

The WORLD Anthology

Robert R. Potter
Roger B. Goodman



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Roger B. Goodman**

ROBERT R. POTTER received his B.S. from the Columbia University School of General Studies and his M.A. and Ed.D. from Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Potter has been a teacher of English in the New York City School System, a research associate for Project English at Hunter College, and a teacher of English at the Litchfield (Conn.) High School. He has held a professorship at the State University of New York and now teaches at the University of Connecticut's Torrington branch.

Dr. Potter is the author of Globe's *American Anthology, Myths and Folktales Around the World, English Everywhere, Making Sense, Writing Sense, Writing a Research Paper, Language Workshop*, and *Tales of Mystery and the Unknown*, and is consulting editor of *American Folklore and Legends* and the *Pathways to the World of English* series.

ROGER B. GOODMAN received his B.S.S. from the City College of New York and his M.A. from Columbia University. He has been an English teacher in the New York City School System and for ten years was Chairman of the Department of English at Stuyvesant High School.

Mr. Goodman's publications include Globe's *World-Wide Short Stories* and *A Matter for Judgment*.

Project Editor: Howard N. Portnoy
Photo Editor: Adelaide Garvin Ungerland

Illustrations: Edgar Blakeney, Ted Burwell, Peter Catalanotto, Mel Erikson, Ned Glattauer, Mary Lopez, Glee LoScalzo, Charles Molina, David Murray, Bob Sabin, Marvin Stein, Kimanne Uhler, Lynda West

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Introduction

Almost all that's important in the study of literature can be summed up in one word: React.

An author's job is to use the best words possible to express what he or she has seen, thought, and felt. A reader's job is to react to these visions, these thoughts, and these feelings in terms of previous experience. Readers who don't know this too often think of literature anthologies as ordinary textbooks—collections of information to be read, studied, and parroted back to a teacher on tests. Readers who look only for information in literature are in for a fall. They soon find themselves sinking toward failure in a sea of words. They drown in a huge vat of alphabet soup.

Reading is reacting. Therefore, this introduction isn't going to *say* much more about literature. Instead, it's going to ask you to *react* to some literature—poems about poetry, if you will.

The American poet Emily Dickinson wrote the following lines more than a hundred years ago. The poem was placed first in a collection of her poetry published a few years after her death:

This is my letter to the world
That never wrote to me—
The simple news that Nature told
With tender majesty.

Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see;
For love of her, sweet countrymen,
Judge tenderly of me.

Why should Emily Dickinson think of this poem, or of a group of poems, as a "letter"? What does she announce as her main subject? Whose are the "hands I cannot see"? How does the poet want you, the reader, to think of her? Can you, as a reader, think of her in that way?

Arthur O'Shaughnessy, an Irish poet of the last century, sees the task of the writer in a different light:

We are the music-makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams;
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams:
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world forever, it seems.

What two qualities of literature are stressed in the first two lines? Can you, personally, identify with the type of poet presented in the middle of the poem? According to O'Shaughnessy, are writers of any real importance in the world? Do you agree?

Still another picture of the writer is offered by a modern black poet, Calvin C. Hernton:

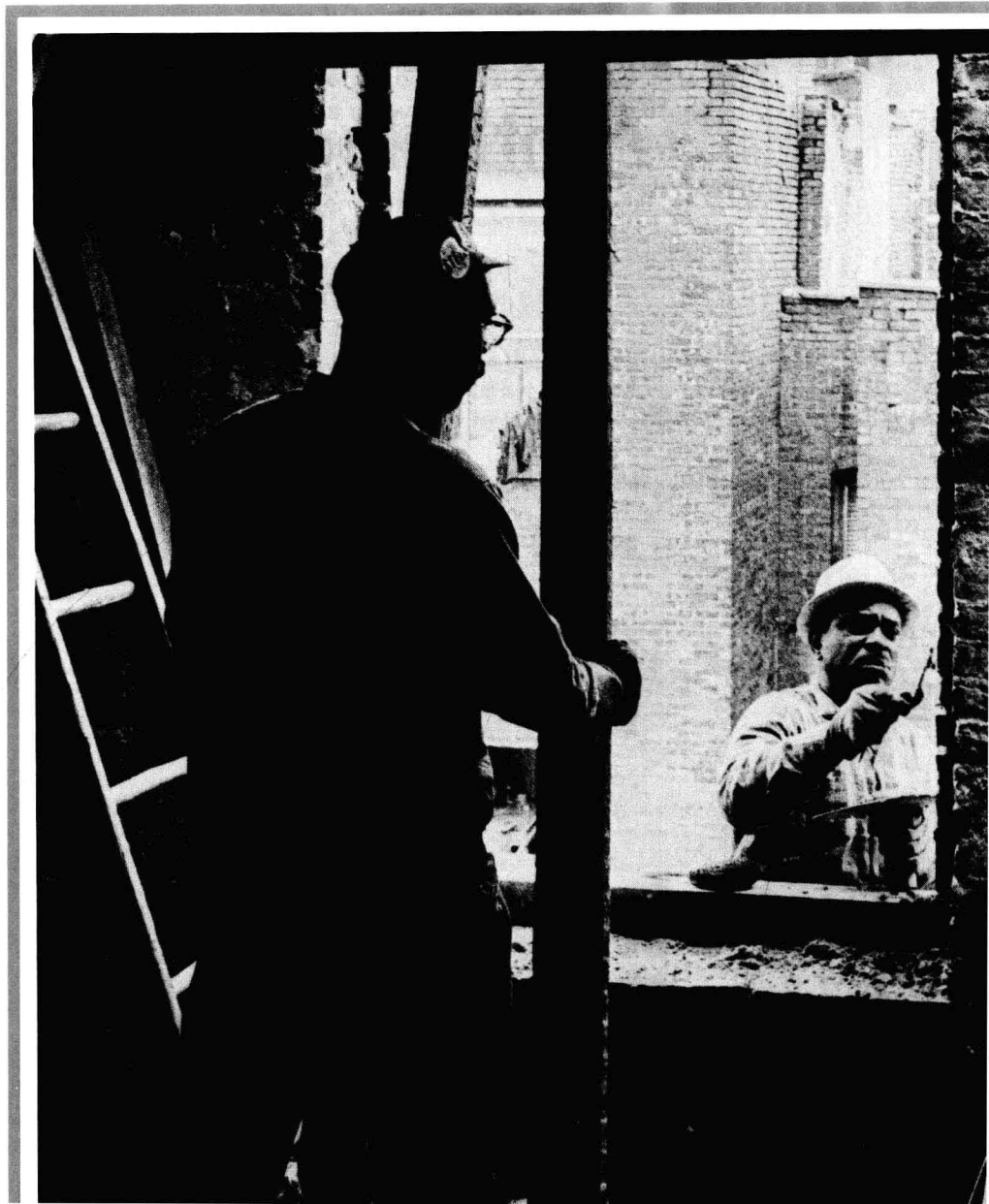
I am not a metaphor or symbol.
This you hear is not the wind in the trees,
Nor a cat being maimed in the street.
I am being maimed in the street.
It is I who weep, laugh, feel pain or joy,
Speak this because I exist.
This is my voice.
These words are my words,
My mouth speaks them,
My hand writes—
I am a poet.
It is my fist you hear
Beating against your ear.

According to this poem, what is the task of the poet—writing fancy and artificial verses, or expressing his or her true feelings? What is your reaction to the last two lines? Did you ever feel the same way when you couldn't "get through" to someone?

For the writer, literature is a process of creation. For you, the reader, it is a process of re-creation. Let's get on with it now. . . .

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Anthology**

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first things first

What comes first in your life? What's most important to you? You might think about—

- *Finding the meaning of life*
- *Understanding the natural world*
- *Laughing at some tall tales*
- *Solving a baffling crime*
- *Learning patience and sacrifice*

In this unit you'll read one story on each of the topics above. And you just might love it!

What's your opinion on capital punishment—or death as the penalty for certain crimes? People disagree violently on that question. They always have. That's one reason this story by the Russian author Anton Chekhov has kept its popularity for so many years. But as you'll discover, there's another reason, too. For the tale is not about death, really, but about the best kind of life.

The Bet



It was a dark autumn night. The old banker was pacing from corner to corner in his room, recalling to his mind the party he had given in the autumn fifteen years before.

There had been many clever people at that party. There was much good talk. They talked among other things of capital punishment. The guests for the most part disapproved of it. They found it old-fashioned and evil as a form of punishment. They thought it had no place in a country that called itself Christian. Some of them thought that capital punishment should be replaced right away with life in prison.

"I don't agree with you," said the host. "In my opinion, capital punishment is really kinder than life in prison. Execution kills instantly; prison kills by degrees. Now, which is better? To kill you in a few seconds, or to draw the life out of you for years and years?"

- **capital** (KAP i tul) involving loss of life
- **by degrees** (BY di GREEZ) by small steps; slowly

"One's as bad as the other," said one of the guests. "Their purpose is the same, to take away life. The government is not God. It has no right to take a human life. It should not take away what it cannot give back."

Among the company was a young lawyer, a man about 25. "Both are evil," he stated. "But if offered the chance between them, I would definitely take prison. It's better to live somehow than not to live at all."

"Nonsense!"

"It is so!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

The banker, who was then younger and more nervous, suddenly lost his temper. He banged his fist on the table. Turning to the young lawyer, he cried out:

"It's a lie! I bet you two million you couldn't stay in a prison cell, even for five years."

"Do you mean that?" asked the lawyer.

The banker nodded eagerly, his face red.

"Then I accept your bet," the lawyer said simply. "But I'll stay not five years but fifteen."

"Fifteen! Fifteen!" cried the banker. He was now wild, as though he had already won the bet. "Done, then. The people here are our witnesses. I stake two million rubles. You stake fifteen years of your freedom."

So this foolish, senseless bet came to pass. At the time, the banker had too many millions to count. He was beside himself with joy. All through dinner he kept talking about the bet. He said to the lawyer jokingly:

"Come to your senses, young man. It's not too late yet. Two million is nothing to me. But you stand to lose three or four of the best years of your life. I say three or four, not fifteen. You'll never stick it out longer than that, I can tell you. And they'll just be wasted years. Not the smallest coin do I give you if you leave earlier than fifteen years. Why, just think of it! My jail will have no bars, no locks. You'll be able to walk out of it any time you want to. That thought will be like poison to you. So you will walk out; I know that. Sooner or later, you'll walk out!"

And now the banker, pacing from corner to corner, recalled all this and asked himself:

- **stake** (STAKE) **bet**
- **ruble** (ROO bul) **unit of Russian money**

“Why did I make this bet? What’s the good? The lawyer loses fifteen years of his life, and I throw away two million. That bet was a mistake. On my part, it was the foolishness of a well-fed man. On the lawyer’s part, it was pure greed for gold.”

He remembered further what happened after the evening party. It was decided that the lawyer’s “prison” would be in the garden wing of the banker’s house. For fifteen years the lawyer was not to pass out through its door. He was not to see living people, or even to hear a human voice. He was not to receive letters or newspapers. Musical instruments, however, were to be permitted. He could also read books and write letters. Some other things he could order. He had only to pass his order note through a special window. A guard would bring anything allowed.

Thus, the smallest details of the bet were discussed and settled. At twelve noon on November 14, 1870, the prison term began. It was to last until twelve noon on November 14, 1885. The lawyer must make no attempt to break the rules agreed upon. Any attempt to escape, even for two minutes, would free the banker from having to pay the two million.

The lawyer’s first year, as far as it was possible to judge from his short notes, was one of suffering. He grew lonely and bored. From his wing day and night came the sound of the piano. Short, easy novels were his only reading—love stories, crime, and comedy.

In the second year the piano was heard no more. The lawyer asked only for classics. But by the fifth year, music was heard again. Guards who peeked into his room said that he yawned often and talked angrily to himself. Books he did not read now. Sometimes at night he would sit down to write. He would write for a long time, and then tear it all up in the morning. More than once he was heard to weep.

In the second half of the sixth year, the prisoner began zealously to study languages, philosophy, and history. He fell on these subjects with hunger. The banker hardly had time to get books enough for him. In four years’ time, about 600 volumes were brought at his request. And later on, after the tenth year, the lawyer sat before his table and read only the New Testament. Then he went on to the history of religions.

During the last two years the prisoner read a huge amount, quite haphazardly. He would ask for books on science. Then it would be

- **classic** (KLAS ik) famous important book
- **zealous** (ZEL us) eager; enthusiastic
- **philosophy** (fi LOS uh fee) study of important ideas
- **haphazardly** (hap HAZ urd lee) at random; in an unplanned way