

## World Literature

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The term “world literature,” originally *Weltliteratur*, was used by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in one issue of the journal *Über Kunst und Altertum* in 1872 (Pizer 3). To Goethe, world literature was just the exchange and availability of texts from different countries and areas across the globe. Goethe had once said:

Es ist aber sehr artig, daß wir jetzt, bei dem engen Verkehr zwischen Franzosen, Engländern und Deutschen, in den Fall kommen, uns einander zu korrigieren. Das ist der große Nutzen, der bei einer Weltliteratur herauskommt und der sich immer mehr zeigen wird (Krobb 6).

In present-day English, this simply meant:

It is quite pleasing that with the close exchange between the French, the English and the Germans nowadays, we have the opportunity to correct each other. That is the great advantage generated by world literature that will become increasingly apparent (Krobb 7).

Goethe thought world literature to be “any literary exchange” that is based on communication from different languages, and in turn, helps to create an entirely new and diverse literary world (Krobb 8).

*What Is World Literature?*, written by David Damrosch, says that in order for a piece of literature to be considered “world literature,” it must be reduced into a variety of different areas by “era, region, and cultural prestige” (Damrosch 9). By obtaining literature from different areas,

they can provide a new outlook on the world from both past and present. These types of “world literature” can possibly even provide “a positive model for the future development of its own tradition; as a negative case of a primitive...; or...as an image of radical otherness against which the home tradition can be more clearly defined” (Damrosch 14). Damrosch also says that over the years, the literary canon has been mostly focused on the European works, especially by males. Until most recently, women hardly had any published works. Because of this, it is difficult to say how long ago world literature actually came about; but in most recent years, it has been able to be dated back to more than four thousand years ago and from more regions across the world that were never thought to before (Damrosch 10).

Damrosch also says that world literature is seen “in one or more three ways:” as a “classic,” a “masterpiece,” or “windows” (Damrosch 9). Classics typically are written by the Romans and Greeks and had “imperial values” worked into them. Masterpieces are considered to be more modern in the world of literature, so there is no concrete region from where they were created. Lastly, specifically when Serbian poetry was being talked about by Goethe to Johann Peter Eckermann, Goethe’s keenness towards this type of poetry from Southeast Europe provides a “window into foreign worlds” (Damrosch 9).

By the standards of Goethe’s description of “world literature,” Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is one example. Since Goethe only requires world literature to be literature exchanged from different areas and countries around the world, *The Canterbury Tales* fits right in because Chaucer was from London, which is where the work was written (Helterman). It has been brought over to countless countries and translated into numerous languages. Chaucer originally wrote the work in Middle English, and today, there are even books that have the modern English translation side by side with the Middle English version.

According to David Damrosch's description of world literature, *The Canterbury Tales* would not correctly fit into most of the characteristics. Damrosch's definition of a "classic" is classified mostly with Romans and Greeks, and Chaucer was neither. *The Canterbury Tales* is not considered to be a "masterpiece," either. To Damrosch, masterpieces are modern or contemporary works that were written in the nineteenth century, the earliest. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* was written in the fourteenth century (Helterman). The only criterion of Damrosch's definition that fits this work is being a "window" into a foreign world. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer references the culture and lifestyle of English people. Each tale within *The Canterbury Tales* told by the pilgrims always has information about their daily lives in the fourteenth century. For example, the title of every tale is the occupation of the pilgrim, automatically giving some background to his or her life. There is the Miller, who is a bread maker for his living. He also tends to steal some grains from his clients, which was typical for a miller during this era. There also is the Wife of Bath, who is a seamstress; the Prioress is a nun, the Man of Law is a lawyer, and the Merchant trades furs and other materials. Through the characters of the *Canterbury Tales*, this work also fits into another area of criterion for Damrosch's definition. He says that world literature must be broken down into a variety of worlds, like era, region, and cultural prestige. The characters in this literary work convey all different areas of cultural prestige. For example, the Man of Law and the Prioress are clearly up higher in the hierarchy than the Merchant or the Wife of Bath are.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's definition of world literature is very different and not as excessive as David Damrosch's. Goethe coined the term "world literature," which was meant for literature that has been traded and made available for all different countries and areas all over the world. Damrosch took that definition and elaborated, making world literature have three

categories that included classics, masterpieces, and windows. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* fits in to Goethe's definition of world literature, but not in all aspects of Damrosch's. Chaucer's work only fits into the "windows" category of Damrosch's definition because of all of the cultural aspects of the pilgrims and how their job occupations allow the reader to look into foreign worlds. However, Chaucer's work also does transmit the cultural prestige and hierarchy of the townspeople in fourteenth century London, making *The Canterbury Tales* an example of world literature.

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