GENRE

"Genre" comes from the French word meaning both "kind" and "gender." While in English we use genre mostly to refer to categories of literary, musical, and artistic compositions, in the past there has also been a sense that some of these types of work are more "masculine" or "feminine"—more or less privileged—than others. According to M. H. Abrams, since the time of Plato and Aristotle, works of literature have generally been placed in three main classes: "poetic or lyric (uttered throughout in the first person); epic or narrative (in which the narrator speaks in the first person, then lets his characters speak for themselves); and drama (in which the characters do all the talking)" (1981, 70). A poet or dramatist's success or failure in any one of these genres was judged by how well he (nearly always the writer was a man) adhered to the standards articulated by classical theorists like Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Longinus, Plotinus, and others.

> From the Renaissance through much of the eighteenth century, the recognized genres—or poetic "kinds," as they were then called—were widely thought to be fixed literary types, somewhat like species in the biological order of nature; many neoclassic critics insisted that each kind must remain "pure" (there must, for example, be no "mixing" of tragedy and comedy), and also proposed *rules* which specified the subject matter, structure, style, and emotional effect proper to each kind. At that time, the genres were also commonly ranked in a hierarchy (closely related to the ranking of social classes, from royalty and the nobility to peasants), ranging from epic and tragedy at the top to the short lyric, epigram, and other minor types at the bottom. (Abrams 1981, 70–71)

Of course, even when ideas of genre were supposedly most rigid, a brief glance at world literature shows us that minor rather than major writers worried more about sticking strictly to narrow ideas of what one could or couldn't do in a work of literature. Shakespeare, for one, was an egregious offender in the crime of genre-mixing. From act to act, scene to scene, even from line to line, he ranges from the tragic to the comic, from high diction to low. In Polonius's speech introducing the traveling players in act II, scene 2 of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare famously satirizes the subdividing of literature into absurdly particular varieties. These are "[t]he best actors in the world," Polonius boasts of the troop, "either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited."

Genre features may no longer be as stable as critics once wanted them to be, but bookstores still classify their wares by nonfiction and fiction, and within these categories are many subcategories. Indeed, "genre fiction" refers to novels found in sections labeled Romance, Horror, Crime, Spy, Science Fiction, and so on. Genre fiction gets its name from the fact that books written in the genre adhere to a specific set of conventions that readers of the genre expect, if not demand. Because these conventions may be so specific and unrelenting, the writing itself may become formulaic, so reliant upon a set of rigid conventions that there is little room for creativity.

Yet if mainstream creative writers once derided genre fiction as unimaginative and mechanical, many literary novelists of the past thirty years have enjoyed playing with, and against, those same conventions. Erica Jong believes that "genres themselves matter less and less. The most enduring books of the modern era are, like *Ulysses*, full of exposition, narrative, dramatic writing and even poetry" (Arana 2003, 69). Postmodern writers have been especially engaged in "the repudiation of narrative and generic boundaries" (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy 1998, 1). In novels that were *almost* recognizable as science fiction, William Burroughs, for instance, employed "nonlinear techniques of narrative composition works together with . . . thematic explorations of domination and resistance, sexuality and drug use, to challenge the structures and taboos of contemporary society." Among the many novelists who have followed Burroughs's example and expanded and challenged the definitions of genre in their work are Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, Samuel Delany, Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Paul Auster, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Gloria Anzaldúa

The influence of postmodernism, which "jams things together, and, in so doing, calls attention not just to their convergences but also to the artificial construct by which they are produced" (Haake 2000, 272), has clearly had an effect on writing in composition (q.v.) courses as well, making them more open to genre-mixing and resulting in the validation of expository essays that may look quite creative indeed. The very site where most writing now occurs—at our computers—is as much a world of imagery (icons on our toolbars and desktops, illustrations and photographs on Web pages) as it is a world of text, and writing any document—creative or scholarly—for an intelligent, attentive audience (*Keywords in Creative Writing*, for example) is likely to involve dipping into and drawing from a number of "genres." As writers toggle between e-mail and the Internet, online databases and print books and journal articles, "it becomes pretty clear that we *already* inhabit a model of communication practices incorporating multiple genres related to each other, those multiple genres, remediated across contexts of time and space, linked one to the next, circulating across and around rhetorical situations both inside and outside of school" (Yancey 2004, 308).

Tom Romano, one of the first scholars to catalog productive ways of crossing genre boundaries in school essays, traces his interest in the multigenre paper to a reading of Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), which consists of "songs, thumbnail character sketches, poems, a comic book excerpt, narrative, stream-of-consciousness passages, newspaper interviews, even photographs and drawings" (2000, 3): "Out of his inquiry into Billy the Kid, Ondaatje created a complex, multilayered, multivoiced blend of genres, each revealing information about his topic, each self-contained, making a point of its own, unconnected to other genres by conventional transitional devices. I cannot emphasize enough this idea of separateness. Each genre is a color slide, complete in itself, possessing its own satisfying composition, but also working in concert with the others to create a single literary experience" (4). Interestingly, as Romano implies here, even when authors are madly mixing genres, the frisson we feel as one type of writing is juxtaposed against another can only occur when we can identify the different genres.

If we can now speak of the multigenre composition essay as a genre in itself, contemporary rhetoricians have taken the study of genre even further and applied it to areas far outside traditional literature. For these theorists, "genres and the activity systems they are part of provide the forms of life within which we make our lives. This is as true of our systems

of work, creativity, community, leisure, and intimacy, as it is of our system of tax obligation—each mediated through language forms along with whatever other embodied and material aspects there are to the interactions" (Bazerman 2002, 15). From this perspective, any type of written or oral communication can constitute a genre. In *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre*, a recent book on the subject, genre theory is used to explain everything from political party Web sites to doctor-patient interviews to school geography classes to architecture students' sketchbooks (Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko 2002). If we can indeed recognize each of these texts as a separate genre, that is because our socialization "has trained us to immediately perceive the purpose and intended effects, i.e., the social function, of most texts we are confronted with. . . . The majority of these texts have some practical function . . . which can be related to the real world around us" (Verdonk 2002, 12).

Clearly, genre is shaped by social forces and by the expectations of different readers during different historical periods, and "a given type persists only so long as it remains a functional response to exigencies" (Campbell and Jamieson 1990, 104). The rise of the novel in eighteenth-century England, for instance, is often linked to the increased education and leisure time of middle-class women. The novel has remained a popular form because literacy and leisure time have continued to expand. However, the relative *un*popularity of the novel compared to television shows and movies can be explained by the fact that, for many people in postindustrial societies, leisure time is now limited; these people would rather seek brief release in a visual medium rather than invest days or weeks in reading a novel.

Because the definitions of genre change over time, it is naive to suppose that those definitions will not be contested in the process of their shifting. As Daniel Chandler (2000) points out: "The classification and hierarchical taxonomy of genres is not a neutral and 'objective' procedure. There are no undisputed 'maps' of the system of genres within any medium (though literature may perhaps lay some claim to a loose consensus). Furthermore, there is often considerable theoretical disagreement about the definition of specific genres. . . . One theorist's *genre* may be another's *sub-genre* or even *super-genre* (and indeed what is *technique, style, mode, formula* or *thematic grouping* to one may be treated as a *genre* by another)." In short, there can be no universally agreed upon characterization of genre.

Despite all the work currently being done in genre theory, many American creative writers would be surprised to learn that anyone is particularly concerned with more than just the four "main genres": poetry,

fiction, drama, and creative nonfiction. From a pragmatic point of view, when submitting work to editors and publishers, writers just need to know which genre editor to send their work to. Those editors, in turn, will expect the writer to have a fairly clear idea of the conventions of their genre.

Moreover, genre remains important for graduate students in creative writing since most programs require students seeking an MFA (q.v.) or writing a creative dissertation (q.v.) to declare a "major genre" in which they will write their book-length thesis. In the work that will ultimately determine whether or not they receive their degrees, graduate student writers may feel hesitant to cross lines that confuse or frustrate their thesis or dissertation committees. (And committee members may feel unqualified to assess work outside their own area of specialization.) Once they have their degrees in hand and begin looking for jobs, creative writers will again find that genre plays a significant role in their professional lives. College and university hiring committees typically specify a particular genre they want candidates to teach; not surprisingly, applicants without extensive experience in that genre are unlikely to be asked to teach it.

Consequently, while genre-mixing may be on the rise among established writers and those outside the academy, there are practical reasons for emerging writers to select a major genre to specialize in and to adhere to the expectations for that genre. Though some writers may find these external forces restrictive, others will be comforted by the fact that once a writer chooses a particular genre, she "has chosen in some respects a template, a standard . . . an interaction of contexts and an appropriate reflection of those contexts in sets of expectation." And even within the boundaries of the genre, there remains "a range of possible variations, room within the standard to meet the demands of the individual situation and the individual's creative choices" (Devitt 2004, 217).