

muriel davis  
**inscape**



stories, plays & poems

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**muriel davis**

San Diego ~~Mesa~~ College

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内在的特性。  
小说、戏剧和诗歌

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*For*

MESSERSCHMIDT



## Contents

I	An Introduction to Literature	1
II	Stories	
	An Introduction to Stories	9
	Ernest Hemingway <i>The End of Something</i>	14
	Conrad Aiken <i>Impulse</i>	19
	D. H. Lawrence <i>You Touched Me</i>	32
	Carson McCullers <i>A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud</i>	50
	Rudyard Kipling <i>Thrown Away</i>	59
	William Carlos Williams <i>The Use of Force</i>	67
	H. G. Wells <i>The Man Who Could Work Miracles</i>	72
	James Baldwin <i>Sonny's Blues</i>	90
	Katherine Anne Porter <i>Theft</i>	123
	W. Somerset Maugham <i>The Lotus Eater</i>	130
	Henry James <i>The Two Faces</i>	146
	Virginia Woolf <i>Lappin and Lapinova</i>	161
	Herman Melville <i>Norfolk Isle and The Chola Widow</i>	170
	Stephen Crane <i>A Mystery of Heroism</i>	184
	Ken W. Purdy <i>Tell Me the Reason, Do</i>	194
	Nathaniel Hawthorne <i>The Birthmark</i>	213
	John Updike <i>Lifeguard</i>	231
	Jean Paul Sartre <i>The Wall</i>	238
III	Plays	
	An Introduction to Plays	259
	Paddy Chayefsky <i>Marty</i>	264
	Tennessee Williams <i>The Glass Menagerie</i>	301
	Aristophanes <i>Lysistrata</i>	379
	William Saroyan <i>The Time of Your Life</i>	425

## IV Poems

<b>An Introduction to Poems</b>	519
Robert Creeley <i>A Picture</i>	534
Jonathan Swift <i>A Description of the Morning</i>	535
Emily Dickinson <i>Crumbling Is Not an Instant's Act</i>	535
William Carlos Williams <i>The Act</i>	536
Manuel Bandiera <i>My Final Poem</i>	537
Thom Gunn <i>No Speech from the Scaffold</i>	537
Walt Whitman <i>By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame</i>	538
Alfred, Lord Tennyson <i>The Lotus Eaters</i>	539
Andrew Marvell <i>To His Coy Mistress</i>	540
Emily Dickinson <i>There's a Certain Slant of Light</i>	542
William Wordsworth <i>It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free</i>	542
William Wordsworth <i>Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802</i>	543
Howard Nemerov <i>Suburban Prophecy</i>	544
Robert Frost <i>The Road Not Taken</i>	545
Edmund Spenser <i>Lyke as a Ship</i>	546
William Shakespeare <i>Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds</i>	546
Percy Bysshe Shelley <i>The Waning Moon</i>	547
Ezra Pound <i>Autumn</i>	547
W. H. Auden <i>Musée des Beaux Arts</i>	548
Kenneth Patchen <i>Pastoral</i>	549
Percy Bysshe Shelley <i>Ozymandias</i>	550
William Blake <i>The Chimney Sweeper</i>	550
Dylan Thomas <i>Was There a Time</i>	551
Leonie Adams <i>Thought's End</i>	552
John Crowe Ransom <i>Good Ships</i>	553
William Wordsworth <i>My Heart Leaps Up</i>	553
Edgar Allan Poe <i>Eldorado</i>	554
William Blake <i>The Tiger</i>	554

Emily Brontë	<i>The Night Is Darkening</i>	555
George Gordon, Lord Byron	<i>She Walks in Beauty</i>	556
Christopher Marlowe	<i>The Passionate Shepherd to His Love</i>	557
Sir Walter Raleigh	<i>The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd</i>	558
Anonymous	<i>The Bailiff's Daughter of Islington</i>	559
Anonymous	<i>The Crafty Farmer</i>	561
Siegfried Sassoon	<i>Dreamers</i>	564
W. D. Snodgrass	<i>Ten Days Leave</i>	564
Joseph Leonard Grucci	<i>Rhine Burial</i>	565
Stephen Crane	<i>War Is Kind</i>	566
Denise Levertov	<i>Life at War</i>	567
Thomas Hardy	<i>Channel Firing</i>	569
Gerard Manley Hopkins	<i>Peace</i>	570
Walt Whitman	<i>Reconciliation</i>	570
James Wright	<i>Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio</i>	570
Anonymous	<i>Hey Nony No!</i>	571
Emily Dickinson	<i>I Heard a Fly Buzz</i>	571
Manuel Bandiera	<i>Moment in a Cafe</i>	572
Gerard Manley Hopkins	<i>Spring and Fall</i>	572
John Donne	<i>Death, Be Not Proud</i>	573
Paul Laurence Dunbar	<i>Compensation</i>	573
Louis Untermeyer	<i>Long Feud</i>	574
Anonymous	<i>The Two Corbies</i>	574
Howard Nemerov	<i>Going Away</i>	575
James Wright	<i>Two Horses Playing in the Orchard</i>	576
Edgar Allan Poe	<i>Israfel</i>	577
John Keats	<i>La Belle Dame Sans Merci</i>	578
Richard Wilbur	<i>Merlin Enthralled</i>	580
Stephen Crane	<i>Should the Wide World Roll Away</i>	581
Matthew Arnold	<i>Dover Beach</i>	581
William Shakespeare	<i>Weary with Toil, I Haste Me to My Bed</i>	582

William Shakespeare	<i>When to the Sessions of Sweet</i>	
	<i>Silent Thought</i>	583
William Shakespeare	<i>My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing</i>	
	<i>Like the Sun</i>	583
Robert Browning	<i>Meeting at Night</i>	584
Robert Browning	<i>Parting at Morning</i>	584
George Meredith	<i>By This He Knew She Wept with</i>	
	<i>Waking Eyes</i>	585
Michael Drayton	<i>Since There's No Help</i>	585
Thomas Hardy	<i>Neutral Tones</i>	586
Denise Levertov	<i>As It Happens</i>	586
Emily Dickinson	<i>One Need Not Be a Chamber</i>	587
Stephen Crane	<i>A Learned Man Came to Me Once</i>	587
Thomas Hardy	<i>Hap</i>	588
T. S. Eliot	<i>The Hollow Men</i>	588
Robert Hillyer	<i>Repartee</i>	591
John Milton	<i>On His Blindness</i>	592
George Herbert	<i>The Collar</i>	592
George Meredith	<i>Lucifer in Starlight</i>	593
Countee Cullen	<i>Mood</i>	594
Langston Hughes	<i>Puzzled</i>	594
Langston Hughes	<i>Trumpet Player</i>	595
William E. B. DuBois	<i>A Litany at Atlanta</i>	596
Ted Joans	<i>Why Try?</i>	599
Ted Joans	<i>Cold</i>	600
Owen Dodson	<i>Sorrow Is the Only Faithful One</i>	600
Carl Sandburg	<i>Happiness</i>	601
Ezra Pound	<i>Salutation</i>	601
Edwin Arlington Robinson	<i>Karma</i>	602
John Keats	<i>On Fame</i>	602
William Wordsworth	<i>The World Is Too Much with Us</i>	603
Walt Whitman	<i>When I Heard the Learn'd</i>	
	<i>Astronomer</i>	603
Fenton Johnson	<i>The Banjo Player</i>	604

Robert Browning	<i>My Last Duchess</i>	604
Thomas Campion	<i>Jack and Joan</i>	606
Richard Wilbur	<i>A Summer Morning</i>	607
Sara Teasdale	<i>Effigy of a Nun</i>	607
E. E. Cummings	<i>One Winter Afternoon</i>	608
Gerard Manley Hopkins	<i>Pied Beauty</i>	609
Ben Jonson	<i>Simplex Munditiis</i>	610
Theodore Roethke	<i>The Waking</i>	610
D. H. Lawrence	<i>Red Geranium and Godly Mignonette</i>	611
D. H. Lawrence	<i>Phoenix</i>	612
James Weldon Johnson	<i>O Black and Unknown Bards</i>	612
John Ciardi	<i>The Gift</i>	614
John Ciardi	<i>In Place of a Curse</i>	614
Robert Creeley	<i>Waiting</i>	615
Robert Frost	<i>Birches</i>	616
James Dickey	<i>The Change</i>	617
Muriel Rukeyser	<i>Reading Time: 1 Minute 26 Seconds</i>	618
<b>Index of Literary Terms</b>		621
<b>Index of Authors, Titles, First Lines of Poems</b>		623

# An Introduction to Literature

WHAT IS ART? Throughout history, man has turned to various forms of art for something which he feels ordinary life cannot give him. He has danced and sung, painted and recited poetry because whatever it was he sensed in these experiences he knew to be a meaningful, perhaps necessary, function of his life. It is obvious that what man seeks in art is not merely more of his everyday existence. He knows that his creation is not a replica of life. An artist, looking at his canvas and seeing the woman he has painted there, knows it is not really his wife. If it were his wife he wanted, the portrait would impel him to find her or grieve for her absence. If he purposely painted her because she was gone and he could not stand being away from her, he would not really be fooled into believing her there alive before him. So, what does the artist gain from his creation? If it is artificial and a poor excuse for life, why does he do it with such dedication and why does civilization profit from his effort? Investigating these questions will lead us naturally to an understanding of literature because literature is first of all art.

We watch a man prepare a field for sowing, conduct a business meeting, or pitch a fast ball and say, "He's a real artist." We watch a pole vaulter execute his finest vault and say, "That's poetry in motion." In each case, what is observed is some special treatment which lifts the experience out of the commonplace.



The vaulter, as an example, is completely concentrated on the moment. He measures his strides. His motions are deliberate, precise, controlled, forcing us to realize that they are not haphazard but that each is perfectly selected to combine into this perfect vault. Here is the quality which causes the spectator to call the vaulter an artist, and here is how art differs from life. Art is an approach which selects, orders, and emphasizes toward some unified statement. It is not so with our lives. They go on in a continuum, with time always forcing the present to slip by before we can grasp it as an isolated moment and understand what really happened or what it meant.

It is only because our complex nervous systems allow us to block and filter that we are able to make any sense out of the barrage of rapid and often conflicting stimuli which confront us at every moment. We have a particularly good time on Saturday and want to recall it the next day, but by then it is gone and our memory is clouded by the events of Sunday. Thus, we feel the need to stop time, to isolate a moment, to experience more clearly. It is for these reasons that we turn to art. While life confronts us randomly, art frames a moment. In one sense, art is artificial, but in another sense, it is the only way we can focus on life. Art is said to improve on life not because it is better but because it is easier to see.

Some pertinent questions emerge from this definition of art: What is the difference between mere sound and music? Why is it often easier to remain numb to life than to art? Why are artists often branded dreamers or threats to society?

**THE CREATIVE PROCESS:** In literature, as in other art forms, the artist frames a moment, but what moment? Is it one which actually occurred in life or is it one which he created? Although many people would answer simply that life is the source of the writer's material, it is obvious that he did not record all of life and that most of his characters or situations do not even exist as real facts. He did, indeed, make them up from his imagination. When we speak of creative writing, we mean that the novelist, playwright, or poet, unlike the historian or biographer, created the facts of his work. What he wrote about was not the facts themselves but some insight, some idea about life, which

lay behind the facts. It was this idea which caught his attention in the first place and seemed special to him.

As we live each day, we find something special about some experiences and not about others. We may say that we seek no such difference, but for some reason, out of every day, three or four or twenty moments make a unique impression on us. We say, "I talked to this man today and he said—" or "Do you remember the other day when—" or "Today I was thinking about—." While we might grasp the uniqueness of such moments or find satisfaction in communicating them, the writer wants to define them further and express their specialness by rendering them artistically.

Just as anything in our experience can unexpectedly trigger a new thought or fresh insight, so the creative process may begin for the writer with any stimuli: a memory, a sound, a person, an incident. One day he may see two men fighting viciously; suddenly, they may stop, hug each other, throw back their heads and laugh with affection. Like us, the writer may care little about the two men or the location of the fight, or even the reason for the fighting. What he is interested in is the strange moment when they suddenly felt more like laughing than hitting. Part of framing the moment is the writer's concentration on this idea, which he feels to be the essence of the scene, perhaps ignoring completely the original life situation. In his story, we may find nothing to remind us of the incident except a rendition of some moment in life when emotions changed very quickly into their opposite. We will find people, places, and events which are the writer's special way of expressing this idea.

A discussion of the creative process inevitably raises many relevant questions: Where should the distinction be made between a creatively written history and a historical novel? Why does literature usually deal with people rather than oceans or dogs? Is creativity a product of the emotions or the intellect?

Misunderstanding of the creative process may cause problems in appreciating literature. One of these may be an attempt to make an author's biography necessary to an interpretation of his work. Some people wish to research a writer's life to find counterparts for characters in his stories, but when they do this, what