

2

What is literature?

In this chapter:

- Consider some definitions of literature and test them by exploring a poem.
- Learn some rules for judging works of literature.
- Write a short commentary on a literary text.

Literature is difficult to define. It seems that what counts as literature can change significantly from time to time and from place to place. After centuries of research and argument, professional critics and theorists still disagree about the concept.

To get you thinking

What makes a piece of writing ‘literature’?

Is it the type of writing? Does it depend on the purpose of the writer? Is it the quality of the work? Does it depend on where and when it was written, read and by whom? Or is it something else entirely?

Sort the following items into two groups: literature and not-literature. (You might need to think of specific examples for some items.)

Work	Literature	Not literature
A popular ‘blockbuster’ novel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A classic novel by Jane Austen or Charles Dickens	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A modern children’s picture book	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The lyrics of a song by Bob Dylan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A play by Shakespeare	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A famous man’s autobiography	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
An ancient play by a Greek playwright	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The travel diary of a 17th-century French writer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The poems of Emily Dickinson	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The poems of Emily Drmitt, aged 12	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
An anonymous fan-fiction <i>Star Wars</i> novel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The King James Version of the Bible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Compare your decisions with others in your course. Discuss the reasoning behind your choices, and list the factors that guided your decisions.

Towards a definition of literature

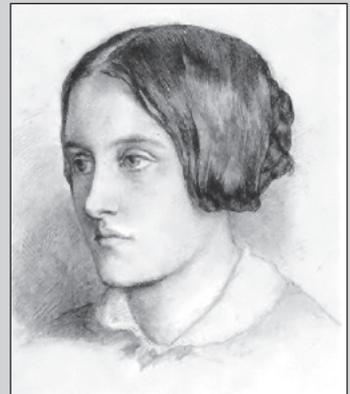
The word literature comes from an ancient Latin word, *litteratus*, which means ‘letters of the alphabet.’ Thus literature broadly means ‘things written down in letters.’ But clearly there is more to it than that. A great many things are written down using letters, and not all of them count as literature. To understand the modern idea of literature as an art form, and what it has to do with ‘letters,’ we need to look further.

Our ideas about what is literature are shaped by many factors. The best way to start exploring the idea of literature in detail is to study a specific text that is widely regarded as literature.

On the next page you will find a poem by Christina Rossetti. We can look at Rossetti’s poem for clues about what makes a piece of writing ‘literature’ and how we judge the quality of literary works.

Who was Christina Rossetti?

Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) was an English poet of the nineteenth century. Along with Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, she is considered one of the significant female poets of the Victorian era. Born and raised in London, Rossetti was deeply religious, and in later life suffered chronic illness – two influences that shaped her poetry, which often focussed on death and the afterlife. Her best-known collections of poetry include *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* (1866) and *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881). Rossetti experimented with poetic forms and language, and is known for her striking use of pictorial imagery. She was the sister of the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. His work and life feature in some of her poetry, including ‘In an Artist’s Studio,’ which alludes to Dante Rossetti’s obsession with Elizabeth Siddal, who eventually became his wife.



Text study: ‘In an Artist’s Studio’ by Christina Rossetti

Christina Rossetti’s poem is widely regarded as literature. It is a sonnet, written around the year 1856. It describes an artist’s studio in which all the paintings are of the same woman.

Read Rossetti’s poem on the next page a number of times, until you feel you are beginning to understand it.

In an Artist's Studio

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel – every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

Christina Rossetti (1830–1894)

Exploring 'In an Artist's Studio'

To understand Rossetti's poem, it is important to *understand the poem's main ideas*, its *theme*, the rules of the *sonnet form*, and some *historical details* about Rossetti's life and work. The activities that follow will help you with these tasks.

Activity

Start by checking your understanding of the poem with the following activity. Below is a jumbled summary of the poem that will help you identify the ideas and their arrangement. Sort it into the right sequence by matching it to lines in Rossetti's sonnet.

A The paintings show her in different dresses and colours, always lovely.

B The same face stares out from each picture.

C He was clearly obsessed by her, and her gaze shows that she loved him.

D He painted his own desire, not her at all.

E She sometimes appears a young girl, a queen, an angel, but always it means the same thing: love.

F He painted his ideal image of her, eternally young and beautiful, never growing older or sadder.

G She is in different poses – walking, sitting, leaning – but clearly the same woman.

Activity

1. Check to see if Rossetti's poem follows all the rules of a sonnet. Look for: fourteen lines exactly; a regular rhyming pattern; and lines with five clear beats.
2. Study the rhyming pattern in Rossetti's poem by looking at the line endings ('canvases'/ 'loveliness', 'screens'/'leans'). Try to describe the pattern or sequence of rhymes.
3. Mark out the pentameter rhythm in the poem by underlining or highlighting the beats in each line, as shown above. How well has Rossetti managed this requirement of the sonnet form?
4. Try reading the poem aloud. Decide whether the rhyme and rhythm should be emphasised, or if a more natural speaking style works better.

What makes 'In an Artist's Studio' literature?

Now that you have come to a better understanding of Rossetti's poem, you are ready to ask the difficult question: *What makes the poem literature?*

Activity

1. Consider which of the following might explain the classification of Rossetti's poem as literature.

Tick any or all that apply. Consider the questions that your choices raise.

What makes it literature:	✓	Questions
a. the fact that it is a poem?		Are all poems literature?
b. the fact that Rossetti is famous?		Does fame guarantee quality?
c. the fact that it has a serious purpose?		Does seriousness equal quality?
d. the cleverness or insight of the content?		How do we measure insight?
e. the poet's skill with the rules of the sonnet?		Is skill alone enough?
f. the fact that it has been published many times.		Does frequency equal quality?
g. the fact that it is included on literature courses?		Who makes those decisions?
h. the fact that it attacks sexism in art?		Are all anti-sexist poems good?

2. We can sometimes explain the quality, or degree of excellence, of a piece of writing by making a comparison. Here is Rossetti's poem again, alongside a poem by a young amateur writer.

Read the two poems side by side, and consider why one might have a better claim to be considered literature.

In an Artist's Studio
Christina Rossetti

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel – every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

The Bedroom Mirror
Emily Drutt (aged 12)

She looks into the mirror every day,
To comb her hair or brush her curls away,
Its frame is like a painting on the wall,
As if the mirror isn't really there at all.
Sometimes the painting shows her pretty face,
Then something comes along to take its place.
As years go by the mirror sees her grow,
It watches as she changes don't you know,
One day when she has grown she will be gone,
But the all-seeing mirror ever watches on.

Which of the following skills are most clearly contrasted in these two poems? Which seem to explain the difference in quality?

Say whether you think the following are (A) very significant, (B) somewhat significant, or (C) not very significant in explaining the difference:

	A	B	C
the length of the text			
the control of complex poetic techniques			
the rhyming pattern			
the clarity of the ideas			
the degree of wisdom or insight offered by the poem			
the effectiveness of word choices			
the sophistication of the language			
the effectiveness of the rhyming pattern			
the seriousness of its purpose			
the precision of the language			

3. Below are two brief *commentaries* – that is, explanatory or critical notes – on the poems. One poem is judged to be literature. The other is judged *not* to be literature. How persuasive do you find the arguments?

i. Christina Rossetti's poem 'In an Artist's Studio' explores the obsessive focus of an artist on his favourite model. It uses this topic to explore the intertwining themes of art, and love, and life. The artist's dedication to one woman at first seems to suggest strong and undying love, a commitment to the woman herself. But Rossetti subtly suggests that it is in fact all about the artist himself and his dedication to his own desire. 'He feeds upon her face' suggests something insatiable, an appetite that she exists to serve. The fact that the paintings are now 'hidden just behind those screens' and are not on display suggests either that the love has died, or that the artist has – which creates an ironic contrast between the attempt to capture this love on canvas forever, and its passing in real life. Thematically, this is similar to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, which is also about an attempt to capture beauty and love through art. Like that poem, 'In an Artist's Studio' suggests that the artist's act is ultimately a selfish one.

ii. Emily DrUITT's poem 'The Bedroom Mirror' uses the familiar idea of reflecting on one's life from a point of view outside it – as seen in a mirror, a diary, or a photograph. The poem strives to be profound and to offer an insight about life: that we *think* we are important, but we will eventually be gone, and the world will carry on. This is a common theme in the writing of young teenagers as they begin to think about life and death. The basic idea is sound, but there are points of confusion that show the writer has not thought deeply and carefully enough about what she is saying. A frame is not a painting, which makes line 3 confusing. The comparison should be between the mirror and a painting. And why say, 'as if the mirror isn't there'? This contradicts the point of the poem, which is that the mirror stays while the girl changes and goes away. The statement that the mirror is 'all-seeing' is an attempt to be profound and mysterious, but we are not told what it sees, apart from the girl. There are also some stumbles with the rhythm (in line 4, for example, the word 'really' adds surplus syllables without adding meaning, and should be deleted). A good poem could be made out of this material, but more maturity and better control of the language and ideas are needed.

Which of the skills and criteria listed on the previous page – length, control, rhyming pattern, clarity, insight, word-choice, sophistication of language, effectiveness, seriousness of purpose, precision of language – seemed most important in shaping these judgments of literary quality?