologist), Smith grew up in the North London neighborhood of Willesden. She attended Cambridge, where she began working on her first novel. Circulated in manuscript, the opening pages set off a bidding war among English publishers. Upon its publication in 2000, *White Teeth* marked Smith as an extravagantly gifted, highly promising writer. She followed her initial success with *The Autograph Man* (2002) and *On Beauty* (2005), a novel informed by her experience as a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard. Smith borrows much of the structure of *On Beauty* from *Howards End* (1910) and credits E. M. Forster (1879–1970) as a major influence on her work.

**Tolstoy, Leo** (a.k.a. **Lev Nikolaevich**; 1828–1910): Influential Russian novelist, story writer, and social critic. Tolstoy was born at Yasnaya Polyana to an aristocratic family. His literary career began in the 1850s with the autobiographical trilogy *Childhood* (1852), *Boyhood* (1854), and *Youth* (1857). During the Crimean War, he commanded a battery at the siege of Sebastopol. He married Sonya Andreyevna Behrs in 1862 and had 13 children with her. His first major masterpiece was published between 1865 and 1869: *War and Peace* is an epic story set during Napoleon's invasion of Russia. His other epic masterpiece, *Anna Karenina* (1873–1877), is a romantic novel about adultery and sexual morality. After finishing *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy underwent a spiritual crisis, resulting in his espousal of a unique, naturalistic brand of Christianity based on the Sermon on the Mount. He devoted the rest of his life to the propagation of this faith. Works such as *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886), *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1891), and the pamphlet *What Is Art* (1898) reflect the intensified moralism of his late period. His family life suffered as a result of his conversion. In his final days, he fled his family in disguise, caught pneumonia, and died of heart failure in a railroad station.

**Twain, Mark** (1835–1910): Pen name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and other classic works of American fiction. His father, an attorney, died before Twain reached the age of 11. His formal education has been described as sporadic. His practical education, as a typesetter, riverboat pilot, and reporter, was extensive and transformative. He first used his pseudonym—a term used by pilots to indicate a depth of two fathoms, or about 12 feet—in 1863. (He did not begin to wear his trademark white suit until 1906.) Twain’s first literary success came with the publication of “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” in 1865. Highlights of his subsequent career include *Innocents Abroad* (1869), *Roughing It* (1872), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894). The reputation of *Huck Finn* rests on its complicated (some would say contradictory) treatment of Huck’s relationship with Jim, a runaway slave, and on the freshness and vitality of Huck’s narration. It is this aspect of the novel that Hemingway seems to have had in mind when he said that “all modern American literature comes from ... *Huckleberry Finn*.”

**Updike, John** (1932–2009): Novelist, short story writer, and poet. Updike was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, and grew up in nearby Shillington. He graduated from Harvard University in 1954 and began writing for *The New Yorker* the following year. His first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair* (1958), was a National Book Award finalist. His second novel, *Rabbit, Run* (1960), introduces the character of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, a former high school basketball star dissatisfied with his job and marriage. Updike returned to this character in three subsequent novels, *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990). Both of the last two Rabbit novels received Pulitzer Prizes, and the series has become a mainstay of American literature. Updike is the author of over 60 books, including *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (1962), *Couples* (1968), and *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996). He described his subject as “the American Protestant small-town middle class.” He was also important as a critic of literature and the visual arts. He died of lung cancer in 2009.

**Waugh, Evelyn** (1903–1966): One of the most respected satirical novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Waugh’s youth was marked by his intellectual and artistic

pursuit. He published an essay on cubism at age 14, founded artistic societies, and won prizes for his art and poetry. He studied at Oxford, where he met Harold Acton. Waugh's first published book, a biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, appeared in 1928. It was favorably reviewed but sold poorly. Later that year, Waugh published his first novel, *Decline and Fall*, which brought him fame despite its lack of commercial success. He secured his reputation with novels like *Vile Bodies* (1930) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934) and became the highest-paid writer of his generation. During World War II, Waugh became an officer in the Royal Marines. He began his most famous novel, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), while recovering from a minor injury incurred in parachute training. In the mid-1950s, he went mad as a result of bromide poisoning. He recovered and continued writing until his death of a massive coronary thrombosis in 1966.

**Wells, H. G. (Herbert George; 1866–1946):** English novelist and social commentator known for such classics of science fiction as *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Wells was the son of shopkeepers. The family lived in dismal conditions and constantly faced the threat of poverty. After a series of failed apprenticeships, he won a scholarship to study biology. He began a career as a science teacher in 1888 and married his cousin shortly thereafter. When the marriage proved unsuccessful, he ran off with a former pupil. Between 1895 and 1908, he published the series of science fiction novels that made him famous. Beginning with *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (1900), he turned increasingly to comic novels about lower-middle-class life, depicting the conditions familiar from his childhood. His earlier writings display an inveterate liberal optimism, but his work grew more bitterly satiric after World War I. In the last decades of his life, Wells concerned himself with popular education and wrote grim, polemical works of fiction.

**Wharton, Edith (1862–1937):** American novelist and story writer best known for her depictions of upper-class American life. Born to a distinguished New York family, Wharton was educated at private schools in the United States and Europe. She made her society debut in 1879 and married a prominent Boston banker in 1885. She had privately published a book of poems in 1878 but did not start writing seriously until after her marriage. Wharton's first

novel, *The Valley of Decision*, appeared in 1902. *The House of Mirth* (1905) was her first critical and popular success. She moved to France in 1907 and divorced her husband in 1913. In France, she deepened her friendship with the novelist Henry James, whose novels had greatly influenced her. This influence is most apparent in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), for which she became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize. Other important works include *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Custom of the Country* (1915). She continued writing until she suffered a stroke and died at the age of 75.

**Woolf, Virginia** (1882–1941): Modernist novelist, essayist, and story writer who developed revolutionary narrative techniques in such masterpieces as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Born Adeline Virginia Stephen, Woolf began writing at an early age, composing letters and serial romances with her siblings. Between 1895 and 1904, she endured the loss of her mother, half sister, and father. Strained by her father's death and ongoing sexual abuse by her half brother, Woolf had a nervous breakdown and attempted suicide. After recovering, she moved with her siblings to the Bloomsbury neighborhood of London. Here began the weekly meetings of the radical young artists and intellectuals that came to be known as the Bloomsbury group, which included Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, John Maynard Keynes, and Woolf's future husband Leonard Woolf, among others. Woolf completed her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, in 1913, but it was not published until 1915 due to another suicide attempt. Subsequent novels such as *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and *The Waves* (1931) experimented with genre conventions and employed stream-of-consciousness techniques and nonlinear narratives. In her classic feminist work *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf explored the economic and cultural roles of women. In 1941, despairing over the horrors of the war and paralyzed by self-doubt, she loaded her pockets with rocks and walked into the River Ouse.

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