

into the subgenres novel, novella, and short story, we take the length of the works as the salient aspect. (Novels are much longer than short stories.) But other fictional subgenres—detective fiction, **gothic fiction**, **historical fiction**, science fiction, and even **romance**—are based on the types of **plots**, **characters**, **settings**, and so on that are customarily featured in these works. These latter categories may include works from all the other, length-based categories. There are, after all, gothic novels (think Anne Rice), as well as gothic short stories (think Edgar Allan Poe).

A few genres even cut across the boundaries dividing poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction. A prime example is **satire**—any literary work (whether poem, play, fiction, or nonfiction) “in which prevailing vices and follies are held up to ridicule” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Examples of satire include poems such as Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad* (1728); plays, movies, and television shows, from Moliere’s *Tartuffe* (1664) to Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) to *South Park* and *The Colbert Report*; works of fiction like Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759); and works of nonfiction such as Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” (1729) and Ambrose Bierce’s *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1906). Three other major genres that cross the borders between fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction are **parody**, **pastoral**, and **romance**.

Individual works can thus belong simultaneously to multiple generic categories or observe some **conventions** of a genre without being an example of that genre in any simple or straightforward way. The Old English poem *Beowulf* is an **epic** and, because it’s written in verse, a poem. Yet because (like all epics) it narrates a story, it is also a work of fiction in the more general sense of that term.

Given this complexity, the system of literary genres can be puzzling, especially to the uninitiated. Used well, however, classification schemes are among the most essential and effective tools we use to understand and enjoy just about everything, including literature.

WHY READ LITERATURE?

Because there has never been and never will be absolute, lasting agreement about where exactly the boundaries between one literary genre and another should be drawn or even about what counts as literature at all, it might be more useful from the outset to focus on *why* we look at particular forms of expression.

Over the ages, people have sometimes dismissed *all* literature or at least certain genres as a luxury, a frivolous pastime, even a sinful indulgence. Plato famously banned poetry from his ideal republic on the grounds that it tells beautiful lies that “feed and water our passions” rather than our reason. Thousands of years later, the influential eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham decried the “magic art” of literature as doing a good deal of “mischief” by “stimulating our passions” and “exciting our prejudices.” One of Bentham’s contemporaries—a minister—blamed the rise of immorality, irreligion, and even prostitution on the increasing popularity of that particular brand of literature called the novel.

Today, many Americans express their sense of literature’s insignificance by simply not reading it: The 2004 government report *Reading at Risk* indicates that less than half of U.S. adults read imaginative literature, with the sharpest declines occurring among the youngest age groups. Even if they very much enjoy reading on their own, many contemporary U.S. college students nonetheless hesitate to study or major in literature for fear that their degree won’t provide them with “marketable” credentials, knowledge, or skills.