

Appreciating English Literature

Conclusion

What Constitutes Literature?

Thousands of new works of fiction are published annually. Books are written about people's lives, or others write about their own (biography and autobiography). Volumes of criticism are printed and reprinted. Together with novels, poetry and drama, how much of all this can be classed as actual literature?

The simplest answer is that true works of literature stand the test of time. They are "timeless" in that they create worlds of their own. In our last unit, we looked at the work of Graham Greene, whose novels, critics have often stated, are set in their own world – "Greeneland."

But there is much more to literature than longevity. No one today, apart from academics, reads Beowulf in the original. Chaucer, too, is only read by a dedicated minority. The poet Andrew Motion said recently that with the collapse of religious education in schools, the fact that children growing up today don't know the bible means that access to a lot of literature is denied to them. These and other questions I hope to address in the final audio recording of this course.

