

Beginning Our Literary Journey 1



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Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Identify the different ways in which you connect to literature.
- Recognize and utilize explanatory notes to enhance your reading experience.
- Discuss the characters and activities presented in the poem “The Red Hat.”
- Discuss the characters and activities presented in the short story “A & P.”
- Discuss the characters and activities presented in the poem “Oranges.”

“You can’t depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”

—Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*

Reading literature that tells a story introduces you to an imaginary world. You are pulled away from a living, breathing world into one that was created in the mind of the author. Its situations and experiences may resemble ones you are familiar with; many of them may even be based in part on real situations, but they are imaginary—shaped by the **imagination** of the person who created them.

To experience literature, you must make an intentional decision to turn yourself over to an imaginary realm. How many times have you heard someone say, “I’m having a hard time getting into this story”? Maybe you’ve said that yourself. Although such a comment often suggests that the reader is encountering a difficult writing style, it may also mean that the reader has not made an intentional connection to the imaginary world of literature.

As adults, we are grounded by the demands of our everyday lives, preoccupied with responsibilities and endless schedules—not to mention university course assignments! So, opting for a full connection to a literary world is demanding: It requires letting go of things at hand and engaging in imaginary things. It actually requires us to believe that an imaginary world is possible and to engage in what Coleridge (1817) so famously called “the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment.” But once we connect, we find ourselves escaping from the routine of our ordinary lives, caught up in adventure and entertained.

1.1 Connecting: Entering Into a Literary Experience

When you allow reading to unlock your imagination, your connection also sets the stage for intellectual engagement. It allows the experience of reading literature to include the pursuit of ideas and knowledge. Your literary experience—as the title of this book suggests—can become *a personal journey, a quest for meaning*. But connections to literature don’t have to begin with deep intellectual quests. The stories themselves, those that strike a human chord, provide the greatest opportunity for connection.

From ancient times, in every culture, humans have told stories to explain their world, to honor people, to celebrate achievements, and to communicate human values. Stories are still essential in our lives: We share them with our children, look to them for entertainment, and read them because at the core of our being there’s a powerful curiosity about human relationships and how to cope in the world in which we find ourselves.

This means you are already wired to explore literature. And the most immediate connection is through story. Allowing yourself to be drawn into a story—whether it’s told by someone, printed in a book, or performed—unlocks your innate abilities to empathize, to laugh, to inquire, to learn, to wonder. Connecting with literature also allows you to reflect on the significance of common human experiences in your life.

For example, if you know what it’s like to send your child off to school for the first time and remember how you felt when this happened, your connection to the emotions that Rachel Hadas, poet and former professor at Rutgers University, packs into “The Red Hat” will be instantaneous. Her poem captures the anxiety and disequilibrium parents feel when watching their young children drawn away from them to enter school and a world away from home. When the watching parent is described in the poem as one whose “heart stretches, elastic in its love and fear,” you can feel those emotions because you have experienced them. And no one has to explain what “waving in the eddies of change” means—you’ve *lived through* that uncomfortable experience when

home seems strangely empty, routine is broken, and you are forced to accept that your child will not always be with you.

The Red Hat

Rachel Hadas (1994)

It started before Christmas. Now our son
officially walks to school alone.
Semi-alone, it's accurate to say:
I or his father track him on the way.
He walks up on the east side of West End, 5
we on the west side. Glances can extend
(and do) across the street; not eye contact.
Already ties are feelings and not fact.
Straus Park is where these parallel paths part; 10
he goes alone from there. The watcher's heart
stretches, elastic in its love and fear,
toward him as we see him disappear,
striding briskly. Where two weeks ago,
holding a hand, he'd dawdle, dreamy, slow,
he now is hustled forward by the pull 15
of something far more powerful than school.

The mornings we turn back to are no more
than forty minutes longer than before,
but they feel vastly different—flimsy, strange,
wavering in the eddies of this change, 20
empty, unanchored, perilously light
since the red hat vanished from our sight.

Rachel Hadas, "The Red Hat" from Halfway Down the Hall: New and Selected Poems
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So, this introduction to literature begins by asking you simply to read a short story and a poem. Each represents a separate literary **genre**, or category, but both present an experience that is likely familiar to you. Each feeds human feelings and emotions. Your task is to read both selections for pleasure and enjoyment. You do not need to consider depth of meaning or think about delving into complex criticism. These challenges will come in later chapters. You are asked just to observe the people and life activities that these pieces of literature present. Such a perspective for reading, as writer Anne Lamott (1995) argues, can be both a source of delight and renewal:

When writers . . . make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship. (p. 237)

As you read these selections, imagine you are meeting the people presented in them; observe their behavior; be aware of your feelings. Then, think about how each person's behavior is different from what you expected, or from what it should be. When you do this, you will see discrepancies. Some of them will delight you, some may be exaggerated, and some may remind you of a personal experience. Especially, be aware of the subtle humor that unusual or unexpected human behavior creates. The authors featured in this chapter present people in this gentle manner—not attempting to analyze their behavior in a formal way, but to observe it with a smile.

A Story

- “A & P”: This short narrative by John Updike is a **coming-of-age story** in which a 19-year-old boy working in a grocery store faces a situation that produces significant personal insight and growth. Its dramatic moments are typical of those we associate with a young person’s shift in perspective from innocence to experience, from idealism to realism, or from ignorance to knowledge.

A Poem

- “Oranges”: Gary Soto’s poem is built around a universal human dilemma that can take you by surprise time and time again. It occurs in those circumstances where you realize that you will fail (or appear naïve) unless through sheer personal resourcefulness you can find a way out. No doubt you’ve had this experience, and hopefully your response was as effective as this young boy’s.

Our Use of Explanatory Notes

Throughout the book, literary selections will often be accompanied by explanatory notes and comments printed in the margins. These annotations are not intended to interfere with your interpretation of the selection involved; rather, they are included to emphasize and illuminate specific literary concepts and techniques that make the particular selection effective. In many cases, the notes will assist you in understanding content as well.

John Updike (1932–2009)

In his growing-up years in small-town Pennsylvania, John Updike developed a keen awareness of the ways religious faith (as a coalescing element) was being replaced by materialistic culture in America. Through his novels, essays, and poems, Updike elegantly explored reasons for this cultural shift, always probing with unrestrained curiosity. He once said, “I want to write books that unlock the traffic jam in everybody’s head.” His short stories and novels often reflect life and changing relationships in communities where he lived in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize twice for the last two novels in his famous Rabbit series, which included *Rabbit, Run*; *Rabbit Redux*; *Rabbit Is Rich*; and *Rabbit at Rest*.



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 After you finish reading “A & P,” watch a video featuring John Updike discussing his famous story at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3TvEa-CzBK8>

A & P¹

John Updike (1962)

In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits. I’m in the third check-out slot, with my back to the door, so I don’t see them until they’re over by the bread. The one that caught my eye first was the one in the plaid green two-piece. She was a chunky kid, with a good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can with those

¹ “A & P,” The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company, was a supermarket widely known for most of the last century, especially in the eastern United States. At the height of its success, it was the country’s largest food retailer.

two crescents of white just under it, where the sun never seems to hit, at the top of the backs of her legs. I stood there with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers trying to remember if I rang it up or not. I ring it up again and the customer starts giving me hell. She's one of these cash-register-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows, and I know it made her day to trip me up. She'd been watching cash registers forty years and probably never seen a mistake before.

By the time I got her feathers smoothed and her goodies into a bag—she gives me a little snort in passing, if she'd been born at the right time they would have burned her over in Salem—by the time I get her on her way the girls had circled around the bread and were coming back, without a pushcart, back my way along the counters, in the aisle between the check-outs and the Special bins. They didn't even have shoes on. There was this chunky one, with the two-piece—it was bright green and the seams on the bra were still sharp and her belly was still pretty pale so I guessed she just got it (the suit)—there was this one, with one of those chubby berry-faces, the lips all bunched together under her nose, this one, and a tall one, with black hair that hadn't quite frizzed right, and one of these sunburns right across under the eyes, and a chin that was too long—you know, the kind of girl other girls think is very "striking" and "attractive" but never quite makes it, as they very well know, which is why they like her so much—and then the third one, that wasn't quite so tall. She was the queen. She kind of led them, the other two peeking around and making their shoulders round. She didn't look around, not this queen, she just walked straight on slowly, on these long white prima donna legs. She came down a little hard on her heels, as if she didn't walk in her bare feet that much, putting down her heels and then letting the weight move along to her toes as if she was testing the floor with every step, putting a little deliberate extra action into it. You never know for sure how girls' minds work (do you really think it's a mind in there or just a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar?) but you got the idea she had talked the other two into coming in here with her, and now she was showing them how to do it, walk slow and hold yourself straight.

She had on a kind of dirty-pink-beige maybe, I don't know—bathing suit with a little nubble all over it and, what got me, the straps were down. They were off her shoulders looped loose around the cool tops of her arms, and I guess as a result the suit had slipped a little on her, so all around the top of the cloth there was this shining rim. If it hadn't been there you wouldn't have known there could have been anything whiter than those shoulders. With the straps pushed off, there was nothing between the top of the suit and the top of her head except just her, this clean bare plane of the top of her chest down from the shoulder bones like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light. I mean, it was more than pretty.

She had sort of oaky hair that the sun and salt had bleached, done up in a bun that was unravelling, and a kind of prim face. Walking into the A & P with your straps down, I suppose it's the only kind of face you can have. She held her head so high her neck, coming

up out of those white shoulders, looked kind of stretched, but I didn't mind. The longer her neck was, the more of her there was.

She must have felt in the corner of her eye me and over my shoulder Stokesie in the second slot watching, but she didn't tip. Not this queen. She kept her eyes moving across the racks, and stopped, and turned so slow it made my stomach rub the inside of my apron, and buzzed to the other two, who kind of huddled against her for relief, and they all three of them went up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-spreads-spaghetti-soft drinks-crackers-and-cookies aisle. From the third slot I look straight up this aisle to the meat counter, and I watched them all the way. The fat one with the tan sort of fumbled with the cookies, but on second thought she put the packages back. The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle—the girls were walking against the usual traffic (not that we have one-way signs or anything)—were pretty hilarious. You could see them, when Queenie's white shoulders dawned on them, kind of jerk, or hop, or hiccup, but their eyes snapped back to their own baskets and on they pushed. I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering "Let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah, yes, applesauce!" or whatever it is they do mutter. But there was no doubt, this jiggled them. A few house-slaves in pin curlers even looked around after pushing their carts past to make sure what they had seen was correct.

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You know, it's one thing to have a girl in a bathing suit down on the beach, where what with the glare nobody can look at each other much anyway, and another thing in the cool of the A & P, under the fluorescent lights, against all those stacked packages, with her feet paddling along naked over our checkerboard green-and-cream rubber-tile floor.

"Oh Daddy," Stokesie said beside me. "I feel so faint."

"Darling," I said. "Hold me tight." Stokesie's married, with two babies chalked up on his fuselage already, but as far as I can tell that's the only difference. He's twenty-two, and I was nineteen this April.

"Is it done?" he asks, the responsible married man finding his voice. I forgot to say he thinks he's going to be manager some sunny day, maybe in 1990 when it's called the Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company or something.

What he meant was, our town is five miles from a beach, with a big summer colony out on the Point, but we're right in the middle of town, and the women generally put on a shirt or shorts or something before they get out of the car into the street. And anyway these are usually women with six children and varicose veins mapping their legs and nobody, including them, could care less. As I say, we're right in the middle of town, and if you stand at our front doors you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real-estate offices and about

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twenty-seven old free-loaders tearing up Central Street because the sewer broke again. It's not as if we're on the Cape; we're north of Boston and there's people in this town haven't seen the ocean for twenty years.

The girls had reached the meat counter and were asking McMahon something. He pointed, they pointed, and they shuffled out of sight behind a pyramid of Diet Delight peaches. All that was left for us to see was old McMahon patting his mouth and looking after them sizing up their joints. Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them, they couldn't help it.

A cashier in an A & P grocery store is telling this story, describing something unusual that is happening, providing vivid details. Notice, though, how much we have learned about him in the process—by his language, his attitude toward the regular customers, his fascination with the girls, and his description of the town and its way of life.

Now here comes the sad part of the story, at least my family says it's sad but I don't think it's sad myself. The store's pretty empty, it being Thursday afternoon, so there was nothing much to do except lean on the register and wait for the girls to show up again. The whole store was like a pinball machine and I didn't know which tunnel they'd come out of. After a while they come around out of the far aisle, around the light bulbs, records at discount of the Caribbean Six or Tony Martin Sings or some such gunk you wonder they waste the wax on, six packs of candy bars, and plastic toys done up in cellophane that fall apart when a kid looks at them anyway. Around they come, Queenie still leading the way, and holding a little gray jar in her hand. Slots Three through Seven are unmanned and I could see her wondering between Stokes and me, but Stokesie with his usual luck draws an old party in baggy gray pants who stumbles up with four giant cans of pineapple juice (what do these bums do with all that pineapple juice? I've often asked myself) so the girls come to me. Queenie puts down the jar and I take it into my fingers icy cold. Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream: 49¢. Now her hands are empty, not a ring or a bracelet, bare as God made them, and I wonder where the money's coming from. Still with that prim look she lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her nubbled pink top. The jar went heavy in my hand. Really, I thought that was so cute.

Then everybody's luck begins to run out. Lengel comes in from haggling with a truck full of cabbages on the lot and is about to scuttle into that door marked MANAGER behind which he hides all day when the girls touch his eye. Lengel's pretty dreary, teaches Sunday school and the rest, but he doesn't miss that much. He comes over and says, "Girls, this isn't the beach."

Queenie blushes, though maybe it's just a brush of sunburn I was noticing for the first time, now that she was so close. "My mother asked me to pick up a jar of herring snacks." 15

Here the storyteller moves beyond his actual observations of the girls to imaginative speculation about what their lifestyle must be like—based on their purchase of Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks.

Her voice kind of startled me, the way voices do when you see the people first, coming out so flat and dumb yet kind of tony, too, the way it ticked over "pick up" and "snacks." All of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living room. Her father and the other men were standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties and the women were in sandals picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big plate and they were all holding drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them. When my

parents have somebody over they get lemonade and if it's a real racy affair Schlitz in tall glasses with "They'll Do It Every Time" cartoons stencilled on.

"That's all right," Lengel said. "But this isn't the beach." His repeating this struck me as funny, as if it had just occurred to him, and he had been thinking all these years the A & P was a great big dune and he was the head lifeguard. He didn't like my smiling—as I say he doesn't miss much—but he concentrates on giving the girls that sad Sunday-school-superintendent stare.

Queenie's blush is no sunburn now, and the plump one in plaid, that I liked better from the back—a really sweet can—pipes up, "We weren't doing any shopping. We just came in for the one thing."

"That makes no difference," Lengel tells her, and I could see from the way his eyes went that he hadn't noticed she was wearing a two-piece before. "We want you decently dressed when you come in here."

"We are decent," Queenie says suddenly, her lower lip pushing, getting sore now that she remembers her place, a place from which the crowd that runs the A & P must look pretty crummy. Fancy Herring Snacks flashed in her very blue eyes.

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"Girls, I don't want to argue with you. After this come in here with your shoulders covered. It's our policy." He turns his back. That's policy for you. Policy is what the kingpins want. What the others want is juvenile delinquency.

All this while, the customers had been showing up with their carts but, you know, sheep, seeing a scene, they had all bunched up on Stokesie, who shook open a paper bag as gently as peeling a peach, not wanting to miss a word. I could feel in the silence everybody getting nervous, most of all Lengel, who asks me, "Sammy, have you rung up this purchase?"

I thought and said "No" but it wasn't about that I was thinking. I go through the punches, 4, 9, GROC, TOT — it's more complicated than you think, and after you do it often enough, it begins to make a little song, that you hear words to, in my case "Hello (*bing*) there, you (*gung*) hap-py pee-pul (*splat*)"—the splat being the drawer flying out. I increase the bill, tenderly as you may imagine, it just having come from between the two smoothest scoops of vanilla I had ever known were there, and pass a half and a penny into her narrow pink palm, and nestle the herrings in a bag and twist its neck and hand it over, all the time thinking.

The girls, and who'd blame them, are in a hurry to get out, so I say "I quit" to Lengel quick enough for them to hear, hoping they'll stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero.

Did you expect this impulsive decision? What earlier behavior or details help to explain the decision?

They keep right on going, into the electric eye; the door flies open 25 and they flicker across the lot to their car, Queenie and Plaid and Big Tall Goony-Goony (not that as raw material she was so bad), leaving me with Lengel and a kink in his eyebrow.

"Did you say something, Sammy?"

"I said I quit."

"I thought you did."

"You didn't have to embarrass them."

"It was they who were embarrassing us." 30

I started to say something that came out "Fiddle-de-doo." It's a saying of my grandmother's, and I know she would have been pleased.

"I don't think you know what you're saying," Lengel said.

"I know you don't," I said. "But I do." I pull the bow at the back of my apron and start shrugging it off my shoulders. A couple customers that had been heading for my slot begin to knock against each other, like scared pigs in a chute.

Lengel sighs and begins to look very patient and old and gray. He's been a friend of my parents for years. "Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad," he tells me. It's true, I don't. But it seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it. I fold the apron, "Sammy" stitched in red on the pocket, and put it on the counter, and drop the bow tie on top of it. The bow tie is theirs, if you've ever wondered. "You'll feel this for the rest of your life," Lengel says, and I know that's true, too, but remembering how he made that pretty girl blush makes me so scrunchy inside I punch the No Sale tab and the machine whirs "pee-pul" and the drawer splats out. One advantage to this scene taking place in summer, I can follow this up with a clean exit, there's no fumbling around getting your coat and galoshes, I just saunter into the electric eye in my white shirt that my mother ironed the night before, and the door heaves itself open, and outside the sunshine is skating around on the asphalt.

Notice the scope of time that is included in this short paragraph: Sammy looks "around" for the girls, then looks "back," and finally looks ahead.

I look around for my girls, but they're gone, of course. There 35 wasn't anybody but some young married screaming with her children about some candy they didn't get by the door of a powder-blue Falcon station wagon. Looking back in the big windows, over the bags of peat moss and aluminum lawn furniture stacked on the pavement, I could see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through. His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter.

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CONNECTING: QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT MADE YOUR READING WORTHWHILE

1. What allowed you to make an imaginative connection to this story? Was it a recollection of similar behavior that you previously observed?
2. Some readers see the young man's behavior as foolish; others think it is based on integrity—he's standing up for what he feels is right. How do you account for his behavior?
3. Is there evidence in the story to suggest that both Sammy and Lengel have regrets about their actions?

Gary Soto (b. 1952)

Gary Soto was born into a Mexican-American family and grew up in a barrio in Fresno, California. A popular Chicano writer, he has published several books of poetry, taught at the University of California, and been a resonant voice for social change, particularly addressing struggles faced by Spanish-speaking Americans. Several of his books were developed for young readers, but all draw heavily on his personal experiences and memorable, true-to-life insights. He's often called "the people's poet."



For an interesting video illustration of "Oranges," see
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptrICCPddcE>



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Oranges

Gary Soto (1995)

Almost a "once-upon-a-time" beginning to the story.

Winter setting and the barking dog are subtle, ominous details.

The first time I walked
 With a girl, I was twelve,
 Cold, and weighted down
 With two oranges in my jacket.

December. Frost cracking
 Beneath my steps, my breath
 Before me, then gone,
 As I walked toward
 Her house, the one whose
 Porch light burned yellow
 Night and day, in any weather.
 A dog barked at me, until
 She came out pulling
 At her gloves, face bright
 With rouge. I smiled,
 Touched her shoulder, and led
 Her down the street, across
 A used car lot and a line
 Of newly planted trees,
 Until we were breathing

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Before a drugstore. We Entered, the tiny bell Bringing a saleslady Down a narrow aisle of goods. I turned to the candies Tiered like bleachers, And asked what she wanted— Light in her eyes, a smile Starting at the corners Of her mouth. I fingered A nickel in my pocket, And when she lifted a chocolate That cost a dime, I didn't say anything. I took the nickel from	25
<i>Crisis point, following mounting suspense.</i>	
My pocket, then an orange, And set them quietly on The counter. When I looked up, The lady's eyes met mine, And held them, knowing Very well what it was all About.	35
<i>Boy's character revealed through his resourceful actions.</i>	
Outside, A few cars hissing past, Fog hanging like old Coats between the trees. I took my girl's hand In mine for two blocks, Then released it to let Her unwrap the chocolate. I peeled my orange That was so bright against The gray of December That, from some distance, Someone might have thought I was making a fire in my hands.	45
<i>Boy's reflective response from a somewhat more informed point of view—a look back on innocence.</i>	
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	55

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CONNECTING: QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT MADE YOUR READING WORTH WHILE

1. At what point did you feel yourself being drawn into the story this poem tells? Did a particular experience in your own life, different from the boy's, draw you into the story?
2. Oranges are identified three times in the poem: in the boy's pocket, on the store counter, and in the boy's hands. What does each of these instances contribute to the story?
3. What feelings or emotions are you most aware of when you connect imaginatively to "Oranges" and to "A & P"?

Summary

When this summary section is included at the end of a chapter, it will provide a brief review of the concepts, explanations, and discussions presented in the chapter. It will call attention to the essential insights you should have gained. At the same time, it will ask you to think again about the literature you have read in the chapter—and reflect on the reasons each piece of literature was selected.

Chapter 1 introduces the study of literature by identifying two ideas that every reader must understand: Literature exists in the imaginary world of its creator, and it is accessible (experienced) by the reader through an intentional, imaginative connection to the creator's world. Readers who approach literary works (short stories, novels, poetry, and plays) with this perspective are sure to discover surprising and penetrating insights into our shared human experience.

Key Terms and Concepts

coming-of-age story A story built around dilemmas or decisions typically associated with a young person's shift in perspective from innocence to experience, from idealism to realism, or from ignorance to knowledge.

genre The term comes from the French language and is used to identify categories or types of literature, including both the broadest categories of literature—prose, poetry, and drama—and specific types of literature within these categories.

imagination The human power that shapes artistic expression; it enables a writer's work to become an expression of meaning in our world and allows readers to engage in identifying with what the writer's work has to say about things that matter.