



# **Prescribed literature in translation: Additional guidance**

**Critical summaries of selected works**

## Purpose of this document

This publication is intended to provide teachers with additional guidance in teaching the Diploma Programme language A courses for first teaching from September 2011. It should be read in conjunction with the *Prescribed literature in translation* (PLT) list (2011), and the language A guides. The purpose of this teacher support material is to help teachers choose works in translation for study in the language A courses.

The IB has ensured that the PLT list offers not only works which are classics in the global sense, but also works which are classics within the literary tradition of their original language of publication. These may not yet have received international recognition. In the case of such works, information in the IB's working languages may not be readily available. Thus, when planning a language A course of study, teachers may experience difficulty in deciding whether such a work will fit in with the other works on their planned course, or provide suitable material for their student group. This document aims to provide teachers with information about selected works from the PLT in order to help them make more informed choices as they construct their language A courses. It is hoped that this document will empower teachers to choose from a wider range of works on the PLT, and consequently improve student access to a diverse range of literature.

The intended audience for this document is teachers. However, the information is directly relevant to students; teachers are therefore encouraged to share this document with them, as appropriate.

## Description of the content

This publication includes:

- basic information identifying each PLT work referred to
- a short plot or content outline of the work in question
- a synopsis of the main literary features of the work (techniques, motifs and critical interpretations)
- links to resources which may be useful. NB: Links were working at the time of publication, if you notice a broken link, please inform IB Answers ([ibid@ibo.org](mailto:ibid@ibo.org)).

Please note the works discussed here and listed in the PLT, may vary in title, content and presentation from translation to translation. If you are in any doubt about a work's suitability for study, please contact IB Answers for advice.

## Work

**Author:** Orhan Pamuk

**Original publication date/period:** 2003

**Original language:** Turkish

**Number of pages (approx):** 400

**Title in English:** *Istanbul: Memories and the City*

## Genre

*Istanbul: Memories and the City* includes an extensive collection of text types: autobiography; art criticism, both literary and visual; essays and reflections on personal and public life; photographs and etchings. The collection of 37 “chapters” lends itself to the study of different types of text and prose other than fiction.

## Time and place

The temporal setting of the collection includes the lifespan of Pamuk and his family, with glances and reflections back to the time of the Ottoman Empire through reflections on architecture, art and cultural history. The place is Istanbul, Turkey’s largest city.

## Subject matter

The range of materials is rich and varied. Pamuk explores the issues of a boy’s emerging identity in a city caught up in the tension between eastern and western influences against the backdrop of the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The intimate explorations of neighbourhoods in this city on the Bosphorus are treated in detail in pieces typical of a travel narrative.

A large portion of the text considers art and books, relating to Pamuk’s own aspirations to be a painter, his studies in architecture, and the emergence of his role as a writer. However, other writers and artists are subjects as well. Pamuk discusses the “Four Lovely Melancholic Writers” (namely Yahya Kemal, Abdulkhak Sinasi Hisar, Ahmed Hamdi Tanpinar and Resat Ekrem Kocu), explores Kocu’s *Istanbul Encyclopedia*, and meditates on writers who were known for their orientalist fascination with the city such as Flaubert, Nerval, and Gautier.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The essay “Huzun” provides a link to the attitude and emotional atmosphere of much of this collection, connecting the materials to the book’s epigraph: ‘The beauty of a landscape resides in its melancholy’ (Ahmet Rasim). In this essay, Pamuk offers both an engrossing etymological history and reading of the word “huzun” itself as well as a contemplation of this emotional condition, associating it with a sense of fallen empire and a dialectical relationship with western modernism.

*Istanbul* is rich in detail of all kinds—historical and geographical; autobiographical, both familial and emotional; descriptions of artistic and literary creations. Lists provide minute descriptions—one covering close to five pages of the essay “Huzun”—and the incorporation of glossed Turkish terms brings readers closer to the culture. Sentences are tight and readable and paragraphs are often short and engaging, making the text attractive to contemporary (and young) readers. Photographs and engravings are delivered in black and white and invite close scrutiny and comparison with the written text.

## Resources

- [www.readinggroupcenter.com](http://www.readinggroupcenter.com) provides interesting discussion questions
- <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5587/the-art-of-fiction-no-187-orhan-pamuk>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy62YqDeE0c>, live interview
- <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/pamuko/istanbul.htm>

# Work

**Author:** Adonis (Ali Ahmed Said Esber)

**Original language:** Arabic

**Title in English:** Anthology of works as chosen by the school

**Original publication date/period:** C20

**Number of pages (approx):** 432

## Genre

Poetry collection.

## Time and place

Adonis is the pen name of Ali Ahmed Said Esber, born in a Syrian village overlooking the Mediterranean in 1930. Adonis was imprisoned for his political activities and in 1956 he left Syria to live in Lebanon. Adonis has been awarded a number of prizes, the latest of which is the Goethe Prize awarded in 2011. Adonis currently lives in Paris.

## Subject matter

*Adonis: Selected Poems* covers Adonis's work over the whole period that he has been writing, and provides excerpts from Adonis's most renowned poems, starting with "First Poems" (1957) and ending with "Printer of the Planets' Books" (2008), works that highlight the changes in the poet's style. Adonis's poetry could be described as pre-Islamic, pan-Arabic (Mediterranean) and postmodern in nature. His themes are universal and his works are mostly reflective.

His materials address the following issues among others: crises in the Arab world; the 1967 Arab–Israeli war; the Israeli invasion of Lebanon; identity; modern Arabic poetry; the imaginary line between the East and the West; cosmic citizenship. Adonis tries to voice concerns about the situation in the Arab literary world, especially the deterioration of the fame of Arabic poetry.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Adonis is a modernist who pioneered the prose poem in Arabic. His work has been compared to a combination of that of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. He has written both classical, rhythmic Arabic poetry, like the poetry of place seen in "Prophesy, O Blind One", one of his latest works, and in other innovative forms. Adonis avoids closures in his poems, allowing the clear and the vague to mesh. His imagery, like his form and closure, is surrealist in approach, yet combined with real events.

The selection focuses on the poems in which Adonis attempted to rejuvenate Arabic poetry through writing both short and epic poems using the fragment (qi'ta) as the base unit for rhythm, colour and sense. It is through the use of the fragment to create his lyrical sequences—be they short or long—that Adonis manages to manipulate language and express thought. In addition, Adonis often uses slashes to signify important aspects.

## Resources

- <http://www.theworld.org/2011/02/world-books-review-adoniss-selected-poems-a-giant-of-arabic-verse>
- <http://www.praguepost.com/night-and-day/books/7750-adonis:-selected-poems-reviewed.html>
- <http://www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2011-sprin/selections/a-review-of-adonis-selected-poems/>

# Work

**Author:** Rabindranath Tagore

**Original publication date/period:** 1924

**Title in English:** *Red Oleanders*

**Number of pages (approx):** 105

**Original language:** Bengali

## Genre

This is one of the masterpieces of Bengali drama, and one of the most significant symbolic dramas of modern India.

## Time and place

Tagore wrote this text in 1923–4 and translated it into English in 1925–6. At this time India entered a period of technological revolution and industrialization. With the backdrop of a fictional rural mining area in India, it explores the theme of human exploitation and personal freedom.

## Subject matter

The setting has the quality of a work of magic realism. A king rules over a fictitious land full of gold mines with his army and officials. He hides himself behind an iron curtain of his own making, and is dreaded by his people. In this apocalyptic world, people are just referred to by numbers. They have accepted their bleak fate working in the gold mines; they drown their pain in alcohol and are afraid to utter a word of protest against the regime.

Nandini is a young girl who adorns her hair with the flower *raktakarabi* (the red oleander), symbolizing free thinking. She is not afraid of anything or anyone. She bravely walks to the den of the king and asks him questions which the king cannot answer. Thus, Nandini finds the king to be a mere human being just like others and does not fear him. In fact, for her he is a lonesome, sad figure who does not receive any love in life. Nandini's innate effervescence, innocence and rational thinking also start to change him.

A revolution begins against the reign of the king, which Nandini has accidentally initiated. The army and the officials try to suppress the revolution, but the king joins Nandini and destroys the tyrannical system he has created. Finally, Nandini is killed in battle and the land is destroyed.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The subject matter is highly symbolic. It shows a systematic mechanization of humans and the repercussions of extreme greed pitted against free and rational human spirit, and how a brutal system suppresses individuals. Tagore also articulates his ideology against regimented governance and dehumanizing technology.

The drama displays Tagore's stylistic features in its language and form. It highlights the victory of eternal humanity and liberty against dehumanization and tyranny through an array of symbols expressed in allegories, metaphors, and other imagery.

The play deals with the theme of asserting the basic essence of humanity. Hope, love and life in the face of suffering, destruction and loss are represented through Tagore's able use of aphorism and dramatic action. The characters are true to life but in keeping with the symbolic messages of the play; their language is infused with a touch of poetic mysticism.

## Resources

- <http://ezinearticles.com/?Red-Oleanders-by-Tagore:-A-Discussion-in-Symbolism&id=6194391>
- [http://books.google.com/books/about/Studies\\_on\\_Rabindranath\\_Tagore.html?id=hptK6GTo43QC](http://books.google.com/books/about/Studies_on_Rabindranath_Tagore.html?id=hptK6GTo43QC)
- <http://www.parabaas.com/rabindranath/articles/brRedOleanders.html>

## Work

**Author:** Miljenko Jergovic

**Original publication date/period:** C20

**Title in English:** *Sarajevo Marlboro*

**Number of pages (approx):** 195

**Original language:** Bosnian

## Genre

Short stories.

## Time and place

This collection of 29 stories is set in Sarajevo during its assault by the Serbs in 1992. The stories consider the fate of many, whether Bosnians, Croats, Catholics, Orthodox believers or Muslims.

## Subject matter

Life in the Balkans is treated with attention to many aspects of survival under extreme duress. The text is divided into three parts: "Unavoidable Detail of Biography", "A Reconstruction of Events" and "Who will be the Witness". The latter section includes only one story, "The Library", a poignant reflection on the wartime destruction of book collections and an elegy for the transitory nature of libraries and, indeed, of all possessions. The necessarily migratory nature of people who can no longer manage a life under wartime conditions is treated in several stories such as "Journey" and "Blind Man". At times, Jergovic's stories offer broader reflections on individual experiences, and at other times venture into rhetorical allegory matching the fate of individuals with the fate of the city as in "The Photograph" or "The Bell".

These are war stories and anti-war stories in which people are perplexed both about their identity and which way to turn. In "The Communist" the central figure has "lost the plot" of his belief system and his life; in "Muslim Doll" and "The Saxophonist" alliances of ethnicity and religious affiliation take surprising turns. Dark humour is offered in such stories as "The Beetle"; overt violence, whether from attacking forces or within the community appear in others such as "Theft".

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The stories are postmodernist, combining humour, pathos, fatalism and the absurd in the treatment of lives of ordinary people learning to cope with a state of siege in a destabilized context.

Religious affiliation, political alliance, family conflict and desperate romantic affairs are all part of the material Jergovic explores. Attitudes range from the playful to quiet resignation. People move beyond limitations or give in to them; no one course of action is chosen by everyone in the face of the disruption they undergo.

In these stories, characters emerge from the page as highly defined in a very short space. The connecting voice of the first person narrator is variably detached, sardonic, sympathetic, and, at times, poignant and reflective. Dialogue is sparse and piercing; diction is edgy and often colloquial. The titles of the three parts and the inclusions of particular stories within those parts offer interesting material for discussion, as do the titles of individual stories.

## Resources

- <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/360/2011-11-12/3584130>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yruAFkvoNWs>

# Work

**Author:** Mercé Rodoreda

**Original publication date/period:** 1962

**Title in English:** *Time of the Doves*

**Number of pages (approx):**208

**Original language:** Catalan

## Genre

*The Time of the Doves* is not a heroic war novel, but a deeply carved, detailed story of the human condition that unfolds the likely feelings and sufferings of anyone confronted by a war. It fits within the psychological fiction subcategory of the realistic fiction genre.

## Time and place

The book opens with Natalia (Colometa, meaning “dove”, as she is nicknamed by her husband) on her way to a dance. The whole story is set around the “plaça del diamant” in Barcelona before, during and after the Spanish civil war.

## Subject matter

Rodoreda depicts vividly the sorrowful story of an ordinary shop assistant Natalia (Colometa) after marrying her controlling husband Quimet, and also how deeply the Spanish civil war intrudes on and destroys the lives of almost everybody, especially the tragic and innocent victims: women like Natalia and children. After her marriage Natalia’s naive life seems to change for the better but with Quimet’s pet doves coming literally into her space, her world starts slowly and unstopably to collapse, even more so after her children are born and Quimet takes sides with the Republican combatants in the civil war. Natalia’s naivety deprives her of self-analysis but gives her the necessary courage and inner strength to survive devastating events and, even with profound suffering, to find a way out for herself and her children.

Natalia seldom refers directly to the war. As the war episodes rage on, she struggles against Quimet’s doves and his more prolonged absences from home, which means an immediate lack of food. She is not political; she wants to live her life away from revolutionaries and move on to an ordinary but better everyday life with her family. Despite all her losses, she manages to adapt, survive and find a certain happiness in life when, having become a widow after losing Quimet, she marries Antoni, another war victim who offers a shelter to her and her children.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Natalia exhibits a balance of submission and acceptance at the beginning of the novel with a resilient maturity and self-confidence at the end.

The force of Natalia (whose metamorphosis into Colometa and then back into a reborn Natalia is stunningly described) is the force of a real fighter with an inner strength, which invites deep reflection.

Descriptions of Natalia and Quimet’s lives, their inner thoughts, the backdrop of the civil war and actions around them, are detailed and vivid. The novel exhibits a form of stream-of-consciousness technique in which Natalia’s words give real life to this character.

## Resources

- <http://kinnareads.wordpress.com/2010/04/20/the-time-of-the-doves-merce-rodoreda/>
- <http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero39/diamante.html>
- <http://sleepwalk.wordpress.com/2010/03/31/the-time-of-the-doves/>

# Work

**Author:** Anyi Wang

**Original publication date/period:** 1989

**Title in English:** *Baotown*

**Number of pages (approx):** 143

**Original language:** Chinese

## Genre

This novel is a traditional Chinese tale with modern concerns, influenced by modernism in its theme of social isolation. The narrative offers irony and a kind of black humour in order to satirize the confused moral values of modern Chinese society.

## Time and place

The story takes place in a small Chinese village during the 1970s, when the Cultural Revolution has just ended but the Opening and Reform was yet to change the poor condition of the villagers. They were isolated from and then surprised by the mainstream politics that had swept all over the country for decades but arrived late at the remote village.

## Subject matter

The whole village in the novel is one extended family, a very common pattern of community in rural China. Some families had too many children, living in very poor conditions. The hero of the story is born as the seventh child in such a family. His father is not even interested in looking at him at his birth and names him Dregs. Hardly able to feed such a big family, and with no knowledge of family planning, the father accepts his situation. At the same time, a cousin of the newborn dies of disease. He was the only grandson of an old man who had lost his son already. The old man is deeply saddened because his family line would stop at his own death and he had no children to look after him when he got older. But Dregs becomes very fond of the old man and takes care of him as if he were his own grandfather. When the village is flooded, he helps the old man get out instead of running for his own life, and both are tragically drowned. When the government hears this story, it awards the boy the title of Young Hero. His tomb is rebuilt with a monument and a memorial house, and children as well as adults are required to learn from his high moral standards and spirit of sacrifice. The family is given a new house and the eldest son is given a job. Even the villagers who initially reported Dregs' deeds and those who found his body are likewise rewarded by the government for their adherence to traditional values.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Along with the presentation of the main characters and plot, the novel describes a variety of villagers in detail. A single mother with four children not allowed to remarry; a child bride who refuses to marry the elder brother but falls in love with a younger brother; a man who prevents his mentally ill wife from committing suicide several times: all these entangled problems and conflicts are eventually settled as a result of the flood and Dregs' sacrifice.

The author creates an atmosphere of suffocation in her description of the villagers' lives through short snatches of conversation, local accents and customs, folk songs and the alternation of long or very short chapters. She makes the reader feel that the villagers are dull and reticent, as if they had inherited a very heavy burden of tradition from Chinese history. Symbolically, the village is situated in a low area which has been being threatened since its early history by floods from the overlooking mountain.

## Resources

- <http://wandermonkey.blogspot.com/2010/04/review-baotown-by-wang-anyi.html>
- [http://articles.latimes.com/1990-01-28/books/bk-1386\\_1\\_splash-mountain-dignity-and-love-life-s-little-pleasures](http://articles.latimes.com/1990-01-28/books/bk-1386_1_splash-mountain-dignity-and-love-life-s-little-pleasures)

## Work

**Author:** Hualing Nieh

**Original publication date/period:** 1981

**Title in English:** *Mulberry and Peach: Two Women of China:*

**Number of pages (approx):** 224

**Original language:** Chinese

## Genre

This novel is written in letters and diaries, presenting psychological depression under political and social pressures. It is a story of fugitives and their mental suffering.

## Time and place

The story takes place in four places at four different times. The first takes place in 1945 when Japanese planes are bombarding the Qutang Gorge along the Yangtze River. The second occurs in 1948–9 when Beijing is besieged by the People's Liberation Army. The third happens in 1957–9 when the heroine's family is hiding in an attic in Taiwan and being hunted as criminals. The fourth takes place in 1969–70 in the USA when the heroine is applying for permanent residence and immigration officers have their suspicions.

## Subject matter

The two women in the title are actually the same person. She is first Mulberry, a teenage girl when Japan invaded China. She spends her whole life struggling to escape from disasters caused by the turbulence in Chinese society during such notable periods in history. In 1945, she is travelling with friends and other refugees along the Yangtze River to the south because the north of China is occupied by the Japanese. But when they reach Qutang Gorge, the ship is stranded. While they are unable to move, Japanese planes arrive and drop bombs. Arguments break out among the passengers in the midst of this tense situation.

In 1949, she is with her fiancé's family in Beijing when the city is besieged. Complex turmoil in family relations leads to the young couple running away to the south to find their freedom. In 1959, the younger generation undergoes a period of corruption in Taiwan. Her husband is alleged to have embezzled public money and the whole family is forced to flee. They hide in an attic and the main character seems on the verge of madness while her daughter is clearly psychologically harmed. In 1969, they finally manage to reach the USA which is supposed to hold the promise of freedom. But they find themselves in distressing conditions where immigration officers suspect them to be communists, criminals and prostitutes.

Mulberry becomes mentally distressed under all the pressures of running away. She eventually fakes her own death and undergoes a metamorphosis into Peach in the last episode.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The structure of the novel is based on letters and excerpts from diaries for the four periods of Mulberry's life, giving the reader two different voices from the same heroine. The final escape is a change of identity.

This is a novel which provides considerable psychological and cultural analysis. The author uses dramatic language to describe the inner life of the heroine. A variety of modalities are used both for characters to communicate their thoughts to other characters and to the readers.

## Resources

- [http://voices.cla.umn.edu/essays/fiction/mulberry\\_and\\_peach.html](http://voices.cla.umn.edu/essays/fiction/mulberry_and_peach.html)

# Work

**Author:** Milan Kundera

**Original publication date/period:** 1973

**Title in English:** *Life is Elsewhere*

**Number of pages (approx):** 432

**Original language:** Czech

## Genre

A novel with the typical characteristics of *Bildungsroman*, it could also be perceived as an autobiographical novel.

## Time and place

*Life is Elsewhere* takes place in Czechoslovakia before and after the second world war.

## Subject matter

*Life is Elsewhere* is Kundera's record of his own period of "lyrical age", youth and naivety in the early 1950s. The reader follows the life of a young poet from his conception until his death. Throughout his entire short life, Jaromil is under the strong influence of his dominant mother who, having failed in her own life, places all her idealistic and naive hopes on her only son. As he grows older Jaromil finds himself lost and unable to deal with an actual life that he finds awkward and unsuitable. He seeks refuge in poetry, where he believes he has found a "real" life in the society of socialist writers accepted by the new regime. Thanks to rather dark circumstances in the 1950s (when the Communist Party took power in Czechoslovakia and installed a totalitarian regime) he eventually manages to infiltrate a group of journalists and becomes an informant (having also denounced and falsely accused his girlfriend). In the end, Jaromil dies of a banal case of influenza, without having really created any remarkable piece of literature or even matured.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The irony that Kundera uses to narrate is a fairly typical signature of his novels. The author presents a rationalist but ironic analysis of this period of life. This work was originally entitled *The Lyrical Age* meaning the period of puberty and adolescence. It is seen as a complicated phase when people learn how to understand reality and develop perspective. The hero, however, has not managed to distinguish between dreams and real life, and has become a hopeless but dangerous creature in the hands of history. Kundera analyses the problems of an individual facing essential changes in society and history itself. In Kundera's novels, individuals are too weak to resist the pressures of machinery present in the political system, the values of the society and the historical changes.

Kundera uses multiple narrators to tell his story. This gives us a chance to see the main hero and other features of the novel from various perspectives. Kundera raises larger questions by using interrogative questions such as: What is the real truth? Which narrator is "right" about Jaromil? What was reality like in the 1950s? These open questions indicate essential concerns of Kundera and tend to break up the narrative, giving the text the quality of an essay at times, especially with the placement of these questions in brackets.

The story is not told chronologically but as disjunctive stories, with Jaromil as a main hero or as a background character in other characters' stories.

## Resources

- Le Grand, Eva. 1999. *Kundera, or, the Memory of Desire*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- <http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Kundera.htm>

# Work

**Author:** Václav Havel

**Original publication date/period:** 1991

**Title in English:** *Selected Plays: 1963–1983*

**Number of pages (approx):** 224

**Original language:** Czech

## Genre

Seven plays of absurd drama, which are chiefly onstage conversations with limited action: “The Garden Party”, “The Memorandum”, “The Increased Difficulty of Concentration”, “Audience”, “Unveiling”, “Protest” and “Mistake”. The four last plays are one act only.

## Time and place

All plays in this volume take place in post-war communist Czechoslovakia, although the author does not provide us with any evidence of historical period or setting.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Havel’s plays present a world in which the human being has lost its human identity, individuality and history. Interpersonal relations are corrupted and ruled by clichés, administrative language and bureaucracy (for example, “Memorandum”, where a new artificial language of administration is being developed in order to eliminate any incomprehension among people in future).

Havel’s characters, functioning within the omnipresent but anonymous system, are typified by a lack of morality and personal responsibility. They are often confronted with a choice to make, but they fail to solve their problems using logic or common sense because there is no logic in the world around them. There is often a lack of action on stage, as all possible actions are seen to be futile. This is heightened in those plays where the main character, Ferdinand Vaněk (who is Havel’s alter ego), appears as a representative of morality doomed to failure.

Communication is often mechanical and repetitive. Very complicated phrases or constant repetition of the same phrase in various contexts or by different characters creates an absence of meaning. The dialogues onstage at first seem to create a sense of logic and meaningful development, but then degenerate into isolated monologues followed by no appropriate reaction. There is no chance for the characters to find compromise or to communicate in order to develop the plot, given that the language used is stereotypical and meaningless, just like the world they live in.

Given that many of Havel’s plays are one act only, the audience is provided with only minimal clarity about the setting or the background of the characters. This technique tends to emphasize action primarily, but as there is no chance for the plot or action to be developed, the plays end as they begin. This cyclic composition underlines the meaningless situations the plays present.

Havel presents a tragicomic world of clichés and meaningless conversations based on his perfect observation of the bureaucratic language used in totalitarian Czechoslovakia between the 1950s and 1980s. Therefore the plays can be understood as a reflection of totalitarian Czechoslovakia, especially the overall loss of sense of spiritual and moral values and the impact of the official corrupted language of the Communist Party which is surrounding, penetrating and ruining the everyday life of common people.

## Resources

- <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/06/theater/06memorandum.html>
- <http://www.amazon.com/Critical-Essays-Vaclav-Havel-Literature/dp/078388463X>

# Work

**Author:** Steen Steensen Blicher

**Original publication date/period:** 1824

**Title in English:** *The Diary of a Parish Clerk*

**Number of pages (approx):** 244

**Original language:** Danish

## Genre

It might be considered a long short story, or a short novel. It is fiction, but it is represented as a non-fictional diary full of psychological realism. There are 68 entries for intermittent days from 1 January 1708 to 12 May 1753.

## Time and place

The action takes place between 1708 and 1753 in Jutland, Sweden and Siberia.

## Subject matter

The narrator is Morten Winge who is, at the beginning, a young boy. At the end he is an old man. He falls in love with the daughter of a nobleman, Sophie. After his father's death Morten becomes the *valet de chambre* of the lord. One night Sophie comes to his bed and kisses him. He is ecstatic, but soon he discovers that she really wanted to visit the gamekeeper, Jens. Her parents want her to marry a nobleman, Gyldenløve, from the Danish court; however, Sophie and the gamekeeper Jens run away together.

Morten's love is tragic. Jens and Sophie run away in 1713, and Morten lives as a soldier in Sweden and in Siberia. He returns to Denmark in 1743 and settles on the island of Falster. In 1744 he meets Sophie and Jens again. They are now beggars and alcoholics, and he understands that Sophie has worked as a prostitute. At the end Morten lives in his father's house and gets the job as a parish clerk. He now realises that man is a frail creature.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Morten is the narrator, and his language is influenced by his current feelings and situation. In the beginning he is studying Latin, and includes many Latin quotations. At the manor he teaches himself French and he uses many French words. Throughout the text there are numerous quotations from the Bible.

The character of Sophie is inspired by Marie Grubbe, a lady of noble birth, 1643–1718, who left her husband to live with a simple farmhand.

## Resources

- <http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ubYuSPK0VVcC&pg=PA81&lpg=PA81&dq=The+Diary+of+a+Parish+Clerk&source=bl&ots=ZK2k-7ayXR&sig=Ik2JtCpPUI3MTQOF4IgrqX2V088&hl=en&sa=X&ei=sU7T5aVOcrH8gPk143XBA&ved=0CFcQ6AEwBTgK#v=onepage&q=The%20Diary%20of%20a%20Parish%20Clerk&f=false>

# Work

**Author:** Willem Elsschot

**Original publication date/period:** 1933

**Title in English:** *Cheese*

**Number of pages (approx):** 134

**Original language:** Dutch

## Genre

This novella is a tragicomedy and can be considered part of the modernist literary movement that is characterized by much thinking and little action. Thoughts, emotions, insights take the place of action and adventure, and the inner life of the protagonist plays an important role.

## Time and place

*Cheese* is set in the 1930s in Antwerp, Belgium and covers several months in the life of Frans Laarmans, a humble shipping clerk who is suddenly elevated to the position of “official representative” of a Dutch cheese company for Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

## Subject matter

Frans Laarmans, frustrated in his job as clerk at the General Marine and Shipbuilding Company in Antwerp, is tempted by his brother’s friend Van Schoonbeke to become a wholesaler of Dutch full-fat Edam cheese. He mainly agrees in an attempt to enhance his income and social standing. He loses himself in the logistical details of setting up an office rather than focusing on selling his 10,000 wheels of cheese as he is committed to in the contract. He does, however, gain more respect with the circle of acquaintances at Van Schoonbeke’s, who gladly celebrate success and promotions with him. In spite of hiring a sales force of 30 people and unsolicited sales attempts by his children, only a few cheeses are sold. Moreover, he realizes that he cannot bring himself to make a single direct sales pitch. Knowing his supervisor is on the way to meet him to settle accounts, he decides to abandon the cheese enterprise and return to the shipyard. His wife kindly does not serve any cheese for quite a long time. He actually never liked the stuff in the first place.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The tragedy of the failure of life is the main theme of this novella. The contrast between the hopes and dreams of this clerk stuck in a drab job and the reality of his abilities are the central material of the narrative. *Cheese* is a comic portrayal of business and greed in particular, and life generally. There is a prevailing irony throughout the story, given that the main character decides to sell cheese, a product that he hates and that makes him gag. It is to be noted how his family supports him unwaveringly: his wife has better business sense than he does and provides him with good advice. The children even try to sell some of the cheese among their friends at school.

The book consists of 24 numbered chapters and starts with a translator’s preface, a dedication to Jan Greshoff, a cast of the characters and a wry enumeration of the elements: “Cheese. Cheese dream. Cheese movie. Cheese business. Cheese day. Cheese campaign. Cheese world. ...”

The author’s original preface concludes the English version. In it, Elsschot explains his views of the importance of style: “In nature tragedy resides in the event itself. In art it resides more in the style than in what happens.” An ongoing thread of irony is what carries this tragicomedy.

## Resources

- <http://www.nlpvf.nl/book/book2.php?Book=106>
- <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/flemish/elssch1.htm>

# Work

**Author:** Louis Couperus

**Original publication date/period:** 1889

**Title in English:** *Eline Vere*

**Number of pages (approx):** 523

**Original language:** Dutch

## Genre

The novel is influenced by the naturalistic style which grew in importance from the middle of the 19th century. *Eline Vere* is a psychological novel focused on the turbulent lives of various characters. Detailed descriptions of conversations reflecting the inner turmoil of interpersonal conflicts make up a large part of the novel.

## Time and place

It is set mostly in The Hague (the Netherlands) in the late 19th century. The events describe about four years in the life of aristocratic socialite Eline Vere.

## Subject matter

The protagonist Eline Vere is a talented yet self-absorbed and melancholy young woman who lives with her sister's family in The Hague. The practical sister Betsy resembles their late mother, while Eline takes after their father, who died without having realized his artistic ambitions. The sisters are part of the well-to-do aristocratic circles in the city of The Hague, and keep boredom at bay by going to parties. Eline's beauty attracts several men while her aloofness raises suspicion among many of her women friends. With not much else to do but socialize, Eline spends a considerable amount of her time and energy contemplating life and love, imagined or real. At one point she gets engaged only to break off the engagement several months later. It seems to be impossible for Eline to find love, yet only love makes life worth living. From the very beginning of the book, Eline questions why she should live if she cannot find happiness, but her alienation and resulting depression seem unrecognized by others in her social environment. Her romantic expectations turn out to be impossible to fulfill. Eline becomes gradually more convinced that she cannot avoid her destiny and is doomed. One night, in a desperate attempt to get some sleep she takes a lethal dose of morphine.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Through the development of Eline's character, and her experiences of inner loneliness and alienation, the novel explores a number of key thematic concerns. These include: the nature of loneliness; the workings of destiny through social environment and heredity; the effects of depression, mental illness and anorexia; and the elusive qualities of love.

Music is a motif in the novel, playing an important role in Eline's life as she has a wonderful voice and loves to sing. Her gradual decline is reflected in her waning interest in music and lessened ability to sing and play the piano.

*Tableaux vivants* are another motif, reflecting the attention this society pays to exterior elements rather than the inner composition of people.

## Resources

- <http://blogcritics.org/books/article/book-review-eline-vere-by-louis/page-2/>
- <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703720504575378120207076244.html>
- <http://www.archipelagobooks.org/bk.php?id=50>
- <http://lit.newcity.com/2011/01/10/fiction-review-eline-vere-by-louis-couperus/>

# Work

**Author:** Cees Nooteboom

**Original publication date/period:** 1980

**Title in English:** *Rituals*

**Number of pages (approx):** 156

**Original language:** Dutch

## Genre

*Rituals* is a philosophical novel with strong existentialist traits. Living in an absurd and senseless world, man creates his own values and is free. Major themes in existentialist literature are fear, loneliness and chaos, being ultimately responsible to oneself.

## Time and place

This novel is set in Holland and is divided into three parts: the "Intermezzo" which takes place in 1963; "Arnold Taads" which is a flashback to 1953; and "Philip Taads" in which the authorial narrator describes a five-year period between 1973 and 1978.

## Subject matter

This generational novel centres, at times tragically, at times tragicomically, around three decades in the life of Inni Wintrop, womanizer and dealer in anything with money-making potential. We meet him at three turning points of his life: in 1963 when his marriage fails and Inni attempts suicide; in 1953 when a young Inni is introduced to Arnold Taads, a misanthropist in search of absolute loneliness and predicts with uncanny accuracy his own death in the Swiss Alps; from 1973 to 1978 when a middle-aged Inni meets Arnold Taads' son Philip, who never had contact with his father. Philip is a Zen practitioner who collects teacups. An art dealer finds a special cup he has been searching for and Philip buys it. He invites the dealer and Inni for a tea ceremony. Soon thereafter he kills himself.

The rituals evoked in the title are those people create to structure their lives and make it tolerable. Inni first embraces the rituals of Catholic mass until they become tainted for him by the priest having a stroke. Inni also transforms sex into a ritual which in essence is a quest to repeat an encounter he has in 1953. Arnold Taads lives a robotic life filled with precisely timed rituals. His son Philip Taads has embraced Japanese culture and rituals. The novel demonstrates the power of rituals to become obsessive to the point that they can lead to death.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Time is used as a stylistic feature in that the chronologically structured events are not presented in chronological order. The first part is called "Intermezzo", an interlude, although it serves as an introduction. This implies that it is not time that matters and neither do events as such: internal debates are the main concern.

This novel is more a collection of ideas than events. Seemingly random assertions are of equal or greater importance than the plot.

## Resources

- <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/nootec/rituals.htm#ours>
- <http://windsweptfiction.wordpress.com/2009/09/17/rituals-cees-nooteboom/>

## Work

**Author:** Anna Enquist

**Original publication date/period:** 1994

**Title in English:** *The Masterpiece*

**Number of pages (approx):** 278

**Original language:** Dutch

## Genre

This novel fits within the psychological fiction subcategory of the realistic fiction genre.

## Time and place

*The Masterpiece* is set in a nameless town in Holland in what appears to be the 1960s and 1970s.

## Subject matter

In a constantly changing perspective the author presents the family, including Johan's vulnerable yet resilient ex-wife Ellen, his evil mother Alma, and his traumatized and jealous brother Oscar. A special role is reserved for Ellen's best friend Lisa, a psychiatrist, who follows the explosive family drama closely while remaining aloof.

The novel describes the three days leading up to the opening of Steenkamer's art exhibition, the highlight of his career, where he will present his masterpiece. He inherited his talent from his father, who left his wife when their sons were young. Johan has always been his mother's favourite, while Oscar, who takes care of her, receives only abuse. Oscar is an art historian at the national museum and writes art reviews for a local paper. The rivalry between the brothers is made public by Oscar's critical review of his brother's work published a few days before the exhibition.

Johan and his wife Ellen are separated, the grief caused by the loss of their youngest daughter having driven a chasm between them.

The climax of the work is Oscar's revelation of a painting that resembles Johan's masterpiece at the exhibition. Johan has recreated one of his father's paintings that he saw once as a very small boy. After this dramatic event, the family ties break down.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Family dynamics lie at the heart of this novel. Abandonment and loss have impregnated all of the protagonists deeply and marked their lives forever.

An important fish leitmotiv appears throughout the novel.

## Resources

- <http://www.nlpvf.nl/book/book2.php?Book=644>
- <http://www.tobypress.com/books/masterpiece.htm>

# Work

**Author:** Gabriel Bá and Fábio Moon

**Original publication date/period:** 2006

**Title in English:** *De: Tales*

**Number of pages (approx):** 112

**Original language:** English

## Genre

The graphic novel is best categorized as fiction, although it has strong elements of personal narrative and biography in its stories.

## Time and place

The subtitle of this graphic novel is “Stories from Urban Brazil” and while the exact location of the various stories is never named, all of them take place in contemporary urban environments among members of the artistic (or “bohemian”) social class of the unnamed city, probably Sao Paulo, Brazil.

## Subject matter

The text is actually made up of 11 stories and a prologue connected by the recurring characters of Fabio and Gabriel (also the names of the authors). These characters are usually unnamed, though the prologue of the work (“El Camino”) establishes that the stories are based on the lives—or at least the imaginations—of the two authors. Most of the stories revolve around everyday activities of young, artistic men and women in contemporary Brazil: looking for work, going to bars, interacting with friends, and searching for love and emotional connections in a world this difficult.

The characters in all of these stories are obviously searching for something—love, companionship, or just a sense of meaning in the world. They are young but not yet jaded or disaffected—they clearly long for a sense of belonging or unity in a society that seems designed to keep its members alone or in a state of constant yearning. Most of all, there is a sense that the characters strive for a sense of authenticity and autonomy in the world; a feeling that choices not only exist but also matter, where self-determination is still a valid concept and even young people can have a say in their futures.

These stories are about choices. The characters are often faced with difficult decisions. Two stories examine the same dilemma from two perspectives, with both outcomes leaving a sense of doubt and non-closure in the reader’s mind. The results of choices are not always revealed, but the ambiguity lends poignancy that might otherwise be absent. These stories also address issues of class and gender. They are told from a decidedly male perspective, and it is obvious that these characters move in a world that is neither completely hemmed in by financial issues nor free to explore all of the possible avenues for success and self-fulfillment offered to those with money and social status.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The most interesting area of exploration will be the authors’ use of devices and techniques that are unavailable to writers working solely with text. Several panels are text-free and readers can consider the use of perspective, detail, and transitions in those wordless parts of the narrative. Some stories also have an element of magic realism, in which doppelgangers and dead characters interact with the “real” world with little comment. Readers will also be compelled to link the stories together, though they can seem to be rather disparate in narrative content.

## Resources

- <http://www.darkhorse.com/Books/13-414/De-Tales-TPB>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Guo0CnnUFA>

# Work

**Author:** Ama Ata Aidoo

**Original publication date/period:** 1990

**Title in English:** *Dilemma of a Ghost*

**Number of pages (approx):** 124

**Original language:** English

## Genre

The play fits the category of English-speaking African literature. The words, though not always the meanings, are English. *Dilemma of a Ghost* lends itself particularly well to analyses from postcolonial, pan-Africanist and feminist perspectives. The communicative idiom relies heavily on the oral resources of traditional Fante folklore including proverb, myth, symbol and mime.

## Time and place

This play belongs to the first generation of contemporary African literary writing. The play is set in the Central Region of Ghana, Aidoo's home region. The play treats the aspirations and frustrations of a society burdened by the transition between the "traditional" and the "modern".

## Subject matter

Ato Yawson returns home to his community after studying in the USA, bringing his African–American wife Eulalie Rush. His progressive yet traditional family's expectations are dashed as they had started negotiations for his marriage to an uneducated local girl. They are stunned to learn Eulalie is the direct descendant of slaves, and alienated from her by conflicting cultural values which frustrate their expectations of Ato to provide much needed financial and other support in return for their sacrifices. In a matrilineal world that places a high premium on child bearing, Eulalie's inability to conceive is condemned, and believed to result from her "excessive" drinking and smoking.

The conflicting impulses of western individualism and Fante communalism fuel and are in turn nourished by a communications gap that places stresses on the marriage. Still, the play ends on a note of optimism as Esi Kom, Ato's mother, begins to understand that her son has served neither his family nor his wife well and demonstrates understanding of Eulalie. And yet Ato, caught in two worlds like the ghost of the title, remains stranded between the old and the new world.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Topics explored in the play include: relations between the individual and the extended family/community; traditional gender roles and expectations; the importance of children; the status of the western-educated African; the challenges for the African–American returning "home"; attitudes towards slavery and its legacy of "psychological bondage" on either side of the Atlantic. The impact of a colonial past and questions of identity both for the individual and the society are all brought into sharp relief. Features include oral tradition and ritual, proverbs, symbols, irony, the cultural economy, the linguistic and structural efficiency with which the perspectives of the wider society are touched on with ritual and choric characters like the Bird of the Wayside and the first and second women.

## Resources

- [http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Ama\\_Atta\\_Aidoo.aspx#3](http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Ama_Atta_Aidoo.aspx#3)
- [http://www.africaresearch.org/Es\\_1309.htm](http://www.africaresearch.org/Es_1309.htm)
- <http://kirjasto.sci.fi/aidoo.htm>
- Odamtten, V. 1994. *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo*, University Press of Florida.
- Azodo, AU and Wilentz, GA. 1999. *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo*. African World Press

# Work

**Author:** Jack Mapanje

**Original publication date/period:** C20

**Title in English:** *Of Chameleons and Gods: Poems by Jack Mapanje*

**Number of pages (approx):** 89

**Original language:** English

## Genre

Free verse poetry, politically subversive writing, African oral tradition, “praise” verse.

## Time and place

Set between 1970 and 1980 in Malawi (southeast Africa), during a period of political repression. The book was withdrawn in Malawi and the author imprisoned without charge or trial for four years.

## Subject matter

Topics include: political justice; critique of government; satire; role of the artist in society; and post-independence Africa. The volume is divided into four sections: “Of Chameleons and Gods”, “Sketches from London”, “Re-entering Chingwe’s Hole” and “Assembling Another Voice”. Poems deal with the author’s anger and anguish over the state of his country, his emerging identity as a change agent, cross-cultural encounters in London and, during what is referred to as “ten turbulent years”, the increasingly oppressive political climate in Malawi. The poems bear witness to the grief and loss experienced as Malawi transitioned from an idealistic, newly independent nation through almost 30 years of dictatorship by Prime Minister Hastings Banda, who suppressed all opposition.

“Requiem to a Fallen Son” remembers a community blessing at a child’s birth and goes on to celebrate the joy of the community around the newborn, echoing Malawi’s celebration at gaining independence while mourning the loss of hope for liberation. “A Marching Litany to our Martyrs” asks “Do we now troop past the skeletal mothers/Before their sons’ burial mounds weeping/With broken bowls of rotten weevils/And shards of sour brew for their libation?” and repeats question after question, interrogating the project of nationalism. “Song of Chickens”, perhaps the most recognized poem of the collection, speaks truth to power describing false promises of protection and loyalty. Other poems build on themes of drought, fire, famine and rainmaking. The collection was awarded the Rotterdam International Poetry Award in 1988.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The poems feature rhythmic verse; dense imagery and metaphor; allegory; and elements of oral tradition, including classic repetitive motifs of African praise poetry. Many pieces are short and make significant use of white space on the page as part of the composition. Mapanje manages to interweave humour and anger in simple, compelling language. Throughout the collection there are references alluding to “dawn” and “cockere!”, drawing on the Malawi Congress Party’s flag which depicts the sunrise and President Banda’s use of “Kwatcha!” (“Dawn!”) at the start of speeches. “Chameleon” (the traditional animal teller of tales in Malawi) in the title refers to his disguise of personal voice. Mapanje attributes some of the heightened metaphor in his work to the political concealment necessary to protect himself and his family. He uses personification of animals and objects in a mythical fashion that bridges traditional and contemporary worlds.

## Resources

- <http://www.african-writing.com/mapanje.htm>
- <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=5495>
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/desert-island-discs/castaway/30921935>

# Work

**Author:** Bessie Head

**Original publication date/period:** C20

**Title in English:** *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*

**Number of pages (approx):** 109

**Original language:** English

## Genre

Short stories. Vignettes of social realism drawing on fables, stories and personal experience.

## Time and place

Set in southern Africa, in villages in Botswana, before colonization by the British and post-1966 independence, examining the effects on women's lives of the erosion of tradition and the transitions, at multiple levels, between old and new.

## Subject matter

Bessie Head (1937–86) gives voice to experiences of rural women in Botswana navigating cultural transitions to independence, capitalism and consumerism. The women in the stories endure violence, infidelity, and imprisonment, and struggle with issues of gender, power, and tensions between public and private spheres. Head also expresses different models of masculinity, men who are not violent, who protect and privilege the women they love.

In "Heaven is Not Closed", Galethebege, a Christian, falls in love with a widower who rejects the "enslaving love" of the "people who had brought ... Gospel to the land". He chooses to marry "according to the old customs". The story explores if "a compromise of tenderness could be made between two traditions opposed to each other"; Galethebege is astonished that there is no place in heaven for Setswana custom. "The Wind and a Boy" is a tragic story about a boy, his grandmother and the collision of the future with the past. "The Collector of Treasures" tells of the murder of a husband by his wife, who is sentenced to life imprisonment. Dikeledi coldly murders her husband when he refuses to pay a portion of school fees for their son. She is composed and confident in her actions, having observed the respectful, fulfilling marriage of her neighbours and found her own relationship a lie beside it. The story contrasts the two "kinds of men", and grieves the lives of women given over to the "one kind [who] created such misery and chaos that he could be broadly damned as evil". Head articulates the path of women walking away from those men toward each other, as women, and toward "another kind of man ... with the power to create himself anew ... a poem of tenderness". Head illustrates choice, and the limits of choice, and dramatizes the costs of circumscribing anyone's humanity.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The stories are intimate and powerful, exploring a range of universal themes while remaining particular to 1960s and 1970s Botswana. Head drew from personal and real and imagined experiences of the villagers around her, examining exclusion, self-fulfillment, boundaries and justice. She returns again and again to the possibilities for liberation within and from gender roles, realizing the tensions and compromises demanded between rural culture and the gains and setbacks of modernity. Her subversive heroines are complex, gritty, and visionary, creating a new path by walking it.

The stories utilize oral conventions and parable-like structures, relying on a simple, engaging narrative voice and rich description while imparting feminist insight into dilemmas faced by women in a changing culture. Head's experiences as an exile, journalist and informal ethnographer shine, keenly demarcating experiences of the "outsider" for the reader's reflection.

## Resources

- <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Head.html>
- <http://jsse.revues.org/index277.html>

# Work

**Author:** Jaan Kross

**Original publication date/period:** 1978

**Title in English:** *The Czar's Madman*

**Number of pages (approx):** 352

**Original language:** Estonian

## Genre

*The Czar's Madman* is a historical novel, presented as the diary of a minor character in the novel.

## Time and place

The events of the novel take place in the 19th century, with a pre-story dating back to the year 1814 and the finale reaching the year 1859. The setting is Czarist Russia and the main events take place in Võisiku manor, situated in the Estonian part of the Czarist empire. Another important site is the Czarist prison in the St Petersburg area; interestingly, the events in prison are presented to the reader through guesses and short reminiscences.

## Subject matter

Jakob Mättik keeps a diary which focuses mainly on the life of his brother-in-law Timotheus von Bock. Timo, a rich Baltic German nobleman and a close friend of Czar Alexander, marries a simple Estonian peasant girl, giving her and her brother a proper education. Timo sends a letter to the Czar, where he accuses the Czar of being a despot and hindering the development of Russia. The Czar keeps Timo in prison for nine years, until he is deemed harmlessly mad and released. At home Timo dies unexpectedly. Jakob's final diary entry 22 years later includes his decision to send his diary to Timo's and Eeva's son, who had become a devoted follower of the Czarist rule.

This is a highly complex story with deep ethical questions. How should an ethical person relate to the unethical system? What is madness and how can one determine who is sane and who is insane? Can speaking the truth be madness? What is a sacrifice? Estonia was violently annexed by the Soviet Union in 1944 and remained under Soviet occupation until the Singing Revolution brought about independence in 1991. The novel was first published in Estonia in 1978, at the height of the Soviet era. Written by an author who had spent years in Gulag prison camps, the novel can be read as a metaphorical story of ethical dilemmas and the quest for inner truth during any kind of oppressive regime, and perhaps especially one under communist auspices.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The novel is stylistically very interesting: the time of narration is a somewhat ordinary one, without many significant events. The core of the story is presented through the diary of Jakob, who writes about significant past events (which culminate with Timo's encounter with the Czar in the prison) over a longer period as an account of Timo's recollections. Thus Jakob's attempts to make sense of Timo's behaviour— is he mad? is he just too honest?—form a significant part of the story.

## Resources

- Maire, J. 2000. "Estonia and Pain: Jaan Kross' *The Czar's Madman*." *Journal of Baltic Studies*. Vol XXXI, number 3. Pp 253–72.
- <http://themodernnovel.com/estonian/kross/madman.htm>

# Work

**Author:** Mika Waltari

**Original publication date/period:** 1945

**Title in English:** *Sinuhe, The Egyptian*

**Number of pages (approx):** 503

**Original language:** Finnish

## Genre

A historical novel.

## Time and place

Place and time play a great role in this novel: the place is Pharaoh's Egypt and surrounding countries and the time is the 14th century BC. Waltari was anxious to give an informed and fair picture of the Middle East at that time, and a reader with some historical knowledge gets an enjoyable review of Egypt, Syria, Babylon, Amurru, Crete, Hatti and other early countries, religions and cultures.

## Subject matter

The newborn boy Sinuhe is found in a reed boat on the Nile by an elderly couple who have no children. They adopt him and he grows up in Pharaoh's capital, Thebes, and is educated to become an Ammon priest and a doctor of surgery and medicine. Coincidence and a hidden logic make him meet the most influential people of his time. He travels through all important cities and countries and gets to know kings, warriors and beautiful women everywhere.

Besides curing grateful princes and ordinary people in all countries, Sinuhe acts as a diplomat and a spy, studying cultures, religions and rearmament. The role of women in the novel is centred on love, which he also encounters in several forms.

Behind many dramatic, tragic and comic events the novel contains a general view of mankind. The novel is what Sinuhe writes in his old age as a concluding task. He is disillusioned and pessimistic. He has lost things he valued partly because of his own shortcomings as a human being and partly because of the evil in humans generally.

Most men in the novel are selfish, false and only care for themselves. Warriors and kings pretend friendship but hide their real plans. Sinuhe meets pharaohs, the Ammon clergy, the warrior Horemheb and kings of all surrounding countries. He meets some good women and finds love, but eventually becomes disillusioned. However, this is not a dark book, but an entertaining one. Its pessimism is so well formulated that the reader enjoys its message.

The book was published in 1945, after the terrible events of war in Europe. It is easy to see parallels between characters, events and attitudes in the novel and in Waltari's own time, a few of them direct, like Hatti and Nazi Germany. But more striking is the parallel between the evil madness of the ruling classes in the ancient Middle East and Europe in the 1940s.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The futility of mankind's striving for power and happiness is described in a way that is strikingly true, educational and entertaining at the same time.

The novel is written in a slightly archaic language, well chosen to fit an elderly, pessimistic man who looks back on his life. The many comic events and speeches get their special quality through this language. Reading this long novel is a great pleasure.

## Resources

- <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/mwaltari.htm>

# Work

**Author:** Väinö Linna

**Original publication date/period:** 1954

**Title in English:** *The Unknown Soldier*

**Number of pages (approx):** 310

**Original language:** Finnish

## Genre

Realistic war novel about a Finnish platoon fighting during the “continuation war” against the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1944.

## Subject matter

Trying to reconquer what was lost to the Soviet Union in the winter war of 1939 to 1940, Finland joined Nazi Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union in 1941. The Finnish army crossed both the new and the old border but got stuck in the forests of Far Karelia, and was finally defeated. This is the frame of the novel, but at its heart is the detailed description of the group of men that Linna creates. There is little in the novel about the big picture of world politics and the strategies of the command, nor is there any Soviet perspective. The focus of the novel is the ordinary Finnish soldiers’ day-to-day problems of survival, bearing the horrors of close combat, the fear of getting killed, the tragedies when close friends are killed and the gradual realization that their entire struggle has been in vain.

An important feature of this novel is the underdog perspective. The soldiers’ contempt for the officers’ snobbery and the hollow patriotic slogans are vividly described. The most stupid officers are described with hatred and irony. The bravest soldiers are at the same time those who dare oppose rigid disciplinary rules. This aspect is also seen in the clashes between good soldiers and stupid officers where Linna provokes the reader to laugh. Some of the soldiers provide comedy when they are criticizing officers. There is little hatred towards the Soviet enemy in the novel.

Linna manages to create a number of individual soldiers, giving each one his own personality, which is often highly defined. Each soldier has his own characteristics, or rather a singular characteristic. There is a coward, a tough guy, a joker, a communist, a good officer, a couple of bad officers, a sympathetic thief, an ideal soldier and others, one of each stereotype, it would seem. This technique could be considered one-sided, but that impression can be balanced by considering the group of soldiers as representing the archetypal Finnish soldier; he who probably had a little of every characteristic. Instead of one main character Linna gives his readers a male collective. There are few women in the novel.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The novel is a classic and realistic novel about war. There are many descriptions of close combat and men being wounded and killed. Official propaganda and officers obsessed with disciplinary rules are ridiculed. It is easy to sympathize with the soldiers and to hate war after reading the novel.

The novel is realistic in its descriptions of the horrors of war as well as in some descriptions of the characterization of the soldiers. The soldiers speak in strong and differentiated dialects, adding to the novel’s social perspective and realism; this presents a challenge for any translator or reader.

## Resources

- Finnish history: <http://www.histdoc.net/history/history.html>
- Finland generally: <http://www.history.com/topics/finland>
- <http://kirjasto.sci.fi/vlinna.htm>

# Work

**Author:** Maryse Condé

**Original publication date/period:** 1989

**Title in English:** *Crossing the Mangrove*

**Number of pages (approx):** 207

**Original language:** French

## Genre

A mystery novel with elements of magical realism, full of ambiguities and unresolved conflicts.

## Time and place

*Crossing the Mangrove* takes place in one night during the wake of Francis Sancher, a man whose life has affected the community of a small town. It is set around the 1980s or 1990s but the novel also encompasses the colonial and postcolonial history of Guadeloupe. The chief setting is Rivière au Sel, a small village on the island of Guadeloupe in the Caribbean.

## Subject matter

Condé's novel revolves around a small community of people gathered on a stormy night at the funeral wake of Francis Sancher. Everyone there has been affected by this Cuban native, who moved to the village of Rivière au Sel a short time ago. The novel begins as Francis Sancher is found face down on a muddy trail in the mangrove, dead. So many individuals could have been his murderer, and some clearly longed to see him dead.

The book is divided into chapters with the chapter titles being the names of members of the community. Each chapter tells of a specific experience of the dead man, while revealing something about an individual's life, that person's own story. Some loved him and were inspired by his charisma and his adventurous life. Others despised him for the pain they accused him of causing their family. As the book unfolds we gain more and more information about everyone in Rivière au Sel.

The village is populated by several different ethnic groups: the French, Creoles, Blacks, East Indians, Haitians, and the various combinations of all these ethnicities. Each one has its own place and social rank in the community, according to their differing shades of colour and economic success.

After his arrival, Francis Sancher has a strong but unintentional impact on the small Guadeloupean community. As a stranger with a mysterious past, his presence attracts curiosity and intense interest. Sancher is somewhat oblivious of the emotional upheaval he has created. On the other hand, what he saw clearly was his imminent death, a death he anticipated as preordained.

During the wake there is a symbolic connection between the stormy night and the internal turmoil of each character. As the night ends, the wind stops. The night is now quiet, the sky is clear and each character reaches a peaceful stage with a renewed inspiration about his or her own life.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The diversity and the complexity of postcolonial identity is what all the characters struggle to deal with, some more consciously than others. Juxtaposed to this search for identity is the natural setting of the island and its contrast to the societal restraints of the modern world.

The image of crossing the mangrove describes something that is diverse, complex and entangling. This imagery is used as a symbol to mirror the cultural and ethnic complexities of the people. Nature is personified throughout the novel.

## Resources

- <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/condeMaryse.php>

# Work

**Author:** Assia Djébar

**Original publication date/period:** 1985

**Title in English:** *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*

**Number of pages (approx):** 227

**Original language:** French

## Genre

This novel includes material such as journals, letters and journalistic accounts of the French colonization as well as oral history accounts. These are interlaced with autobiographical material and reflections on female identity within the author's mixed Franco–Arabic context.

## Time and place

The setting is Algeria, both the cities and the rural locations. The time span covered in the historical material is from the French conquest of Algeria in the 1830s through to the war of independence, beginning in 1954. The fictional autobiographical material begins in the 1930s in the coastal town of Cherchel.

## Subject matter

There are numerous chapters about the 19th-century French military campaign throughout Algeria. Many are vivid and physical, such as the description of the French incineration of native Algerians in the caves of Dahra. The description of the arrival of the French armada is a memorable sample of Djébar's ability to evoke the feeling of the historical events she recounts, a description as detailed as the work of a painter.

The author's autobiographical material, which probes deeply into her identity as a woman of Arab origin and culture, ties her evolution to those of her Algerian sisters. Djébar addresses such questions as her struggle with two languages, that of her father, a French teacher, and that of her mother, who holds a traditional role as a wife in a Maghrebian household. Through these dilemmas the author executes her search for her own identity.

Djébar focuses on two particular aspects of her own life and those of other women: the linguistic tension between a mother tongue and “the language of the enemy” in which she does her writing, and her encounter with traditional Maghrebian expectations of Arab women. This struggle with language and with feminist concerns pervades the text, juxtaposed with the largely masculine advance of the colonial enterprise.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

As can be seen from the polyphonic structure of the novel outlined above, this work presents its material in an unusual way. Its lively use of anecdote and incident, based on both Algerian oral history and French historical documents, is juxtaposed with monologues and personal reflection as well as lively accounts of conversations among the girls and women of Cherchel. The use of the first person brings the material close to the reader and provides an integrating principle.

Musical underpinnings and references enrich the content of this work. The title “Fantasia” refers both to the ceremonial equestrian display practised in North Africa, involving galloping horses, shouting and rifle shots, and to the musical movement of Beethoven; part three of the novella is structured into “movements”.

## Resources

- <http://www.umass.edu/complit/ogscl/jana/janadjébarFantasiabibquestions.htm>
- <http://www.oulitnet.co.za/africanlib/fantasia.asp>

# Work

**Author:** Andree Chedid

**Original publication date/period:** 1952

**Title in English:** *From Sleep Unbound*

**Number of pages (approx):** 157

**Original language:** French

## Genre

Novel delivered through the first person voice of Samya, the central character.

## Time and place

The novel is set within the Christian–Arab community of Cairo and in the countryside; likely time is early to mid-20th century.

## Subject matter

The novel delves into the fate of Samya as a Christian–Arab woman subject to the tradition of arranged marriages. At 15, Samya is a motherless girl who has been educated in a convent and is summoned from her school to return to her father's home. Facing financial difficulty, her father has arranged to marry her to an unpleasant man in his forties, Boutros, who supervises farmlands. His sister Rachida runs his household until the marriage which takes Samya from Cairo to an isolated existence in the country. Her movements are restricted by her husband, her attempts to brighten the household bring the wrath of Boutros down on the head of a faithful servant, and her only consolations are the visits of an older woman Om el Kher, who brings produce to the house daily, and a young girl Ammal, whose creative spirit is actualized in the creation of small figurines.

Eventually, after eight years, Samya gives birth to a girl, Mia, who along with Ammal becomes her great joy in life. Shortly after she turns six, Mia contracts typhoid and dies, to the despair of her mother. Samya gives up on life, her legs become paralysed, and Rachida returns to take over the household. As is revealed at the outset of the novel, on Boutros's return from work one day, Samya shoots him. She then withdraws into herself, and abandons herself to the consequences of her act.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The narrative is delivered through the first person voice of Samya, with emphasis on her inner rebellion against the fate of a woman within the culture. Poetic and sometimes surreal imagery permeates the thoughts and imaginings of Samya that dominate the novel. These reflections are played out against the terse and judgmental dialogues of others, an outward dialogue in which Samya has very little to say.

Another compelling feature is the angry, anguished interior monologue that occurs at every stage of Samya's story. Dreamlike language along with harsh estimations of her condition characterize Samya's narrative. Dialogue is limited chiefly to what others say to her.

The three-part structure of the narrative works to sustain suspense and interest. The murder is described in the first chapter with a focus on Rachida and her discovery of her dead brother. The event is again included in the third part of the novel, with a deeper insight into Samya's state of mind.

## Resources

- [http://www.greeninteger.com/pipbios\\_detail.cfm?PIPAuthorID=357](http://www.greeninteger.com/pipbios_detail.cfm?PIPAuthorID=357)

## Work

**Author:** Ferdinand Oyono

**Original publication date/period:** 1956

**Title in English:** *Houseboy*

**Number of pages (approx):** 144

**Original language:** French

## Genre

As a novel *Houseboy* may be seen as a study in the psychology of racial oppression. Like other works of the *Négritude* tradition it may also be read both as protest and as an affirmation and reclamation of Africa. The novel should reward analyses from postcolonial and Africanist perspectives. Oyono's ironic narrative and the use of the diary form lay bare the hypocrisies of French colonialism in Africa.

## Time and place

Set in pre-independent Cameroun (before 1960), Ferdinand Oyono's country of birth, *Houseboy* holds up to scrutiny and ridicule the nature of the relationship between colonizer and colonized.

## Subject matter

Toundi runs away from the harsh discipline of his father's household to serve the white priest of a Catholic mission. He learns to read and write and is fascinated by the ways of the white people. The priest dies suddenly and Toundi finds himself as the houseboy of the French Commandant of the area. Dazzled by the beauty of the Commandant's wife, Toundi's willing immersion into the superior world of the whites begins to stir out of balance and beyond his control when she starts an affair with the colonial prison director. Naive and vulnerable, Toundi is unable to navigate the world of intrigue and corruption that is bred by the lusts of his masters. He is accused of a theft he has not committed—a convenient scapegoat who knows more than he should know about the moral failings of his superiors and who must be "eliminated". He dies an untimely death.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

*Houseboy* lays bare the colonial experience as lived by the colonized Africans and their French "masters", highlighting the tragic nature of this experience, especially for the Africans who, within this context, are condemned to a life of inferior servitude. Nothing of their culture receives validation. Toundi's story speaks to the tragic irony in the seductive lure, for the African, of the white man's world of easy freedoms.

The novel also suggests the adverse impact of the colonial experience on the colonizers themselves who are caught in an incestuous web of immorality, treachery and hypocrisy far from the restraining norms of their own homes. The divisiveness of the colonial enterprise within which the Catholic Church and the French state (military, civil service) play complementary roles is evident in the uneasy relations it breeds among the Africans.

Oyono's pervasive irony, imagery, Christian symbols, humour and characterization work well together to convey his purpose. The frame narrative which opens the novel helps to add credibility to the "exercise books" of Toundi which are said to deliver his story.

## Resources

- Corti, L. 2003. "Colonial Violence and Psychological Defences in Ferdinand Oyono's *Une Vie de Boy*." *Research in African Literatures*. Vol 34, number 1.
- Asaah, AH. 2005. "Beyond the borders of the locality: Postcolonial and universal dimensions to Oyono's *Houseboy*." *Annales Aequatoria*. Vol 26. Pp 451–65.

# Work

**Author:** Amin Maalouf

**Original publication date/period:** 1986

**Title in English:** *Leo Africanus*

**Number of pages (approx):** 360

**Original language:** French

## Genre

A traditional narrative in many senses, this episodic novel describes the experiences of a narrator who is loosely based on the geographer known in the West as Leo Africanus, a 16th century Arab, whose name was El Hassan ibn Mohammed El Wazzan. The novel can very usefully be paired with Maalouf's set of essays *In the Name of Identity*.

## Time and place

The novel specifically indicates the time frame of each chapter. The first is dated 1488 and the last is 1527. There are four locations, indicated by the titles of the four parts: the "books" of Granada, Fez, Cairo and Rome. The account is purported to be written for the benefit of the protagonist's son.

## Subject matter

The narrative begins in Granada with Hasan as a boy in a Muslim family. In this first section, Maalouf conveys the sense of peaceful coexistence of Jews and Muslims, disrupted by the overthrow of Boabdil by Spanish Christian forces. Within the family, a daughter named Miriam is born. On the recommendation of their own Muslim leaders, Hasan's family emigrates to Fez, Morocco, where they have a difficult time settling and are robbed by outlaws while on their travels. Hasan's mother becomes involved in occult practices and his father repudiates her. Hasan begins a period of diplomatic missions, accompanying his Uncle Khali. He marries, has a daughter, and embarks on his travels as a merchant. Hasan is then exiled from Fez for two years.

The third part of the narrative begins in Cairo where Hasan acquaints himself with the city, and meets and marries a Circassian widow. From here Hasan's travels take him back to Fez and to involvement in the adventures of a friend, Harun. Eventually after a visit to Constantinople, a return to Cairo and a pilgrimage to Mecca, Hasan begins a new and even more dramatic phase of his life when he is kidnapped and transported to Rome, where he is presented to the Pope, and ordered to learn Latin, Hebrew and Greek and to teach Arabic. Eventually baptized in the Catholic faith with the name Johannes-Leo, Hasan takes up life in Rome with a new wife and becomes involved in the politics of the place and era. As the book closes, Hasan is on a return voyage to Africa.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The issues of power, politics and religion are closely intertwined in this narrative. As Maalouf constructs this journey he weaves in multiple subplots, brief travelogues, and reflections on identity.

This novel provides a highly accessible storyline, in the picaresque tradition, underpinned by the serious issues of conflict, migration, and the necessity to adapt. Lively characters and adventures complement serious matters of marriage, fidelity and tradition. The chapter structure provides an organizational pattern within the multiple geographical settings.

## Resources

- <http://said.hajji.name/en/book-leo.html>
- <http://www.leoafricanus.com/>
- Davis, NZ. 2007. *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds*. Hill and Wang.

# Work

**Author:** Eugène Ionesco

**Original publication date/period:** 1950

**Title in English:** *The Bald Soprano*

**Number of pages (approx):** 300

**Original language:** French

## Genre

This work is probably one of the best-known plays from a dramatic subgenre labelled the “Theatre of the Absurd”.

## Time and place

*The Bald Soprano* takes place somewhere in England in the 20th century, probably soon after the second world war. It respects the classical rules of place, time and action.

## Subject matter

This play, divided into 11 scenes of unequal length, does not have a precise plot. Hence, its matter cannot be described in terms of cause and consequences. It is constructed around the meeting of two couples, the Smiths and the Martins. Two secondary characters, a maid and a fireman, participate in the dialogue.

The action starts with Mrs Smith describing her daily activities, using trivial sentences taken from an English language learning method, while the clock strikes an absurd number of times; this device is often repeated. She and her husband then have a conversation about a family in which everyone is called Bobby Watson. When the Martins arrive, the Smiths leave their guests alone, apparently angry at their late arrival. An uncanny dialogue takes place during the fourth scene: the Martins marvel at the numerous coincidences that link them together. This scene concludes with the joyful realization that they are husband and wife. But the maid then addresses the audience and reveals that they are wrong. She claims she holds the truth, because her real name is Sherlock Holmes. In the seventh scene, the couples sit down together. They are unable to communicate and their ordeal, punctuated by long silences, is interrupted by the arrival of a fireman, who tells many nonsensical anecdotes taking the form of fables ending with obscure moralities. Mary then confesses that she is an old flame of the fireman and insists on telling a story of her own, which clearly annoys the Smith couple, who expel her. In the next to last scene, the fireman announces that a fire will have to be put out in precisely three-quarters of an hour and sixteen minutes, then leaves the scene. His last line refers to the bald soprano, even if no reference has been made to her previously. After an awkward silence, Mrs. Smith replies that the singer has not changed her hairstyle.

In the final scene, both couples exchange more lines at an increasingly rapid rate and in a more and more violent tone until they reach an abrupt halt. The play then starts again, from the first scene on, with the Martins now playing the Smiths' role.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

As this linear description of the content of the play suggests, its unfolding does not correspond to any clear project taken up by the characters. However, this play is neither a true parody nor a denunciation, but rather an exploration of our strange world. The circular structure of the play highlights the presence of both comic and tragic elements, but with a parodic intention. However, the main stylistic features are characteristic of the Nouveau Théâtre: a refusal of realistic conventions; absurd themes; apparently meaningless dialogue pointing towards an existentialist interpretation.

## Resources

- Bois, C. 2007. *Eugène Ionesco. La cantatrice chauve*. Paris. Ellipses.
- Holland, M. 2004. *Ionesco: La Cantatrice Chauve and Les Chaises*. London. Grant and Cutler.
- [http://www.theatrehistory.com/misc/bald\\_soprano\\_002.html](http://www.theatrehistory.com/misc/bald_soprano_002.html)

## Work

**Author:** Marguerite Duras

**Original publication date/period:** 1984

**Title in English:** *The Lover*

**Number of pages (approx):** 128

**Original language:** French

## Genre

The novel is a work of fiction with the quality of a memoir. The telling of the tale includes a strong poetic element.

## Time and place

*The Lover* is set in French colonial South Vietnam in the early 1930s, although the author goes back and forth in time and place between Indo-China and France.

## Subject matter

Duras' novel revolves around the story of a 15-year-old French girl who becomes the lover of a Chinese man 12 years older than her. The young woman comes from a poor family whose father died young, leaving the mother as the sole financial support for the family. The mother is headmistress of a French school. The girl has two brothers. The younger one she adores; the older one she abhors. None of the main characters is given a name; instead each is referred to by a role, and in that sense they act as archetypes: mother, brother, daughter and lover.

The girl seems to become the Chinese man's lover for mainly financial reasons, although she is also very unhappy in her family. Her mother only loves the elder brother and tolerates the two younger siblings. The mother becomes aware of her daughter's relationship with the Chinese man and is at first angry but shortly after seems to accept and even to be satisfied by the arrangement. The Chinese man adores and is infatuated by the young woman, but his father refuses to let him marry her. The lover is dependent on his father's money and constrained by his own culture.

The girl is 15 years old when she begins her affair and ends it at the age of 17, when she leaves for France by boat. The girl, upon her return to France, eventually separates from her family. Her elder brother ruins their mother with his gambling debts. The younger brother's premature death affects her deeply.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The essential elements of the novel centre on the cultural and racial as well as sexual issues associated with an affair between a 15-year-old French girl and a 27-year-old Chinese man. In an attempt to escape from a dysfunctional family, the young girl makes what seems to be a desperate choice. Leaving behind the traditional values of her European identity, she enters into an affair with an older Chinese man, and in doing so goes from schoolgirl to mistress, seemingly without credible compelling factors.

The book jumps back and forth from present to past, using short and long segments; there are no chapters. In telling her story, Duras uses the first person (the girl) as narrator and, at other times, the third person (the author's omniscient voice). In both instances the narrator is the same, the girl describing the action as it is happening or the grown woman, remembering what happened from the perspective of 50 years later. Duras makes extensive use of imagery involving water.

## Resources

- [http://womenshistory.about.com/library/bio/ucbio\\_duras\\_margaret.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/library/bio/ucbio_duras_margaret.htm)
- <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/jun/26/in-love-with-duras/?pagination=false>

## Work

**Author:** Gabrielle Roy

**Original publication date/period:** 1970

**Title in English:** *Windflower*

**Number of pages (approx):** 168

**Original language:** French

## Genre

This novel is the fictional “life narrative” of an Inuit woman Elsa Kamachuk. It was one of three short narratives published together by Roy, and perhaps more precisely can be called a novella.

## Time and place

The setting of the novel is northern Quebec along the Koksoak River. The action occurs chiefly in the village near the Fort Chimo installation of the US army which was established in 1942, with a brief interlude set on the opposite side of the river. The action of the novel covers a period from the mid-1940s to the period of the Vietnam war in the 1960s.

## Subject matter

After being impregnated by an American soldier, Elsa gives birth to her mixed-race child Jimmy, blonde, blue-eyed and an object of wonder and admiration to the people of her village. Elsa raises the child with single-minded devotion and sacrifice, following as far as she is able the child-raising practices of white women, her employers and advisors. Jimmy and Elsa begin life with deep roots in Inuit culture as well, even spending time with Uncle Ian who has maintained a basic Inuit life on the opposite side of the Koksoak. However, as Jimmy grows into adolescence he becomes allied with the barrack culture of the Americans and chafes against the restrictions of village life. In spite of Elsa’s determined efforts to make a life that is designed to accommodate what she perceives as Jimmy’s culture, he eventually leaves the village without a word. Elsa, in her despair, abandons the way of life of the army and missionary settlers she had embraced, and returns to the far simpler existence of her family and village, but living an aimless and saddened life. Only briefly heartened by the possibility (and likelihood) that an army pilot flying an Arctic mission who has contacted the village by radio turns out to be Jimmy sending a message, Elsa lives out her life in the expectation of his return, becoming a kind of mythic figure in her own landscape.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

In spite of its brevity, *Windflower* provides many interesting features to explore. Roy’s approach to motherhood (a recurring motif in her fiction) is important, a central element of the plot being the dissonance between Jimmy’s conception (through rape) and Elsa’s positive reaction to her pregnancy and devotion to raising him. Other critically important topics include: cultural juxtaposition and conflict; Elsa’s response to nature in the traditions of her upbringing; the influx of modernity; and the characterization of family members and of “outsiders”. The narrator presents Elsa sympathetically, using free indirect discourse to connect the reader with her thoughts, feelings and values. The often poetic description of the environment is complemented by realistic interactions among all parties to Elsa’s drama: the other characters, whether as groups (the other admiring mothers) or as individuals (the wise grandfather, the determined uncle, the sympathetic priests).

## Resources

- [http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/SCL/bin/get.cgi?directory=vol13\\_2/&filename=Andersen.htm](http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/SCL/bin/get.cgi?directory=vol13_2/&filename=Andersen.htm)
- [http://www.amazon.com/Windflower-Gabrielle-Roy/dp/0771094205#reader\\_0771094205](http://www.amazon.com/Windflower-Gabrielle-Roy/dp/0771094205#reader_0771094205)
- [http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id\\_nbr=7991](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=7991)

# Work

**Author:** Christa Wolf

**Original publication date/period:** 1983

**Title in English:** *Cassandra*

**Number of pages (approx):** 324

**Original language:** German

## Genre

This novella is based on the well-known Homeric story but told from Cassandra's viewpoint.

## Time and place

Cassandra is the oldest daughter of King Priam, a prophetess at the time of the Trojan war. The novella describes her final three days in Agamemnon's palace in Mycenae, Greece. Awaiting death, Cassandra reviews her life and that of her people up until the time the Greeks conquer Troy. Wolf uses the mythological story as a mirror to comment on the former communist East Germany.

## Subject matter

At first, the reader has the impression of hearing Homer's *Iliad* once again: Paris, one of King Priam's sons, kidnaps King Menelaus' wife Helena, thus abusing the sacred law of hospitality and causing war between the Greeks and the Trojans. In Wolf's version of the story, the situation that provokes war is changed slightly but significantly: Helena never arrives in Troy because the King of Egypt kidnaps her from Paris. The major reason for war is an economic one, namely control of the Bosphorus Straits trade. Cassandra therefore witnesses a war not based on honour but on deceit.

As the King's daughter but more importantly as prophetess of Troy's main patron god Apollo, Cassandra is at first highly valued. Gradually, there is a shift in the country's politics and culture from a fairly peaceful matriarchal society to a society controlled by men. The Trojans come to believe war is necessary and accept the military state. Women are shut out from all positions of power. When Cassandra dares to warn against the tragic outcome of the war and recommends peace talks with the enemy, her father dissociates himself from his favourite daughter and has her imprisoned.

Homer's celebrated heroes on both sides are anything but heroic in Wolf's rendering of the story, as is the case with both Achilles and Eumelos. In the end, the Trojans fall into the Greeks' trap. At the advice of Odysseus, the Greeks build the giant horse and sack the city without encountering much resistance. Most citizens are slaughtered, and Cassandra is among the few taken as slaves back to Greece. She knows that Agamemnon, the Greek military commander, will be murdered by his wife and her lover and also knows that she will be next.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Betrayal and deceit are key elements. The novella illustrates the dangers of male domination, false pride and misguided heroism which lead to disaster on both sides: the fall of Troy and disaster and death among the Greeks. Wolf's criticism is based on a society as she experienced it.

Cassandra reviews her life in an inner monologue, knowing that she will soon be murdered. The narrative is at first a little confusing because she does not tell her story chronologically; certain memories are only dealt with when she feels the moment to be right for her. This style adds to her credibility.

Written from a woman's point of view, the narrative emphasizes honesty and the power of emotions, rather than heroism and other male virtues. Key features are Cassandra's voice and vision which she actually experiences as foreign and destructive forces.

## Resources

- [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/cas/ashp/cassandra\\_home\\_page.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/ashp/cassandra_home_page.html)
- <http://www.davidson.edu/academic/german/denham/cis100f8/students/cassandra.htm>

# Work

**Author:** Theodor Fontane

**Original publication date/period:** 1894

**Title in English:** *Effi Briest*

**Number of pages (approx):** 256

**Original language:** German

## Genre

The novel is a hallmark of German realism, although there are strains of classic romanticism in its depictions of Effi's time spent in natural surroundings (especially when at her childhood home).

## Time and place

*Effi Briest* takes place in Germany during the regime of Otto von Bismarck, primarily spanning the 1880s. The individual locations for the narrative vary, but most of the action takes place in Kessin (a resort town) and Berlin.

## Subject matter

*Effi Briest* concerns several years in the life of the title character, a young girl who is married off at the age of 17 to Baron von Innstetten, a former suitor of her mother. Effi adjusts reasonably well to the life of a military wife in the somewhat provincial resort community of Kessin, but her dissatisfaction with her duties and the society she must keep soon becomes more and more evident.

In Kessin, Effi embarks on an affair with Major Crampas, a military officer with a reputation for womanizing. The affair takes a toll on Effi's spirit and health, however, and she is thrilled to move to Berlin when her husband, a rising star in Bismarck's government, receives a new appointment.

Effi's adultery is revealed several years after she has called off the affair, but her husband still feels compelled by pride and societal obligations to seek out and kill Crampas in a duel. He then takes Annie (his daughter with Effi) and leaves Effi to lead a solitary life in Berlin. Effi's health deteriorates, and she is finally allowed to move back to her childhood home, where she dies peacefully soon after.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Fontane addresses topics such as childhood, guilt, adultery, youth and age, experience and innocence, and the power of society's pressures versus the will of the individual. There are also discussions of the societal roles of men and women, and the ways in which culture rather than reason can determine "right" and "wrong" behaviour.

Fontane uses spare yet poetic language and demonstrates a restrained style, even when discussing significant events in the lives of the characters. He uses detailed description, and portrays the behaviours and personalities of even minor figures in the story. The plot follows a linear structure, with jumps of many years occurring in the narrative. This book is easily compared to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, but Fontane is less symbolic than Flaubert. *Effi Briest* is notable for what it doesn't say or depict. Students may find the pace too deliberate at first read, but they will come to appreciate the subtlety Fontane employs.

## Resources

- [http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/history/map\\_german\\_unification.html](http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/history/map_german_unification.html)
- [http://depts.washington.edu/scand/isa/review/78/Hedda\\_Gabler\\_Effi\\_Briest\\_and\\_The\\_Ibsen\\_Effect](http://depts.washington.edu/scand/isa/review/78/Hedda_Gabler_Effi_Briest_and_The_Ibsen_Effect)
- <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5323>

## Work

**Author:** Amos Oz

**Original publication date/period:** 1993

**Title in English:** *Fima*

**Number of pages (approx):** 336

**Original language:** Hebrew

## Genre

This novel fits within the psychological as well as sociopolitical subcategory of the realistic fiction genre.

## Time and place

Fima takes place in contemporary Jerusalem, where Efraim (Fima) sometimes humorously but always wittingly moves within uncertainties and contradictions. The chaotic movements of his life sometimes shake his ideals but he cannot organize himself because he is ground down not only by his own inner, permanent doubts but also by his political criticism towards the short-sightedness of the Israeli government.

## Subject matter

Fima wanders through his Jerusalem life in a habitual cloud of dissatisfaction. He is a contradictory man: attentive and absent-minded, melancholic and enthusiastic at the same time. He wants to concentrate on his book of poems but gets bogged down in a mire of intellectual and political quarrelling. His incapacity to manage his life successfully gets on everyone's nerves. Nobody seems to understand what and how he perceives the world, not at the clinic where he works as a receptionist and not within the puzzling love affairs in which he always gets involved. Fima is looking for love and finds it in different women. Every romantic occurrence and the way in which it is finely depicted is humorous: meeting, marrying and getting divorced from Yael; his fleeting encounters with Liat Sirkin and others. But political concerns absorb much of his energy. The political situation of Israel confounds and obsesses him. He even imagines scenes of a bloody future for his country, although doomsday fails to occur. Throughout the novel, Fima makes plans to see a Jean Gabin film, but when he finally arrives at the theatre, he realizes this film has already been substituted by another one. The same happens with almost every expectation in his life.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The novel explores Fima's social relationships: with his father (the rich and tidy industrialist), the feminine world (with their rhetoric and differences), his permanent daydreaming and fears about Israel's future.

The novel is narrated with a precise, crystal clear structure; the psychologically perfect descriptions of anecdotes (for example, how he got into and out of every love affair) are incredibly humorous and subtle at the same time.

## Resources

- <http://happyantipodean.blogspot.com/2006/02/review-fima-amos-oz-1991-story-opens.html>

## Work

**Author:** Bhisham Sahni

**Original publication date/period:** 1974

**Title in English:** *Tamas*

**Number of pages (approx):** 352

**Original language:** Hindi

## Genre

Historical fiction written in an episodic style.

## Time and place

The novel is set in 1947, just before the partition of India and Pakistan. The action of the novel occurs over a period of five days in a small town and the surrounding area in a northwest frontier province that is now Pakistan. The events described in *Tamas* are not only historical but also take into account the grey areas of communalism involved in the riots of 1947.

## Subject matter

Bhisham Sahni has highlighted the trauma the common man experienced through no fault of his own when politicians divided the country. He has exposed religious fascism during the partition of India and Pakistan. The story begins when Nathu is asked by a local Muslim leader named Murad Ali to kill a pig for veterinary purposes. Nathu accepts the order, but riots break out in the community when the same slaughtered pig is found outside a mosque; this event is followed by killing of a cow. The conflicts generated are the catalytic force of the plot. Forced conversion in the face of violence happens within a community that had lived in relative harmony and the necessity to flee in order to preserve life are powerful lines of action included in this narrative.

The writer explores British policy in India before independence. The conversations between Richard, the British Deputy Commissioner, and his wife often provide evidence of this aspect. The juxtaposition of the colonial view with the local strife provides a telling contrast which heightens the drama of the novel.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

*Tamas* depicts the communal tension and killing and looting that takes place in 1947. However, the underlying emphasis is the human story of the selected characters. *Tamas* demonstrates that every community includes people who cynically manipulate people in their religious group to achieve political ends. Through this novel we also get a glimpse of the poignant aspect of the Indian/Pakistani society where the voice of women is suppressed, even though women are often the champions of humanitarian values. All the important elements of Indian society during this time in the town of Rawalpindi in the Punjab province are evident in this novel.

*Tamas* is written in a straightforward and relatively simple style. Characterization is both literal and symbolic. The original language, Hindi, also includes words from Punjabi, Urdu and English, delivering an aura of authenticity to the story. This effect is further intensified by the style of language according to the characters and situation. The writing is highly descriptive. The writer very effectively depicts the irrational religious sentiment, the political motives and the social evils that engulfed the society during this period.

## Resources

- Sanchyan, S. January 2010. *Bilingual Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol 1.
- <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0247896/>

# Work

**Author:** Imre Kertész

**Original publication date/period:** 1975

**Title in English:** *Fateless*

**Number of pages (approx):** 272

**Original language:** Hungarian

## Genre

Not a conventional biography but a novel from inside Nazi Germany's concentration camps by an author who lived in the same concentration camps as the novel's protagonist at the same young age. The authenticity of the story is sharpened by being told by the boy himself in the first person.

## Time and place

Budapest and the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Zeitz 1944–5.

## Subject matter

In the summer of 1944, 14-year-old György Köves lives with his Jewish family, his father and stepmother, in Hungary's capital Budapest. Nazi Germany occupies Hungary and the persecution of Jews is expanding. The boy is called to forced labour, and sent in a railway truck to Auschwitz, where he stays a few days only, but long enough to understand what is in the smoke from the chimneys. He is sent to the concentration camps of Buchenwald, then Zeitz, then back to Buchenwald where he finds himself when the war ends.

It is an absurd experience to read the young boy's impressions from the concentration camps. He gives a naive impression, not speculating or expressing emotions as today's readers may expect, but only recording what he sees and hears. His awareness of both terrible and trivial details and his general apologetic attitude clash with what a reader today would expect.

The novel starts and ends in Budapest. When in the beginning family and friends come to say goodbye to the boy's father who will be sent to forced labour in a camp, the novel shows Jewish reactions that may surprise today's readers. We know today that their religious perspectives or speculations about world politics were in vain.

The end of the novel describes the boy's return to Budapest in 1945. He meets people who want to know about the concentration camps, but they don't understand. Since their questions and expectations are rather like what a reader would ask and expect today, the final pages of the novel are a severe challenge. The boy now gives a sophisticated discourse on fate and freedom.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The text delivers a unique description by an insider of this terrible crime in mankind's history, showing us as much as we can understand. We learn the limitations of our understanding.

The novel is written in a unique and personal language. The voice is that of a young boy, underlining his naive and apologetic attitude. At the same time the language is sophisticated, with long sentences and paragraphs, and a winding sentence structure.

## Resources

- Anything about the Holocaust, the second world war and Hungary will help to understand the novel better. There is a parallel to Camus' *The Stranger* in some interesting respects. Another parallel is Primo Levi's *If this is a man*, also written by a prisoner in a concentration camp.
- <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/magyar/kertes5.htm>
- <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/aug/28/fiction.features>

# Work

**Author:** Einar Már Guðmundsson

**Original publication date/period:** 1993

**Title in English:** *Angels of the Universe*

**Number of pages (approx):** 164

**Original language:** Icelandic

## Genre

The novel's intermingling of the tragic, the lyrical and the comic make it hard to categorize. The novel is to a certain extent based on the life of the author's brother, but it is a psychological novel that delves into the inner life of the main protagonist.

## Time and place

The story takes place in Reykjavik, Iceland between approximately 1950 and 1990.

## Subject matter

The novel is written as an autobiography and describes the descent of the main character Paul, an intelligent and promising young man, into mental illness. The novel portrays his life, from his birth to his tragic death, demonstrating how his illness grows more prominent and finally takes over, distancing him from his family and friends. Although the story is tragic and emotionally powerful it is also very funny as it is told with both great humour and tenderness.

Guðmundsson's narrative is not in chronological order. Paul tells his own story from the cradle to the grave in the first person after his death, which gives him a unique perspective. Events from Paul's childhood, his family history and birth, his friends and his first relationship are used to build a complex picture of him and his destiny. These episodes are intertwined with descriptions of his life as his illness progresses, life within a mental institution in the 1960s and 1970s, and the life of a man who is disabled because of his mental illness and is unable to enter mainstream society. In the end his feelings of isolation and ostracizing by society result in his suicide.

Paul's friends, family and fellow patients make up an interesting gallery of characters that although often funny are never caricatures. The novel also includes social commentary with the key quote from the novel being: "The madhouse is in a lot of places." The various sections are alternately hilarious and poignant as well as being thought-provoking. The work provides a multifaceted portrayal of a human being who suffers from schizophrenia.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Mental illness and its consequences are the most prominent issues in the story. The author paints a human face on the patient and criticizes the way the mentally ill have been marginalized in society. The novel also has a further societal aspect as the author plays with reflections between mental illness and modern society.

The intermingling of tragic, humorous and lyrical elements creates a multilayered text which, along with the first person perspective, the shifts in chronological order and the extensive use of foreshadowing, oppositions, allusions and symbolism makes this a rich text for literary analysis.

## Resources

- <http://icelandiccinemaonline.com/film/Angels-of-the-Universe>
- <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0233651/plotsummary>
- [http://icelandreview.com/reviews/books/?ew\\_news\\_onlyarea=content1&ew\\_news\\_onlyposition=3&cat\\_id=59349&ew\\_3\\_a\\_id=323558](http://icelandreview.com/reviews/books/?ew_news_onlyarea=content1&ew_news_onlyposition=3&cat_id=59349&ew_3_a_id=323558)

# Work

**Author:** Halldór Laxness

**Original publication date/period:** 1933

**Title in English:** *Independent People*

**Number of pages (approx):** 544

**Original language:** Icelandic

## Genre

The novel has been called a sociological novel. It depicts social injustice and the author is mostly positive towards socialist views, but the irony that colours the whole work, undermines any easy ideological definition.

## Time and place

The story takes place on a poor farm on a heath in rural Iceland, between approximately 1895 and 1920.

## Subject matter

The novel follows the life of the main protagonist Bjartur and his family as they confront hostile conditions, both natural and man-made. It's an epic story written with irony and great compassion.

The first part describes the family's first years on the heath. Bjartur buys a smallholding from the richest farmer in the region. With him is his new wife, Rosa, who he has been forced to marry by the farmer and his wife because she is pregnant. Bjartur is a man who places great emphasis on being independent and free. His pride and stubbornness has terrible consequences for himself and his family. He cares more for his sheep than anything else and when his favourite sheep goes missing (his wife had slaughtered it in secret as she was starving) he leaves to look for it. When he comes home his wife is dead, having bled out after giving birth alone, but a dog has kept the baby alive.

The second part takes place 13 years later. Bjartur has a new wife Finna, and they have three sons. Also living with them is the daughter of his first wife, Asta, who is the only person Bjartur seems to feel any love for. In this part the relationship between Asta and Bjartur is central but Bjartur's obsessive need to be independent and owe nothing to anybody is again shown to have devastating consequences that ultimately results in the death of his second wife.

In the third part the fate of Bjartur's children are in the foreground. Their characters, actions and destinies are shown to be ultimately the results of their father's decisions. At the end of this part he has driven away two of his sons and also Asta who he was closest to of all the family.

In the fourth part four years later, everything is prospering in Iceland. Bjartur, however, has trusted all the wrong people and is finally bankrupt. In this part, class struggle becomes a more prominent theme but the story ends when Bjartur takes Asta, who is now seriously ill, and her children; back up on the heath to try to eke out life on a new, even more desolate, smallholding.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The novel explores how positive ideals such as freedom, independence, national pride and the like can have devastating personal results. The use of irony, foreshadowing, leitmotifs and how the author leaves it to the reader to draw conclusions about what happens to and between characters all make for interesting investigation.

## Resources

- [http://www.gljufrasteinn.is/en/halldor\\_laxness/](http://www.gljufrasteinn.is/en/halldor_laxness/)
- [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1955/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1955/)
- <http://crookedtimber.org/2007/01/02/independent-people>

# Work

**Author:** Junichiro Tanizaki

**Original publication date/period:** 1933

**Title in English:** *In Praise of Shadows*

**Number of pages (approx):** 56

**Original language:** Japanese

## Genre

This essay shows Tanizaki's view about aesthetics, using the metaphor of shadows.

## Time and place

Tanizaki wrote this essay in 1933 when electricity was not fully developed in Japan.

## Subject matter

Tanizaki warns against losing a sense of traditional beauty, which is created by shadows, through the development of electricity and new architectural styles. He says that electricity, gas, and waterworks do not harmonize with a traditional Japanese house. Lovers of the modern try to embrace them, but it may be better leaving things in a more natural state.

Tanizaki explores several examples of the situation. A toilet is very important for health and a Japanese toilet is very different from a western one. It must be far from the main house and it should have a shadowy quality, an absolute cleanliness and a perfect silence, so the user may enjoy raindrops, songs of birds and insects. A western toilet is clean and convenient, however it cuts out relations with the beauties of nature. Tanizaki is not against convenience, but for him, it must be adapted well to Japanese traditional style, not borrowed from western styles.

Also, Japanese aesthetic taste prefers objects without lustre. Lacquer ware shows its beauty in dim light; it is the presence of some darkness that creates this sort of beauty. It loses this magic under bright light. It is said that a Japanese dish is for the eyes, not only for the mouth. However, Tanizaki would say it is also for meditation. For example, sweet bean jelly (Yôkan) gathers the darkness in the room and gives us a sweet fascinating sensation in half light. Miso, soy sauce, tofu, sashimi, all these materials harmonize with darkness or half-darkness.

The Japanese ancestors were obliged to live in a dark room where they found a beauty in shadows. Consequently, they started using shadows in their creation of beauty. All the elements of a Japanese room, such as a shelf, a hanging scroll, an alcove, exist for lights and shadows.

Shadows are also important for women. For example, female dolls of Bunraku, actors of Kabuki and No are beautiful in dim light. Their make-up was adapted for a dark space; their charm is thus best in half light. We see only the face and hands of Japanese women in a kimono. It stimulates our imaginations, so Japanese women are often made more attractive due to the light.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Important and interesting in this essay is a comparison between the Japanese lifestyle and the Western one. Also a comparison between a Japanese older lifestyle and modern one is essential. The role of shadows is vital in this work. Tanizaki's rhetoric in describing many sorts of shadows deserves literary analysis. His comparative ideas and his argument are interesting. They reflect the Japanese traditional aesthetic view very well.

## Resources

- <http://www.fireandknowledge.org/archives/2006/09/23/in-praise-of-shadows-a-meditation/>
- <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/oct/05/featuresreviews.guardianreview25>
- <http://kirjasto.sci.fi/tanizaki.htm>

## Work

**Author:** Soseki Natsume

**Original publication date/period:** 1914

**Title in English:** *Kokoro*

**Number of pages (approx):** 170

**Original language:** Japanese

## Genre

This is a psychological novel in which there are two very puzzling suicides. We can read this work as a kind of detective story.

## Time and place

The main events in *Kokoro* take place at the end in the Meiji period (1868–1912) in Tokyo, Japan, although the narrator tells the story years later. The book is written in the first person.

## Subject matter

The events of this story can be reduced to two suicides. But the deaths say nothing about the real essence of the narrative: the heart and thoughts of the main character Sensei.

This novel has three parts. In the first part, the narrator, a young student, meets Sensei (professor in English). He is interested in this mysterious person and goes often to his house, although the sensei is not especially enthusiastic about these visits. Nonetheless, Sensei starts explaining his life little by little, although he withholds an important secret. The narrator desires to know the secret, but Sensei tells him he will explain it when it needs to be revealed.

The narrator goes back to his parents' home in the second part because his father is seriously ill. He compares his father with Sensei and he is surprised to recognize his father as the father he believed he would find in Sensei. They could well be spiritual father and son. When his real father falls into a critical condition, the narrator receives a long letter from Sensei and he finds this shocking sentence: "When you receive this letter, I will not be in this world. I will already be dead." Leaving his father, the narrator immediately takes a train for Tokyo.

The last part of the novel is comprised of the testament of Sensei. He finally reveals his secret. His parents were rich, but they died in an epidemic when he was 20 years old. His uncle was supposed to help him manage his money, but instead used it for his own purposes. Sensei learns of all this two years later. Sensei no longer trusts anyone. He finds a lodging house in Tokyo and continues his studies. Shizu, his future wife, is the daughter of the lodging house owner, and he falls in love with her. Sensei also meets a new friend K. K is in trouble with his parents and Sensei invites him to live with him. K's mind is usually focused only on learning; however, he falls in love with Shizu. Accusing K, Sensei quietly makes a proposal to Shizu. After discovering the engagement of Sensei and Shizu, K commits suicide. Sensei is consumed with guilt. When the Meiji Emperor and his chief military officer die, Sensei decides to kill himself. He may be a victim of his selfish pride.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Natsume's purpose is to deliver a portrait of the intelligentsia in the Meiji era.

## Resources

- <http://quarterlyconversation.com/kokoro-by-natsume-soseki-review>
- <http://blogcritics.org/books/article/book-review-kokoro-by-natsume-soseki/>
- <http://www.simandan.com/?p=3>

## Work

**Author:** Sawako Ariyoshi

**Original publication date/period:** 1966

**Title in English:** *The Doctor's Wife*

**Number of pages (approx):** 352

**Original language:** Japanese

## Genre

This is a fictional account based on the real story of Doctor Hanaoka who first invented a general anaesthetic at the end of the 18th century. Ariyoshi describes this event in the context of conflicts between Kae and Seishu's mother Otsugi, in a novel that can be regarded as psychological fiction.

## Time and place

This is the story of Kae (1760–1827) who is the wife of the doctor Seishu Hanaoka (1760–1835) at Kishu in Japan.

## Subject matter

The central focus lies in the ugly conflicts between Kae and Otsugi to elicit Seishu's affection. Kae meets Otsugi when she is eight. Thirteen years later, Otsugi asks Kae's parents to arrange for Kae to marry her son Seishu, who is studying medicine in Kyoto. The family accepts the arrangement, with Kae's agreement, even though Kae's family is much higher in social status than Otsugi's.

Awaiting Seishu's homecoming from medical school, Kae is happy living with the very kind Otsugi. But the return of Seishu dramatically changes Otsugi. She alienates Kae and their conflicts start. Meanwhile, Seishu is carrying out many experiments on animals like cats and dogs, looking for an anaesthetic. As his work progresses, he feels that he needs to experiment with human beings. Kae and Otsugi vie for the privilege of being the experimental subject. Eventually, Seishu gives Kae a stronger anaesthetic than Otsugi, as Kae is much younger than Otsugi. Kae is still happy, even though the experiments result in her losing her eyesight, feeling that she is winning against Otsugi. After his success, Seishu's reputation flourishes. Once she knows the true story of the experiments, Otsugi is disappointed and feels old.

Kae appears to have succeeded against Otsugi. But who has won against whom? The last description of Ariyoshi is about the sizes of the graves of Otsugi, Kae and Seishu. Kae's grave is much bigger than Otsugi's one. However, Seishu's grave is so much bigger than other graves that we cannot see the two graves of Otsugi and Kae, the subjects through which his success was established.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Conflicts between a bride and a mother-in-law are clearly expressed here. The status of women and wives in traditional families in Japan is also an issue. The conflicts of the women may be tragic; however, they gladly sacrificed themselves for the success of Seishu. The paradoxes included in this novel provide ample material for discussion.

This story is based on the success story of Seishu. But in fact, many members of his family took part in this experiment. Ariyoshi deals mainly with only Kae and Otsugi in order to focus on the plot elements provided by their conflicts. These psychological descriptions of their conflicts are structurally interesting; Seishu's thoughts are not described directly but they are depicted indirectly.

## Resources

- <http://whisperinggums.wordpress.com/2010/03/01/sawako-ariyoshi-the-doctors-wife/>
- <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/LiteratureEnglish/WorldLiterature/Asia/?view=usa&ci=9784770029744>

# Work

**Author:** Ngugi wa Thiong'o

**Original publication date/period:** 1982

**Title in English:** *Devil on the Cross*

**Number of pages (approx):** 256

**Original language:** Kikuyu

## Genre

This novel fits in the category of the postcolonial fiction. It can also be categorized as satire.

## Time and place

*Devil on the Cross* takes place in postcolonial Kenya. It is set mainly in the fictitious rural town of Ilmorog in the 1970s and 1980s.

## Subject matter

The plot begins with Wariinga being nearly crushed by triple misfortunes. For refusing the advances of her employer, she loses her job as a secretary; that evening she is jilted by her lover; and then evicted by her landlord the following morning. She is saved from being crushed by a bus and her anonymous saviour invites her to the devil's feast. On boarding a minibus taxi, she is joined by Gatuiria, a young intellectual in search of his cultural roots, Wangari, an old woman and ex-freedom fighter who has just lost her only piece of property, and Muturi an enlightened worker. Shortly after, the driver (Mwaura) nearly abandons Wangari for not having the fare but the other passengers pay it for her. During their conversations about social and political issues in their society, it transpires that each of them has been invited to the devil's feast.

The main action thus centres on this party, held in a cave, and its aftermath. During the feast, these rich people compete among themselves for the coveted prize of the chief of thieves and robbers. They even enumerate their wealth and describe in detail the criminal and immoral methods they have used to acquire it. In the course of the competition, Mwaura and Muturi turn out to be equally competitive though for different motives and results. In the ensuing chaos, lives are lost and many are injured. Instead of arresting the thieves, the police take Wangari who ironically had gone to report them. Throughout this drama, Wariinga and Gatuiria have been spectators.

During the next two years, Wariinga's fortunes improve significantly. She and Gatuiria fall in love and plan to marry. But when they go to meet his parents, she discovers a horrible truth. His father is the same Rich Old Man who years ago took her virginity, made her pregnant, and then abandoned her, thereby sentencing her to all her subsequent tribulations. Her vengeful reaction brings the novel to a dramatic and liberating climax.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The novel explores a multitude of sociopolitical issues, including patriarchy and women's sexual exploitation, betrayal, the growing social divide in postcolonial society, globalization (especially capitalism), the relationship between the individual and the collective, class conflict, and corruption to mention a few. Ngugi dedicates the novel to "all Kenyans struggling against the neo-colonial stage of imperialism". The novel combines a wide range of oral tradition and more formal narrative devices. These include the use of the narrator/audience relation, songs (traditional and Christian), proverbs, very suggestive names, heavy uses of irony and satire.

## Resources

- <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/africa/omoregie11.html>
- <http://kelley-wadson.suite101.com/devil-on-the-cross-a51919>

## Work

**Author:** Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii

**Original publication date/period:** 1982

**Title in English:** *I Will Marry When I Want*

**Number of pages (approx):** 125

**Original language:** Kikuyu

## Genre

*I Will Marry When I Want* is can be classified as social realism and postcolonial drama.

## Time and place

*I Will Marry When I Want* is set in Kamiriithu, in the central province of postcolonial Kenya. Nowadays, the village is owned by a very small number of indigenous Kenyans of the Gikuyu tribe. During the Mau Mau guerilla war against British colonialism, Kamiriithu was set up as an "emergency village" by the colonial government so as to contain the rebellion. The play is set in the 1970s to 1980s.

## Subject matter

Ngugi's play revolves around the life and tribulations of Kiguunda, a farm labourer and a former freedom fighter with the Mau Mau, his wife Wangeci and daughter Gathoni. Aiming to upgrade their social status, they are instead ruined by his employer and tycoon neighbour.

When the play opens, Kiguunda and his family are busy preparing for a rare and inexplicable visit from the tycoon Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and his wife Jezebel. At the same time, Kiguunda has recently received a letter offering to buy his land for the construction of an insecticide factory, and his daughter is in a relationship with the arrogant son of his employer Kioi. Meanwhile, his fellow peasant neighbours pay them a courtesy call.

Ahab and Jezebel persuade Kiguunda and Wangeci to convert to Christianity and have a "proper" church wedding so that their two families can become closer. At first, Kiguunda refuses to abandon his ways. But since their daughter is in a relationship with Kioi's son, he and Wangeci mistake the visit for a sign that Kioi's son will marry their daughter and decide to comply. In so doing, they ignore their peasant neighbours' warnings. No sooner does the wedding take place than their daughter is made pregnant and then jilted by Kioi's son. Their efforts to get Kioi and Jezebel to intervene fail, with disastrous results for Kiguunda and his family. The play ends with Kiguunda and his peasant neighbour Gicaamba, taking an oath reminiscent of the Mau Mau days.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The play celebrates the role of Mau Mau and the ordinary person in the liberation of the country from British colonialism but dramatizes the disillusionment of the masses in postcolonial Kenya. The betrayal of traditional culture, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the influence of multinational corporations and what may be seen as neocolonial culture are also explored. Equally, the role of memory and history, the centrality of marriage and family as mainstays of traditional society, and the fate of the ordinary person are key concerns of the play.

The play is a result of collaboration between the authors and the villagers of Kamiriithu. It is very rich with oral tradition and ritual, a wide variety of songs and dances, flashbacks, proverbs, imagery and symbolism, irony, allegory, Biblical allusions and very suggestive names, to mention a few.

## Resources

- <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/africa/omoregie11.html>
- [http://www.usapglobal.org/stories/i\\_will\\_marry\\_when\\_i\\_want\\_telling\\_our\\_own\\_stories.htm](http://www.usapglobal.org/stories/i_will_marry_when_i_want_telling_our_own_stories.htm)

## Work

**Author:** Tadeusz Borowski

**Original language:** Polish

**Title in English:** *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*

**Original publication date/period:** 1948

**Number of pages (approx):** 192

## Genre

This is a collection of short stories about concentration camps often characterized as stark realism.

## Time and place

Most of the stories in the collection titled *This way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* ("Farewell to Mary") take place in Auschwitz concentration camp during the second world war.

## Subject matter

Bringing a different perspective to the large existing body of writing about the Holocaust, Borowski chooses as his focus the interactions among the prisoners. Their grievous condition can lead them into behaviours ranging from insensitivity to active persecution of others, and the betrayal of their own values and those of their fellow prisoners.

In the first story, titled "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen", Borowski describes a day in the camp when a transport of new prisoners arrives. The narrator and other prisoners are in group of privileged ones, who help with the transport. They have a chance to get all the goods that the new prisoners bring with them. They also are aware of the future of the new arrivals; part of the transport is to be directed to the gas chambers right away. Yet they are insensitive to that, as they care only for their own survival and new shoes which they can get from the newcomers.

The other stories deliver similar descriptions of the camp. Auschwitz is a place where terrible things happen but life for some seems normal, commonplace. There are prisoners who play soccer while others are led to the gas chambers. The only information about those who die is a terrifyingly high number. The author attention is devoted to those who survive and descriptions of how they achieve that, which is often the most horrifying detail.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Tough-minded realism characterizes both the material addressed and the attitude with which these stories from Auschwitz are presented. Moments surrounding the passage of some prisoners to the gas chambers played against those who will benefit from their deaths leave vivid impressions.

The cool and detached narrative voice adds a chilling dimension to the narrative. While sensing an underlying agenda of voicing what cannot ultimately be said by the deceased as well as by those who survive, the reader is likely to be disturbed by the mode of presentation.

The stories are written in the first person. The name of the narrator of three of the stories is Tadeusz. The identification of the author with the narrator was the moral decision of the former to accept the mutual responsibility for the concentration camps.

## Resources

- <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/aug/25/brief-survey-short-story-tadeusz-borowski>
- [http://books.google.nl/books/about/Holocaust\\_Literature\\_Agos%C3%ADn\\_to\\_Lentin.html?id=Gvfxm\\_YuGT4C&safe=active&redir\\_esc=y](http://books.google.nl/books/about/Holocaust_Literature_Agos%C3%ADn_to_Lentin.html?id=Gvfxm_YuGT4C&safe=active&redir_esc=y)

# Work

**Author:** Slawomir Mrozek

**Original publication date/period:** 1964

**Title in English:** *Tango*

**Number of pages (approx):** 100

**Original language:** Polish

## Genre

A play in three acts.

## Time and place

*Tango* is a play that covers about 24 hours in the life of a multigenerational family. The play takes place in the family apartment. Written and first performed in Kraków in 1965, the play was prohibited in Poland during periods of unrest in the 1970s and early 1980s.

## Subject matter

The apartment belonging to Stomil and Eleanor is untidy and squalid, full of useless objects of the past. The play takes place in times so modern there are no rules. The liberation from convention has been so complete that there is nothing to rebel against; the family live in a state of anarchic bohemianism. Stomil, the patriarch, appears unkempt and careless. He does not even seem concerned that his wife Eleanor is having an affair with the equally revolting and squalid servant Eddie. The grandparent/parent generation (Eugenia, Stomil, Eleanor) are people who celebrate complete freedom; nothing matters, no laws or rules apply. There is no need for conventions, for keeping any order in the house because their generation abolished all the rules.

Arthur, the Stomil's son, who always wears a suit, is troubled by this state of affairs. He doesn't approve of or accept the general spirit of anarchy in his family home. He wants to change it, and attempts to take action by enlisting the help of his grandmother Eugenia's older brother Eugene, and young female cousin Ala. However, his parents, Eddie and grandmother Eugenia discourage any move in this direction and Arthur's efforts are futile. Even when Arthur tries to provoke Stomil to kill Eddie in order to stop his affair with Eleanor, there is no result; Stomil instead joins in their game of cards. Arthur then declares his will to marry Ala. He wants a traditional wedding, and believes this will help to restore order to his family. However, this plan goes awry when Ala casually reveals she has also been having sex with Eddie. Arthur is incapacitated by the news and Eddie is able to kill him, taking Arthur's own gun from him for this purpose. Finally, Eddie and Eugene dance a tango to celebrate it all. This family conflict represents any other conflict and struggle for power: political, social and economic.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The play is a good example of work based on the grotesque and absurd. The set-up and stage are realistic but as the play moves on, more elements emerge as grotesque and absurdist.

The play also draws on and exploits the conventions of tragedy; a sustained analogy to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* may be drawn.

## Resources

- <http://www.chopintheatre.com/event.php?id=122>
- <http://kirjasto.sci.fi/mrozek.htm>

# Work

**Author:** Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen

**Original language:** Portuguese

**Title in English:** Anthology of works as chosen by the school

**Original publication date/period:** C20

**Number of pages (approx):** unknown

## Genre

Poetry.

## Time and place

Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen (1919–2004) is a Portuguese poet who wrote during the second half of the 20th century.

## Subject matter

Sophia wrote around 600 poems. She is considered a referential marker in Portuguese poetry. Her poetry is inspired by classical writing, and by the scenery of the Mediterranean region, as we see in “Dionysos”, “Soneto de Eurydice”, “Musa”, “Ressurgiremos”, “Delphica”, “Em Hydra, evocando Fernando Pessoa”. Through poetry, Sophia explored the nature of humanity and the origins of the universe, especially the notion of chaos and nothingness. The sea, the earth, home, childhood and the family also occupy an important place. “Paisagem”, “Mar”, “O Jardim e a Noite”, and “Casa Branca” are poems where we discover the sea, the wind and a secret garden. Sophia used to say that poetry was a way of penetrating reality. She writes in a transparent and intimate language, her ideas structured by the most ancient myths of humankind.

She was fully engaged with Portuguese society where she played an important role during the dictatorship, before the revolution of the 25 April 1974. She courageously criticized the politics of the time. Many poems evoke the hard times lived without freedom: “Este é o tempo ...”, “Porque”, “Exílio”, “Pranto pelo dia de hoje”, “Data”, “As pessoas sensíveis”. After the revolution she continued her involvement in political Portuguese life and her poetry reflects this in poems like “25 de abril”, “Revolução” or “Nesta hora”.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Sophia de Mello was engaged in a search for justice, balance, harmony and a demanding moral stance. She demonstrated keen awareness of the period in which we live. Other significant motifs include: nature and the sea; the home; love; life opposed to death; the memory of childhood; the values of the Classical period; idealism and individualism considered on a psychological level; the poet as guardian of the absolute; Christian humanism; the belief in messianic values; and separation.

Sophia had her own style in which we can recognize the exceptional value of the words, a rigorous approach to expression, a call for a clear vision, rich symbols as well as allegories, synaesthesia and rhythm evoking a ritual dimension. The word becomes transparent in relation to things; there is the brightness of a world where the rhythm and the intellect are in a perfect harmony.

## Resources

- Vasconcelos, JC. 2004. *Cem poemas de Sophia*. Visão/JL.
- Besse, MG. 1990. *Sophia de Mello Breyner*. Publicações Europa-América. Sintra.
- <http://www.bibliomonde.com/auteur/sophia-mello-breyner-445.html>
- [http://www.poetryinternational.org/piw/cms/cms/cms\\_module/index.php?obj\\_id=4657](http://www.poetryinternational.org/piw/cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=4657)
- <http://cvc.instituto-camoes.pt/poemasemana/08/03.html>

# Work

**Author:** Griselda Gambaro

**Original publication date/period:** 1981

**Title in English:** *Saying Yes*

**Number of pages (approx):** unknown

**Original language:** Spanish

## Genre

The play is from the dramatic genre that could be viewed as both theatre of the absurd and theatre of the grotesque.

## Time and place

The play takes place at an unspecified time and location, although the characters' speech suggests that it is set in contemporary Buenos Aires.

## Subject matter

A man enters a barbershop for a haircut. From the outset, the barber's attitude is strange and mildly intimidating. The man interprets each of the barber's few words and his gestures as a demand to reverse roles. As the action unfolds, the man does more and more things that place him in the barber's role, while the barber gradually adopts the stance of a customer.

This role reversal is demonstrated largely by the man's tendency to accept the barber's demands, several of which are only suggested or are imagined by the man, than by the wishes of the barber himself. This phenomenon explains the title of the play.

The play premiered in July 1981 against a political and cultural context that has a decisive bearing on the play's interpretation. It premiered as part of the Teatro Abierto movement of cultural resistance to the military dictatorship (1976 to 1983). This movement was an initiative by playwrights, directors, actors and intellectuals who opposed the military regime. Although the regime was by then partially weakened politically, the allusive, symbolic and metaphorical nature of many of the movement's plays was due primarily to the need to circumvent censorship.

The man's "saying yes" could be interpreted as the consent given by a small but significant portion of Argentine society, particularly the higher income sectors, to the military dictatorship despite its illegal repression practices. Similarly, the abstract placement of the actions in space and time, and the names of the characters (the Man, the Barber) could be due to the need to circumvent censorship by avoiding references to specific circumstances.

Acceptance of the unacceptable, the inability to rebel, self censorship, fear and obedience are the central themes of this play. The compact nature of the characters (intimidating and enigmatic in the case of the Barber; timid and fearful in the case of the Man) provides an interesting subject for study.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

The stage directions are a key aspect of the dramatic text of this play. They provide detailed descriptions of the characters' gestures in order to create a very slow transition in the reversal of roles that represents the central conflict of the play.

## Resources

- <http://theater.dukejournals.org/content/21/3/34.citation>
- [http://www.amazon.com/Escena-Teatro-Griselda-Gambaro-Spanish/dp/9500517027/ref=sr\\_1\\_6?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1324246676&sr=1-6](http://www.amazon.com/Escena-Teatro-Griselda-Gambaro-Spanish/dp/9500517027/ref=sr_1_6?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1324246676&sr=1-6)
- [http://www.amazon.com/Embodying-Resistance-Griselda-Grotesque-Literature/dp/083875659X/ref=sr\\_1\\_9?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1324246733&sr=1-9](http://www.amazon.com/Embodying-Resistance-Griselda-Grotesque-Literature/dp/083875659X/ref=sr_1_9?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1324246733&sr=1-9)

## Work

**Author:** Gioconda Belli

**Original publication date/period:** 1994

**Title in English:** *The Inhabited Woman*

**Number of pages (approx):** 414

**Original language:** Spanish

## Genre

This novel fits within the Latin American *post-boom* literary tradition with elements of both fantasy and realism. It has been considered partially autobiographical in many respects.

## Time and place

A double narrative takes place in Faguas, a fictional setting very similar to Nicaragua. One narrative is that of the modern woman Lavinia, an architect. The second narrative is from the 15th century and features Itza, who represents the life and values of an indigenous woman. She has been killed by the conquerors of her land and she survives through inhabiting the soul of Lavinia in the present-day narrative.

## Subject matter

Two stories intermingle but the core narrative in Gioconda Belli's novel presents the story of Lavinia, an upper class architect who lives in Faguas and is gradually presented as a feminist who avoids romantic commitment and lives by herself. In a patriarchal and protectionist society she behaves as a very liberated woman who cares mainly for feminism: women's rights, self-realization and social justice. But her life changes when Felipe, her lover, introduces her to a revolutionary movement whose mission is to topple the military regime ruling their country. Increasingly involved in society and the world surrounding her, Lavinia eventually engages wholeheartedly with this movement and, shortly after her lover is killed, she also dies for the cause and principles she has decided to support.

Belli also introduces a second storyline which gives life to Itza, an indigenous woman who had lived in the 15th century and who was in her own time a true symbol of a revolutionary feminist resisting the Spanish conquerors. Itza dwells in an orange tree in Lavinia's garden, and when Lavinia makes orange juice, Itza's rebellious spirit emerges and the minds and hearts of both women become intertwined. Like Lavinia, Itza has also died for her cause, fighting for a better world, recognizing the rights of human beings but also respecting the natural world. Both characters serve, not only as symbols of rebellious womanhood in a patriarchal and despotic society, but also as a bridge between nature and mankind.

## Important conventions and stylistic features

Feminism, and the need for women to fight for their rights, is a major focus of the work. Sensitive nature is symbolized by the orange tree, developing a relationship between a traditional understanding of Mother Earth and the sense of unity between humans and nature.

A poetic prose style within the prose narrative is used. Symbolism represents the honoring of Nature, consonant with all the values of indigenous American peoples and their connections to our modern, contemporary civilization. Belli's use of language to describe space and time deserves deep analysis to grasp the true link of the time/space matrix in this novel.

## Resources

- <http://www.giocondabelli.org/the-inhabitedwoman/>
- [http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi\\_0199-4424762/The-revolutionary-empowerment-of-nature.html](http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-4424762/The-revolutionary-empowerment-of-nature.html)