

A Glossary of Literary Terms

SEVENTH EDITION



M. H. ABRAMS

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with a suggestion also of yield up). The poet also adapts standard metric feet to his special purposes: the poem is framed by opening and closing with a regular *iambic* foot, yet is free to mimic internally the resistance to the wind in the recurrent strong stresses in the first stanza (Thě réeds gíve / wáy) and the graceful yielding to the wind in the succession of light iambs in the second stanza (And gíve / thě wínd āwáy).

A number of contemporary poets and critics are calling—in a movement termed the **new formalism**—for a return from free verse to the meters, rhyme, and stanza-forms of traditional English versification. For discussions see Alan Shapiro, "The New Formalism," *Critical Inquiry* (Vol. 14, 1987), and Dana Gioia, "Notes on the New Formalism," *Conversant Essays*, ed. James McCorkle (1990).

See Percy Mansell Jones, *The Background of Modern French Poetry* (1951); Donald Wesling, "The Prosodies of Free Verse," in *Twentieth-Century Literature in Retrospect*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (1971); Walter Sutton, *American Free Verse* (1973); Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (rev., 1979); Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (1980). Timothy Steele's *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter* (1990) is a history of free verse by a writer who argues for a return to metrical versification.

Genres. A term, French in origin, that denotes types or classes of literature. The genres into which literary works have been grouped at different times are very numerous, and the criteria on which the classifications have been based are highly variable. Since the writings of Plato and Aristotle, however, there has been an enduring division of the overall literary domain into three large classes, in accordance with who speaks in the work: *lyric* (uttered throughout in the first person), *epic* or *narrative* (in which the narrator speaks in the first person, then lets his characters speak for themselves); and *drama* (in which the characters do all the talking). A similar tripartite scheme was elaborated by German critics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was echoed by James Joyce in his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), chapter 5, and functions still in critical discourse and in the general distinction, in college catalogues, between courses in poetry, prose fiction, and drama.

Within this overarching division, Aristotle and other classical critics identified a number of more limited genres. Many of the ancient names, including *epic*, *tragedy*, *comedy*, and *satire*, have remained current to the present day; to them have been added, over the last three centuries, such newcomers as *biography*, *essay*, and *novel*. A glance at the articles listed in the Index of Terms under *genre* will indicate the criss-crossing diversity of the classes and subclasses to which individual works of literature have been assigned.

Through the Renaissance and much of the eighteenth century, the recognized genres—or poetic **kinds** as they were then called—were widely thought to be fixed literary types, somewhat like species in the biological order of nature. Many *neoclassic* critics insisted that each kind must remain "pure" (there must, for example, be no "mixing" of tragedy and comedy), and also proposed *rules* which specified the subject matter, structure, style, and emotional effect proper to each kind. At that time the genres were also commonly

ranked in a hierarchy (related to the ranking of social classes, from royalty and the nobility down to peasants—see *decorum*), ranging from epic and tragedy at the top to the pastoral, short lyric, epigram, and other types, then considered to be minor genres, at the bottom. Shakespeare satirized the pedantic classifiers of his era in Polonius' catalogue (*Hamlet*, II. ii.) of types of drama: "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral . . ."

In the course of the eighteenth century the emergence of new types of literary productions—such as the novel, and the poem combining description, philosophy, and narrative (James Thomson's *Seasons*, 1726–30)—helped weaken confidence in the fixity and stability of literary genres. And in the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the extraordinary rise in the prominence and prestige of the short lyric poem, and the concurrent shift in the basis of critical theory to an *expressive* orientation (see the entry *criticism*), effected a drastic alteration both in the conception and ranking of literary genres, with the lyric displacing epic and tragedy as the quintessentially poetic type. From the Romantic Period on, a decreasing emphasis on the generic conception of literature was indicated by the widespread use of criteria for evaluating literature which—unlike the criteria in neoclassic criticism, which tended to be specific to a particular genre—were broadly applicable to all literary works: criteria such as "sincerity," "intensity" "organic unity," and "high seriousness." In the New Criticism of the mid-twentieth century, with its ruling concept of the uniqueness of each literary work, genre ceased to play more than a subordinate role in critical analysis and evaluation. For the changes in the nineteenth century in the classification and ranking of the genres, see M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), especially chapters 1, 4, and 6; on the continuance, as well as changes, of writings in the traditional genres during the Romantic Period, see Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (1986).

Since 1950 or so, an emphasis on generic types has been revived by some critical theorists, although on varied principles of classification. R. S. Crane and other Chicago critics have defended the utility for practical criticism of a redefined distinction among genres, based on Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which works are classified in accordance with the similarity in the principles by which they are organized in order to achieve a particular kind of emotional effect; see Crane, ed., *Critics and Criticism* (1952), pp. 12–24, 546–63, and refer to the *Chicago school* in this *Glossary*. Northrop Frye has proposed an *archetypal* theory in which the four major genres (comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire) are held to manifest the permanent forms bodied forth by the human imagination, as represented in the archetypal myths correlated with the four seasons (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957, pp. 158–239). Other current theorists conceive genres as social formations on the model of social institutions, such as the state or church, rather than on the model of biological species. By *structuralist critics* a genre is conceived as a set of constitutive conventions and codes, altering from age to age, but shared by a kind of implicit contract between writer and reader. These codes make possible the writing of a particular literary text, though the writer may play against, as well as with, the prevailing generic conventions. In the

reader, these conventions generate a set of expectations, which may be controverted rather than satisfied, but enable the reader to make the work intelligible—that is, to *naturalize* it, by relating it to the world as defined and ordered by codes in the prevailing culture.

By many critics at the present time, however, genres are conceived to be more or less arbitrary modes of classification, whose justification is their convenience in talking about literature. Some critics have applied to generic classes the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of **family resemblances**. That is, they propose that, in the loosely grouped family of works that make up a genre, there are no essential defining features, but only a set of family resemblances; each member shares some of these resemblances with some, but not all, of the other members of the genre. (For a description and discussion of Wittgenstein's view, see Maurice Mandelbaum, "Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 2, 1965, pp. 219–28.) There has also been interest in the role that generic assumptions have played in shaping the work that an author composes, and also in establishing expectations that alter the way that a reader will interpret and respond to a particular work. Whatever the present skepticism, however, about the old belief that genres constitute inherent species in the realm of literature, the fact that generic distinctions remain indispensable in literary discourse is attested by the unceasing publication of books whose titles announce that they deal with tragedy, the lyric, pastoral, the novel, or another of the many types and subtypes into which literature has over the centuries been classified.

Reviews of traditional theories of genre are René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (rev., 1970), chapter 17, and the readable short survey by Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (1982). For recent developments see Paul Hernadi, *Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification* (1972); Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature* (1982); Adena Rosmarin, *The Power of Genre* (1986); James Battersby, *Reason and the Nature of Texts* (1996).

Golden Age. The term derives from the form of *chronological primitivism* that was propounded in the Greek poet Hesiod's *Works and Days* (eighth century B.C.), as well as by many later Greek and Roman writers. The earliest period of human history, regarded as a state of perfect felicity, was called "the golden age," and the continuous later decline of human well-being through time was expressed by the sequence "the silver age" and "the bronze age," ending with the present sad condition of humanity, "the iron age." See *primitivism and progress* and, for renderings of the golden age in the guise of a carefree rural existence, *pastoral*. Refer to Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (1969).

Gothic Novel. The word *Gothic* originally referred to the Goths, an early Germanic tribe, then came to signify "germanic," then "medieval." "Gothic architecture" now denotes the medieval type of architecture, characterized by the use of the high pointed arch and vault, flying buttresses, and intricate recesses, which spread through western Europe between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries.