

# World Literature

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Cross

# WORLD LITERATURE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE	CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE GREAT LITERATURE OF THE WORLD	1	THE OLD TESTAMENT ( <i>cont.</i> )	
II. ANCIENT EGYPTIAN LITERATURE . . . . .	6	The Song of Songs	
THE PRECEPTS OF PTAH-HOTEP . . . . .	10	The Bride Speaks . . . . .	34
THE BOOK OF THE DEAD		The Happy Dream . . . . .	35
A Part of the Negative Confession. . . . .	10	Zion Redeemed	
EGYPTIAN STORIES . . . . .	11	The Prelude (Isaiah, 40) . . . . .	35
Setna and the Magic Book. . . . .	12	The Awakening (Isaiah, 52). . . . .	36
EGYPTIAN POETRY . . . . .	17	Wisdom's Ways with Her Children (Proverbs, 8) . . . . .	36
Hymn to the Sun . . . . .	17	IV. THE LITERATURE OF ASIA BEFORE THE CHRISTIAN ERA . . . . .	38
Hymn to Osiris . . . . .	18	THE SACRED BOOK OF ZOROASTER . . . . .	41
Sunrise . . . . .	19	THE RIG-VEDA	
Hymn to Amon Ra . . . . .	19	Hymn to the Sun . . . . .	42
Hymn to Usertesen III . . . . .	20	Hymn to Death . . . . .	42
Hymn to Aton . . . . .	20	THE RAMAYANA	
III. HEBREW LITERATURE. . . . .	22	Lex Talionis. . . . .	42
THE OLD TESTAMENT		THE MAHABHARATA	
Belshazzar's Feast (Daniel, 8). . . . .	25	Love Stronger Than Death . . . . .	44
The Trees Choose a King (Judges, 8). . . . .	27	THE PANCHATANTRA	
The Oration of Moses on the Blessing and the Curse (Deuteronomy, 28) . . . . .	27	The Raven, the Rat, and the Pigeons . . . . .	51
A Lament (II Samuel, 1) . . . . .	30	Kings. . . . .	52*
Remember Thy Creator (Ecclesiastes, 12) . . . . .	31	True Friendship . . . . .	53*
The Twenty-third Psalm . . . . .	31	Poverty. . . . .	53.
The Ninetieth Psalm . . . . .	31	THE CHINESE CLASSICS	
The One Hundred and Third Psalm . . . . .	32	Confucius' Doctrine of the Mean . . . . .	53
The One Hundred and Twenty-First Psalm . . . . .	32	The Analects of Confucius . . . . .	53
An Elegy of a Broken Heart (Job, 3) . . . . .	33	V. GREEK LITERATURE—HOMER TO PERICLES. . . . .	55
The Creator's Joy in His Creation (Job, 38) . . . . .	33	HOMER	
		The Iliad	
		Book XVIII . . . . .	62
		The Odyssey	
		Book VIII . . . . .	69
		Book IX . . . . .	76

CHAPTER	PAGE	CHAPTER	PAGE
SAPPHO		THE GREEK ANTHOLOGY ( <i>cont.</i> )	
Ode to Aphrodite . . . .	83	PLATO	
Ode to Anactoria . . . .	84	Morning and Evening Star . . .	101
Farewell to Anactoria . . .	84	THEOCRITUS	
Hesperus . . . . .	84	Idyll XI . . . . .	102
VI. GREEK POETRY AND		AESOP'S FABLES	
DRAMA OF THE		The Frog and the Ox. . . .	103
GOLDEN AGE . . . . .	85	The Dog in the Manger. . .	103
PINDAR		The Crow and the Pitcher. . .	103
Olympic Ode VIII. . . . .	97	The Wind and the Sun . . .	103
THE GREEK ANTHOLOGY		The Man, the Boy, and the . .	
AGATHIAS		Donkey . . . . .	104
Plutarch . . . . .	99	The Hare and the Tortoise. . .	104
ANONYMOUS		AESCHYLUS	
Spirit of Plato . . . . .	99	Prometheus Bound. . . . .	104
Riches . . . . .	99	SOPHOCLES	
Grapes . . . . .	99	Antigone . . . . .	121
The Tomb of Diogenes . . .	100	EURIPIDES	
ANTIPATER		Iphigenia in Aulis . . . . .	141
Undying Thirst . . . . .	100	ARISTOPHANES	
ARCHIAS OF BYZANTIUM		The Frogs . . . . .	165
Sea Dirge . . . . .	100	MENANDER	
CALLIMACHUS		The Arbitrants. . . . .	179
Heraclitus . . . . .	100	VII. GREEK HISTORY, PHI-	
Saon of Acanthus . . . . .	100	LOSOPHY, AND ORA-	
CRINAGORAS		TORY . . . . .	187
Epitaph on an Infant . . .	100	PLATO	
LEONIDAS OF ALEXANDRIA		Phaedo—The Death of	
Menodotis . . . . .	100	Socrates . . . . .	189
LEONIDAS OF TARENTUM		ARISTOTLE	
Cleitagoras . . . . .	100	Ethics—Books I and II . . .	198
The Last Journey . . . . .	101	The Art of Poetry . . . . .	201
LUCILLIUS		HERODOTUS	
On an Old Woman . . . . .	101	History of the Persian Wars	
Treasure . . . . .	101	Leonidas at Thermopylae . . .	203
MELEAGER		THUCYDIDES	
In the Spring . . . . .	101	History of the Peloponne-	
A Garland for Heliodora . .	101	sian War	
NICIAS		Pericles' Memorial Oration . .	210
The Fountain at the Tomb . .	101	The Final Struggle in the	
PAULUS SILENTIARIUS		Harbor of Syracuse . . . . .	214
No Matter . . . . .	101	XENOPHON	
		Anabasis—Book IV . . . . .	215



CHAPTER	PAGE
ISOCRATES	
Panegyricus . . . . .	217
DEMOSTHENES	
On the Crown . . . . .	220
VIII. PRE-CHRISTIAN LATIN LITERATURE . . . . .	225
PLAUTUS	
Menæchmi; or, The Twin-Brothers . . . . .	236
TERENCE	
Andria . . . . .	259
SENECA	
Medea . . . . .	281
JULIUS CAESAR	
Commentaries upon the Gallic Wars . . . . .	294
Caesar's First Invasion of Britain . . . . .	295
SALLUST	
The Conspiracy of Catiline . . . . .	298
LIVY	
Rome from the Founding of the City	
Horatius at the Bridge . . . . .	301
CICERO	
An Oration Against Catiline . . . . .	303
Selected Letters of Cicero	
To Atticus (Returning from Epirus) . . . . .	310
To M. Marius (at Cumæ) . . . . .	310
To L. Papirius Paetus (at Naples) . . . . .	312
On Friendship . . . . .	312
IX. THE LATIN POETS . . . . .	318
LUCRETIUS	
On the Nature of Things	
The Interpreter . . . . .	318
No Single Thing Abides . . . . .	319
CATULLUS	
My Sweetest Lesbia . . . . .	320
True or False . . . . .	321
To Himself . . . . .	321

CHAPTER	PAGE
CATULLUS ( <i>cont.</i> )	
Sappho . . . . .	321
On the Burial of His Brother . . . . .	321
Love and Death . . . . .	321
VIRGIL	
Eclogue IV . . . . .	324
The Georgics—Prelude . . . . .	324
The Aeneid—Book IV	
Aeneas Deserts His Queen . . . . .	325
Death of Dido . . . . .	327
HORACE	
To Maecenas . . . . .	331
Country Life . . . . .	332
Persian Fopperies . . . . .	333
To an Ambitious Friend . . . . .	333
To Chloe . . . . .	334
Ad Leuconoën . . . . .	334
OVID	
Metamorphoses	
Pyramus and Thisbe . . . . .	336
Narcissus . . . . .	338
Orpheus and Eurydice . . . . .	339
X. LATIN AND GREEK LITERATURE AFTER AUGUSTUS . . . . .	342
PLUTARCH	
Parallel Lives	
Pericles . . . . .	345
Demosthenes . . . . .	347
Cicero . . . . .	350
The Death of Caesar . . . . .	353
EPICETUS	
Sayings of Epictetus . . . . .	356
LONGUS	
Daphnis and Chloe . . . . .	357
THE TWO PLINYs . . . . .	362
PLINY THE YOUNGER	
Epistles	
To Trajan . . . . .	363
To Calpurnia . . . . .	365
To Calpurnia . . . . .	365
To Tacitus . . . . .	365
To Cornelius Tacitus . . . . .	367
To Fuscus . . . . .	369

CHAPTER	PAGE
PLINY THE YOUNGER ( <i>cont.</i> )	
To the Emperor Trajan . . . . .	370
Trajan to Pliny . . . . .	371
MARCUS AURELIUS	
Meditations—Marcus Aurelius to Himself . . . . .	371
PETRONIUS	
The Satyricon—The Feast of Trimalchio . . . . .	373
QUINTILIAN	
On Greek and Roman Writers	
Homer . . . . .	375
Virgil and Other Roman Poets . . . . .	376
Historians and Orators . . . . .	376
MARTIAL	
Post-Obits and the Poets . . . . .	378
Procrastination . . . . .	378
To Cloe . . . . .	378
What Makes a Happy Life . . . . .	378
Erotion . . . . .	378
Country Pleasures . . . . .	378
JUVENAL . . . . .	378
TACITUS	
The Life of Agricola	
A Visit to Britain . . . . .	379
APULEIUS	
Cupid and Psyche . . . . .	382
THE LATIN ANTHOLOGY	
The Vigil of Venus . . . . .	391
THE NEW TESTAMENT	
ST. LUKE . . . . .	393
The Prodigal Son . . . . .	394
ST. PAUL . . . . .	394
An Essay on Love . . . . .	395
THE CHURCH FATHERS . . . . .	395
ST. AUGUSTINE	
The Confessions	
The Death of His Mother, Monnica . . . . .	396
BOETHIUS	
The Consolation of Philosophy . . . . .	399

CHAPTER	PAGE
XI. EUROPEAN AND ORIENTAL LITERATURE THROUGH THE MIDDLE AGES . . . . .	402
BEOWULF	
How Hrothgar and Beowulf Went to the Mere in Which the Monster Dwelt . . . . .	414
How Beowulf Sought Out and Fought with the Monster . . . . .	414
How Beowulf Slew the Monster, and Returned with Grendel's Head . . . . .	415
THE NIBELUNGENLIED	
How Gunther Went to Issland to Woo Brunhild . . . . .	416
How Gunther Won Brunhild . . . . .	419
How Siegfried Was Slain . . . . .	423
GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH	
The History of the Kings of Britain	
The Death of Arthur . . . . .	430
SIR THOMAS MALORY	
Morte d'Arthur	
The Death of Arthur . . . . .	431
THE MABINOGION	
The Lady of the Fountain . . . . .	433
XII. LITERATURE THROUGH THE MIDDLE AGES ( <i>Continued</i> ) . . . . .	438
THE SONG OF ROLAND	
The Battle of Roncevals . . . . .	441
THE CID	
Poema del Cid . . . . .	448
Chronicle of the Cid	
The Cid and the Great Soldan of Persia . . . . .	450
AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE . . . . .	452
THE RUBÁIYÁT OF OMAR KHAYYÁM (FitzGerald) . . . . .	457

CHAPTER	PAGE	CHAPTER	PAGE
CHINESE POETRY		ARIOSTO	
THE SHI KING		Orlando Furioso—Canto	
The Morning Glory . . .	463	XIX . . . . .	488
How Goes the Night? . .	463	BOCCACCIO	
I Wait My Lord . . . .	463	Four Sonnets . . . . .	493
The Pear Tree . . . . .	463	The Decameron	
Tso Ssū		The First Day . . . . .	494
The Scholar in the Narrow		The Fifth Day—Novel IX	
Street . . . . .	464	—The Falcon of Sir	
LI T'AI-PO		Federigo . . . . .	499*
Clearing at Dawn . . .	464	The Story of Griselda . .	502*
TU FU			
The Emperor . . . . .	464		
PO CHÜ-I		XIV. THE RENAISSANCE ( <i>Con-</i>	
Rejoicing at the Arrival of		<i>tinued</i> ) . . . . .	508
Ch'en Hsiung . . . . .	464	GEOFFREY CHAUCER	
Losing a Slave-Girl . . .	465	The Canterbury Tales	
On Being Sixty . . . .	465	The Prologue . . . . .	511
		The Wife of Bath's Tale .	511
JAPANESE POETRY			
HITOMARO . . . . .	465	WILLIAM LANGLAND	
AKAHITO . . . . .	465	Piers the Plowman—From	
THE LADY OF SAKANOE .	465	the Prologue . . . . .	515
REYNARD THE FOX		FOISSART'S CHRONICLES .	516
How Bruin the Bear was		CAXTON AND PRINTING . .	516
sped of Reynard the Fox .	466	THE POPULAR BALLADS	
How Bruin Ate the Honey	467	Sir Patrick Spens. . . . .	516
The Complaint of the Bear		The Twa Corbies . . . .	517
on the Fox . . . . .	469	The Cruel Sister . . . .	517
		Bonny Barbara Allan . . .	518
XIII. THE RENAISSANCE—		Edward, Edward . . . .	519
1300 TO 1600 . . . . .	470	The Bridge of Death . . .	520
DANTE		Gentle River, Gentle River	520
The Divine Comedy		TRANSLATORS OF THE BIBLE	
Inferno—Canto I . . . .	480	The Gospel of Matthew, 5.	
Inferno—Canto V		Translated into English by	
Cary Translation. . . .	481	John Wycliffe . . . . .	521
Temple Classic Transla-		The Gospel of Matthew, 5.	
tion . . . . .	482	Translated into English by	
Anderson Translation .	483	William Tyndale, 1526 .	521
Paradiso—Canto XXXIII	484	The Gospel of Matthew, 5.	
PETRARCH		The King James or Au-	
If It Be Destined . . . .	486	thorized Version, 1611 . .	522
Sonnets XV, XVIII, and		The Gospel of Matthew, 5.	
XCV . . . . .	487	The American Revised	
Canzone VI—A Dream of		Version, 1901. . . . .	522
Laura Dead . . . . .	487		



CHAPTER	PAGE	CHAPTER	PAGE
THOMAS À KEMPIS		HAFIZ	
The Imitation of Christ		Odes . . . . .	550
The First Book		EDMUND SPENSER	
Chapter I . . . . .	523	Sonnets VIII and LXXIX	552
Chapter II . . . . .	524	Prothalamion . . . . .	552
FRANÇOIS VILLON		The Faerie Queene	
The Ballad of Dead Ladies .	524	Book I. The Prologue . .	555
The Epitaph in Form of a		Canto I . . . . .	555
Ballad . . . . .	525	XVI. THE SEVENTEENTH	
PIERRE DE RONSARD		CENTURY . . . . .	558
The Rose . . . . .	525	CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE	
To His Young Mistress . .	526	The Tragical History of	
To Marie . . . . .	526	Doctor Faustus . . . .	570
To Helen . . . . .	526	THOMAS DEKKER	
XV. THE RENAISSANCE ( <i>Con-</i>		The Gull's Hornbook. . .	580
cluded) . . . . .	527	WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE	
SIR JOHN MANDEVILLE		Sonnets XVII, XXIX,	
The Voiage and Travaille		LXXVI, CXXVII . . .	585
of Sir John Maundeville .	527	Sonnet CXXXV. . . . .	586
RABELAIS		Lyrics from the Plays	
Pantagruel		Who is Sylvia? . . . .	586
How Pantagruel Persuaded		Under the Greenwood	
Panurge to Take Counsel		Tree . . . . .	586
of a Fool . . . . .	528	Blow, Blow, Thou Win-	
MONTAIGNE		try Wind . . . . .	586
Of Age . . . . .	530	Antony and Cleopatra . .	587
NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI		CALDERÓN	
From The Prince . . . .	532	Magico Prodigioso . . .	634
BENVENUTO CELLINI		FRANCIS BACON	
Autobiography . . . . .	533	Of Truth . . . . .	643
BRUNO AND ERASMUS . . .	535	Of Revenge . . . . .	644
SIR THOMAS MORE		Of Beauty . . . . .	645
Utopia—Book II . . . .	536	Of Love . . . . .	645
CAMOËNS		Of Youth and Age . . . .	646
The Lusiads—Canto I . .	537	Of Studies . . . . .	647
TASSO		XVII. THE SEVENTEENTH	
Jerusalem Delivered . . .	539	CENTURY ( <i>Continued</i> ) . .	648
THE ARABIAN NIGHTS		PIERRE CORNEILLE	
Ali Baba and the Forty		Le Menteur (The Liar) . .	659
Thieves . . . . .	540	JEAN RACINE	
SA'DI		Les Plaideurs (The Litig-	
The Dancer . . . . .	549	ants) . . . . .	665
The Great Physician . . .	549	MOLIÈRE	
		L'Avare (The Miser) . . .	672

CHAPTER	PAGE	CHAPTER	PAGE
CERVANTES		LESSING	
Don Quixote . . . . .	704	Laocoön . . . . .	765
JOHN BUNYAN		XIX. THE POETRY AND	
The Pilgrim's Progress		DRAMA OF THE EIGHT-	
Giant Despair . . . . .	707	EENTH CENTURY . . .	767
JOHN MILTON		ALEXANDER POPE	
Paradise Lost		The Rape of the Lock . .	772
Book I . . . . .	711	OLIVER GOLDSMITH	
Book II . . . . .	716	The Deserted Village . .	782
Book III . . . . .	721	THOMAS GRAY	
Book XII . . . . .	722	Elegy Written in a Country	
On His Blindness . . . .	724	Churchyard . . . . .	784
On the Late Massacre in		WILLIAM COWPER	
Piedmont . . . . .	724	The Castaway . . . . .	786
JOHN DRYDEN		WILLIAM BLAKE	
Alexander's Feast . . . .	725	The Piper . . . . .	787
SAMUEL BUTLER . . . . .	727	The Lamb . . . . .	787
JEAN DE LA FONTAINE		The Tiger . . . . .	787
The Fables		ROBERT BURNS	
The Cobbler and the Rich		Flow Gently, Sweet Afton. 789	
Man . . . . .	728	Tam O'Shanter . . . . .	789
The Wolf and the Dog .	728	GOETHE	
The Dog that Dropped the		Faust	
Substance for the Shadow	729	The Prologue in Heaven. 794	
The Lark and the Farmer .	729	The Compact . . . . .	795
SAMUEL PEPYS		The Death of Margaret . 797	
The Diary of Samuel Pepys	730	LUDVIG HOLBERG	
XVIII. THE EIGHTEENTH CEN-		Erasmus Montanus . . . .	801
TURY . . . . .	734	LESSING	
JOSEPH ADDISON		Nathan the Wise . . . . .	807
The Spectator		GOETHE . . . . .	810
The Vision of Mirza . .	748	SCHILLER	
The Spectator's Account		Wilhelm Tell . . . . .	811
of Himself . . . . .	750	RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERI-	
RICHARD STEELE		DAN	
The Spectator, Sir Roger		The Rivals . . . . .	819
and the Club . . . . .	752	XX. EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY	
SAMUEL JOHNSON . . . . .	754	PROSE FICTION . . .	827
JAMES BOSWELL		RENÉ LE SAGE	
The Life of Samuel John-		Gil Blas . . . . .	834
son, LL.D. . . . .	755	DANIEL DEFOE	
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN		Robinson Crusoe . . . .	840
Autobiography . . . . .	760		

CHAPTER	PAGE	CHAPTER	PAGE
VOLTAIRE		JOHN KEATS	
Candide . . . . .	847	The Eve of St. Agnes . .	921
SAMUEL RICHARDSON		Sonnet—Bright Star!	
Clarissa Harlowe . . . .	855	Would I Were Steadfast	
HENRY FIELDING		as Thou Art . . . . .	926
Tom Jones . . . . .	861	XXII. THE NINETEENTH CEN-	
JONATHAN SWIFT		TURY—POETRY ( <i>Con-</i>	
Gulliver's Travels . . . .	872	<i>tinued</i> ) . . . . .	927
JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU		ESAIAS TEGNÉR	
Émile. . . . .	877	Frithjofs Saga	
BERNARDIN DE SAINT-PIERRE		The Viking's Code . . .	936
Paul and Virginia . . . .	879	Birds of Passage . . . .	937
GOETHE		ADAM GOTTLÖB OEHLER-	
Wilhelm Meister's Appren-		SCHLAEGER	
ticeship . . . . .	883	Song from "Correggio" .	938
XXI. THE NINETEENTH CEN-		A Hymn . . . . .	938
TURY — BACKGROUND		ALEXANDER SERGEYEVICH	
AND POETRY TO 1850	886	PUSHKIN	
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH		To Mme. Kern . . . . .	938
Lines Composed a Few		MIKHAIL YURYEVICH LER-	
Miles above Tintern		MONTOV	
abbey . . . . .	906	A Sail . . . . .	939
I Wandered Lonely as a		Composed While Under	
Cloud . . . . .	907	Arrest . . . . .	939
The Solitary Reaper . . .	908	ALPHONSE DE LAMARTINE	
It Is a Beauteous Evening,		The Cedars of Lebanon .	939
Calm and Free . . . . .	908	PIERRE JEAN DE BÉRANGER	
September, 1802, Near		The King of Yvetot . . .	940
Dover . . . . .	908	The Garter . . . . .	940
London, 1802 . . . . .	908	ALFRED DE MUSSET	
SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE		Nature . . . . .	941
Christabel . . . . .	909	CHARLES BAUDELAIRE	
SIR WALTER SCOTT		La Beauté . . . . .	941
The Lay of the Last Minstrel		Harmonie du Soir . . . .	941
Rosabelle . . . . .	915	THÉOPHILE GAUTIER	
Marmion, Canto V—Loch-		Love at Sea . . . . .	942
invar . . . . .	916	JOHANN LUDWIG TIECK	
LORD BYRON		Autumn Song . . . . .	942
Don Juan, Canto III . . .	917	LUDWIG UHLAND	
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY		Durand of Blonden . . .	942
Ozymandias . . . . .	920	HEINRICH HEINE	
Ode to the West Wind . .	920	Die Lorelei . . . . .	943
		Mir Traumte Wieder der	
		Alte Traum . . . . .	943



CHAPTER	PAGE
HEINRICH HEINE ( <i>cont.</i> )	
Ein Fichtenbaum Steht	
Einsam . . . . .	943
Mein Herz, Mein Herz Ist	
Traurig . . . . .	944
Es Stehen Unbeweglich .	944
Der Mond Ist Aufgegangen	944
Sag', Wo Ist Dein Schönes	
Liebchen . . . . .	944
WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT	
Thanatopsis . . . . .	944
To The Fringed Gentian .	945
EDGAR ALLAN POE	
Ulalume . . . . .	946
Annabel Lee. . . . .	947

XXIII. BRITISH AND CONTI-  
NENTAL POETS, 1850-

1925 . . . . .	948
ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON	
The Lady of Shalott . . .	960
Ulysses . . . . .	962
The Princess	
The Splendor Falls . . .	962
Tears, Idle Tears . . . .	963
In Memoriam	
Strong Son of God . . . .	963
Crossing the Bar . . . . .	963
ROBERT BROWNING	
Evelyn Hope . . . . .	964
My Last Duchess . . . .	964
Prospice . . . . .	965
Confessions . . . . .	965
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWN- ING	
Sonnets from the Portu- guese—I, VII, XIII, XIV, and XLIII . . . . .	966
MATTHEW ARNOLD	
Dover Beach . . . . .	967
Shakespeare . . . . .	967
The Forsaken Merman . .	968
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI	
My Sister's Sleep . . . .	969
Sudden Light . . . . .	970

CHAPTER	PAGE
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI ( <i>cont.</i> )	
The House of Life	
Willowwood . . . . .	970
ALGERNON CHARLES SWIN- BURNE	
Before the Beginning of Years . . . . .	971
To Walt Whitman in America . . . . .	971
RUDYARD KIPLING	
Recessional . . . . .	973
A Ballad of East and West	973
A. E. HOUSMAN	
When I Was One-and- Twenty . . . . .	975
JOHAN LUDWIG RUNEBERG	
Ensign Stal . . . . .	975
GUSTAF FRÖDING	
A Love-Song . . . . .	976
Winter Night . . . . .	976
GUNNAR MASCOLL SILVER- STOLPE	
The Dreamer . . . . .	977
HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL	
Ballad of the Outer Life . .	977
GIOSUE CARDUCCI	
Petrarch . . . . .	978
In a Gothic Church . . .	978
SULLY-PRUDHOMME	
To the Reader . . . . .	978
If You But Knew . . . .	978
PAUL VERLAINE	
Claire de Lune. . . . .	979
After Three Years . . . .	979
FRÉDÉRIC MISTRAL	
The Cocooning . . . . .	979
The Leaf-Picking . . . .	979
STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ	
L'Après-Midi d'un Faune .	980

XXIV. AMERICAN POETS, 1850-

1900 . . . . .	982
RALPH WALDO EMERSON	
Concord Hymn . . . . .	985
Each and All . . . . .	985

CHAPTER	PAGE
JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER	
Snowbound . . . . .	986
Telling the Bees . . . . .	987
HENRY WADSWORTH LONG- FELLOW	
Divina Commedia—I and II . . . . .	988
The Sound of the Sea . .	988
The Hanging of the Crane	988
OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES	
The Chambered Nautilus	990
JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL	
The Vision of Sir Launfal	
Prelude to Part First . .	991
The Courtin' . . . . .	992
WALT WHITMAN	
Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking . . . . .	993
O Captain! My Captain! .	994
Song of the Open Road .	994
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBIN- SON	
The Master (Lincoln) . .	999
Miniver Cheevy . . . . .	1000
ROBERT FROST	
Mending Wall . . . . .	1000
Birches . . . . .	1001

## XXV. NINETEENTH-CENTURY

## PROSE . . . . . 1002

WILHELM AND JAKOB GRIMM  
Cinderella . . . . . 1015

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN  
The Ugly Duckling . . . 1019

WILLIAM HAZLITT  
On Going A Journey, . . 1023

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE  
Biographia Literaria—  
Chapter XVIII . . . . . 1028

THOMAS DE QUINCEY  
The English Mail Coach—  
The Vision of Sudden  
Death . . . . . 1031

CHARLES LAMB  
The Superannuated Man . 1039

CHAPTER	PAGE
THOMAS CARLYLE	
Past and Present	
Chapter XI—Labor . .	1043
Chapter XII—Reward .	1045
THOMAS BABINGTON MA- CAULAY	
The History of England, Coffee Houses and Travel- ing in 1685 . . . . .	1049
RALPH WALDO EMERSON	
The American Scholar . .	1053
HENRY DAVID THOREAU	
Walden	
Brute Neighbors . . .	1058
CHARLES AUGUSTIN SAINTE- BEUVE	
Monday Chats on Litera- ture—What is a Classic? .	1064
MATTHEW ARNOLD	
The Study of Poetry . . .	1070
THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY	
On a Piece of Chalk . . .	1075
JOHN RUSKIN	
The Seven Lamps of Archi- tecture	
The Lamp of Memory	1080
WALTER PATER	
Romanticism . . . . .	1081

## XXVI. THE NOVEL FROM 1800

TO 1875 . . . . . 1086

SIR WALTER SCOTT  
The Heart of Midlothian . 1115

JANE AUSTEN  
Pride and Prejudice . . . 1119

CHARLES DICKENS  
David Copperfield . . . . 1122

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE  
THACKERAY  
The Newcomes . . . . . 1126

PEDRO ALARCÓN  
The Child of the Ball. . . 1130

VICTOR HUGO  
Les Misérables . . . . . 1131

CHAPTER	PAGE	CHAPTER	PAGE
IVAN TURGENEV		PAUL HEYSE	
Fathers and Sons. . . . .	1136	The Fury . . . . .	1226
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT		VERNER VON HEIDENSTAM	
Madame Bovary . . . . .	1142	A Clean White Shirt . . . . .	1236
XXVII. THE NOVEL SINCE 1875	1149	O. HENRY	
J. P. JACOBSEN		A Municipal Report . . . . .	1238
Niels Lyhne . . . . .	1171	WILBUR DANIEL STEELE	
SELMA LAGERLÖF		For They Know Not What	
Gösta Berling's Saga		They Do . . . . .	1245
The Lady Musica . . . . .	1178	LUIGI PIRANDELLO	
ANATOLE FRANCE		The Reserved Coffin . . . . .	1255
The Crime of Sylvestre			
Bonnard . . . . .	1180	XXIX. NINETEENTH- AND	
GEROGE MEREDITH		TWENTIETH-CENTURY	
The Ordeal of Richard Fe-		DRAMA . . . . .	1262
verel		VICTOR HUGO	
Chapter 15—Ferdinand		Ruy Blas . . . . .	1277
and Miranda . . . . .	1189	EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON	
THOMAS HARDY		Richelieu . . . . .	1283
The Return of the Native. . . . .	1193	HENRIK IBSEN	
WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS		The Master Builder. . . . .	1314
The Quality of Mercy . . . . .	1194	JOHN GALSWORTHY	
XXVIII. THE SHORT STORY . . . . .	1200	The Silver Box . . . . .	1353
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE		XXX. EPILOGUE . . . . .	1382
The White Old Maid. . . . .	1206	APPENDIX . . . . .	1385
EDGAR ALLAN POE		The Nobel Prize in Litera-	
The Pit and the Pendulum . . . . .	1211	ture . . . . .	1385
GUY DE MAUPASSANT		Some of the Great Books of	
The Piece of String . . . . .	1218	the World . . . . .	1386
LYOF TOLSTOY		INDEX OF AUTHORS . . . . .	1389
The Long Exile . . . . .	1222	INDEX BY TYPES . . . . .	1392



# WORLD LITERATURE

## CHAPTER I

### THE GREAT LITERATURE OF THE WORLD

*The Study of World Literature.* The student who opens this book for the first time may ask why he should be introduced to the literature of a world dead and gone a thousand years ago. Is there anything in it that is worth the attention of a twentieth-century young man or woman? As we read the great pieces of literature that have been preserved through the centuries, we discover that the men and women of five hundred or a thousand or three thousand years ago thought and acted very much as we do today. We come to see that the people who lived in other countries and other times were not crude or savage men, but were indeed not very different from ourselves. Our respect for them increases. We turn to them for wisdom and beauty just as we turn to the thinkers, writers, and artists of our own time, our own country, and our own speech.

Most young people who go to college have a desire to become educated men and women. Some few want only to acquire the tools and the skills that will enable them to make a living as a teacher, a physician, a mechanic, an architect, a housekeeper, or a farmer. The great majority, however, want the skill that will enable them to make a living, and they want something in addition. They want to develop their personalities. They hope to become cultivated and educated men and women. They hope to develop interests that will fill their leisure with things worth while. They wish not only to be able to make a living but also to live a full and a good life.

To do this it is necessary in some measure to be interested in the fine things of life—in the arts, in architecture, music, painting, sculpture, literature, and the like. The intellectual and artistic interests often find their fullest expression in hours in which one is free from toil. Think of a man who makes his living tending a machine but has no interest in reading, music, sports, or arts. What will he do with his spare hours? What can he use to occupy empty days or weeks of the present or to fill the years of his coming old age?

If you are to associate with refined and educated people, you must know some of the things that they are interested in, that they get pleasure from, that they talk about. There is a fund of common knowledge that all educated people draw upon. No one person knows it all, but every educated person knows some of it and draws upon what he knows. You make contacts with people through common interests. Suppose I have eight interests, and you have eleven, all different from mine. We should be very little company for each other on a long journey. But

suppose five of your interests were the same as five of mine. Suppose, for example, that we were both interested in tennis, and short stories, and travel, and photography, and cookery. We might get on together famously for a time.

Reading and books are an interest common to nearly all cultured people. And there are a few books that most educated people either know or know about. The number of these books that are very generally known is not so great as it may seem on first thought. Ask some educated person to make you a list of the famous books of all time. His list will be a short one, perhaps less than a hundred titles. Another person might make another list of a hundred books. The two lists will contain some of the same titles, but they will not agree throughout. Perhaps both lists will agree upon fifty or sixty books. The others will be different. There will be some agreement, no matter who makes up the lists of great books. The *Iliad*, *Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Faust*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* are books that all would agree upon. Not to know such books marks one as uneducated.

*Great Literature.* During your high school years, no doubt you were required to read many books and shorter works which have a place in English and American literature. Some few of them you may have liked. Unfortunately you probably disliked most of them. Some you disliked because they were outside the range of your youthful interests; others you detested because you were required to analyze them instead of reading them rapidly for their interest as stories, or for the beauty of expression, or for the dramatic situation they presented. Teachers are such conscientious people that they often teach the life out of things artistic. Instead of suggesting to you that *Guy Mannering* is a very interesting romance, and then letting you find it and read it in two evenings for the story alone, they want to bring it into the classroom and spend three weeks "studying" it. They maul it and take it to pieces and put it back together again. When they get it together after analyzing it in that way, there is no more singing left in it than in a child's music box that has had the same kind of treatment. It looks just as it did before it was analyzed, but it is dead for you. There are books, of course, that tell stories and present problems that are within the reach of young people, but which have technical and intellectual difficulties beyond their reach. The teacher can help the young literary adventurer over these obstacles without delaying the reading too much, and without deadening the interest in the adventure. That is helpful teaching.

Too much of the study of literature in schools has been of the deadly, analytic kind. Too much of it has made young people question the judgment of teachers and older readers about what great literature is. They wonder why literary critics regard *Macbeth* as a great drama or the *Odyssey* as a great story. They ask why *Gammer Gurton's Needle* and Michael Wigglesworth's *Day of Doom* are always included in the histories of English and American literature. Are all these great literature?

We teachers have not been clear and frank with you about such matters. Perhaps we are not clear in our own minds about them. Make a picture for yourselves.

Suppose you have just finished reading Thomas Hardy's *Tess* or George Meredith's *Richard Feverel* or Ibsen's *Master Builder* or Robinson's *Tristram*. You want to know whether writers have always written novels, dramas, and poems as these comparatively recent men have written them. You decide to explore the stream of literature from its beginnings down to the present. First, you find the source, the little springs and lakes back in the distant hills and the tiny trickle that flows out of them. You set the names of these down in your notebook. They are not great, but they are worth noting because they are the beginnings. As you proceed, you come across other minor writers and minor pieces of writing. They are not great, but they serve to mark the course of the stream. They direct you to the Chaucers, Shakespeares, Dantes, Miltons, Tolstoys, and Ibsens farther along the course of the stream. In telling the story of literature one mentions hundreds of names that are only markers along the way, and only a few that are the expanses and mountain peaks that you want to explore, height and breadth and depth.

The intention of this book is to trace the story from the beginnings, to note the road signs as we go, but to require reading and study of only a limited number of those productions that the years have preserved as "great literature." It is not easy to say what great literature is. Listen to Tschaikowsky's *Pathétique Symphony* played by a great orchestra and then to some popular, sentimental dance orchestra number. The latter may be pleasing or exciting to many, but there is something in the *Pathétique Symphony* that calls forth an emotional response from practically everyone who hears it. *Macbeth* is the story of a man and woman whose lives were dominated by ambition. To attain their aim they resorted to violence and murder, but at last justly suffered death for their acts. When you see *Macbeth* played by great actors, you leave the theater satisfied because justice has been done, but grieved that two human beings who might have been good and great have ruined and lost their lives because of an overwhelming ambition that made them forget justice and mercy and friendship and love. A roaring melodrama could be built on the plot of *Macbeth*. At the fall of the curtain on the last act of the melodrama, the audience would break out in exultant applause. A villain would have been brought to justice. Audiences who see *Macbeth* may applaud the acting, but they leave the theater thoughtfully, quietly. They too have seen justice done, but in this case justice was done at the cost of two lives that had large possibilities of good in them. Fate had to destroy those who were blinded by ruthless ambition.

Great literature deals with great ideas, emotions common to all humanity, conflicts of men of great strength, the elements that lie at the base of human character and human actions. Usually these ideas and emotions are the simple ones. They are love, jealousy, ambition, loyalty, courage, hate, fear, devotion, friendship, faith, and the like. Great literature deals with human beings, characters; and they must be great characters, people well worth knowing. They may be rich or poor, high or low, prince or peasant, saint or sinner, but they must be personalities who are worthy of observation and analysis. It must be worth our while to look into the depths of their souls.



And again, a piece of great literature can be written only by a master artist. He takes characters worth the study and one or more of the simple and universal ideas or emotions; and then he makes a plot, or plan, that produces a conflict of ideas or of men. The artist must have insight, understanding of human beings. And finally he must be a master of his instrument. A man might dream a perfect picture, or another imagine a perfect serenade; but neither could make his creation available for others without a mastery of the technique and instruments of the painter or musician. The weaving of words is an art as complex as that of the maker of a Persian carpet. One must have an adequate vocabulary, must be able to combine words so as to get just the shade of meaning needed—to get vigor, delicacy, exactness, clarity, swiftness, deliberation, serenity—any effect that the subject, characters, emotions, and ideas may call for.

These four, then, *ideas, emotions, insight into character*, and the *artist's mastery of materials and tools*, are all implied when we speak of literature that is truly great. Great literature is produced by genius.

*Natural Selection of Books.* Three hundred years ago Shakespeare wrote thirty-seven plays. How many of them are commonly seen on the twentieth-century stage? How many of them are still commonly read? Not more than ten or a dozen. The Greek dramatists wrote many plays. Only a few of them remain to us. Even the manuscripts have disappeared. And of the few that remain we read only a third or a fourth part. Our Old Testament contains thirty-nine books. These are a collection of the sacred writings of the Hebrews produced during a period of about a thousand years. A few other Hebraic writings constitute the *Apocrypha*. We happen to know that there were other books written within that time that have not been preserved. We know the titles of some of them, but the books are gone. The Roman dramatists wrote many plays for their theaters. A few by Plautus, Terence, and Seneca are read today by students of Latin literature. The others are lost or forgotten. A dozen questions arise. We want to know why we still read and play *As You Like It* and *The Tempest* but no longer read *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* or *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Nor do we see them on the stage. Certain books and chapters of the Bible are well known and frequently quoted. Others are never read by the ordinary reader. Why are these things so?

This is the answer. The best books are preserved. The less valuable are forgotten and lost. Let us go back to the great period of literary activity among the Greeks. Sophocles lived from 495 to 405 B.C. Menander lived from 342 to 291 B.C. Menander was a writer of popular comedies. Sophocles was a writer of tragedies. Each was highly regarded in his own century. No doubt there were many manuscript books of the plays of each of these dramatists. In a hundred years or so some of these copies would be worn out or lost. New copies would be made of the plays that were still highly thought of and commonly read. Old copies would be well taken care of and handed down from father to son and from son to grandson. Plays that no longer had any strong appeal would be thrown about and either worn out or lost. No new copies would be made. Families would not be careful