

Historically, a group of people bound together by kinship and geography will form a society that exhibits a *culture*—common language, behavioral rules, traditions, skills, mores, religion, and art that define the civilization of that group. Literary works, including folklore and myth, are inseparable from the particular human society from which they emerge.

Until relatively recently, with the invention of trains, automobiles, and airplanes, travel over long distances was difficult. Instant communication—the telephone, the Internet—is an innovation of our time. Originally, information about other societies could be heard only as far away as a human could shout. Letters helped transmit ideas and cultural values over time and distance, but no more quickly than a horse could gallop or a ship could sail. For thousands of years cultures lived in relative isolation from each other, and hence they tended to develop distinctive traits and values. Within China, for instance, there are numerous well-defined cultures: the Uighurs of the northwest, the coastal Chinese of Shanghai, the Tibetan mountain people, the Szechuanese of the southwest. They eat different foods; they practice different religions; they speak different dialects.

Though technological advances have made the world seem smaller and, generally, have ended the geographical isolation of various cultures, these advances have not diminished the powerful cultural distinctions that mark societies all over the world. In fact, modern communication and transport have sometimes served to bring cultures into conflict. The works in this section, varied as they are, share a preoccupation with the connection between culture and identity. Some, such as George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," examine the devastating consequences of cultural imperialism. Others, such as Louise Erdrich's "Dear John Wayne," focus on the way dominant cultural stereotypes distort and undermine the sense of self.

The works in this section demonstrate how powerfully culture shapes identity. They reveal the tension generated by interacting cultures, and offer insight into the conflicts that usually emerge. But these works also provide an opportunity for us to step outside the bounds and bonds of our own culture and to experience just how complex, diverse, and interesting the human condition can be.

QUESTIONS FOR THINKING AND WRITING

As you read the selections in this section, consider the questions that follow. You may want to write out your thoughts informally—in a journal, if you are keeping one—as a way of preparing to respond to the selections. Or you may wish to make one of these questions the basis for a formal essay.

1. What cultural tradition(s) do you come from? Describe this tradition as fully as you can. Do you feel that you live in or out of the cultural mainstream? Explain.
2. Except for Native Americans, the people of the United States descended from or arrived as citizens of foreign cultures. Is there, nonetheless, an American culture? Explain. The United States was once called a *cultural melting pot*. Now it is sometimes called a *cultural mosaic*. Which **metaphor** strikes you as more apt? Explain.
3. Do economic considerations affect culture? Aside from their wealth, are the rich different from the poor? Explain. Does education strengthen or weaken traditional culture? Explain.
4. What are some of the positive and negative associations you have with the values of the cultural tradition(s) you come from? Is the preservation of these values a good thing or a bad thing? Explain.