

## INTRODUCTION TO A *GENRE-BASED* APPROACH TO LITERATURE (GENERIC INQUIRY)

Now that we're better acquainted with "thematic" and "analytic" approaches to literature, we'll turn our attention to an approach that takes advantage of a basic fact of the human mind: we love to categorize.

### 1. *Our Propensity for Categories*

A good way to beginning thinking about "genre" as an approach to the study of literature is to realize that we make "genre" distinctions all the time, especially when it comes to matters that are important to us. A good example is music: In addition to the most obvious genre distinction (e.g., blues, classical, country, folk, hip hop, jazz, rock), people who especially like a particular genre (e.g., rock) usually make further distinctions. For example, the *Wikipedia* entry for "Rock Music" currently lists 19 sub-genres and 17 fusion genres, including,

Alternative rock, art rock, beat experimental rock, garage rock, glam rock, hard rock, heartland rock, heavy metal indie rock, new wave post-punk post-rock, progressive rock, psychedelic rock, punk rock, roots rock, soft rock, surf.

Moreover, our set of categories change rather quickly; here is the *Wikipedia* list from 5 years ago:

Art rock, British rock, Christian rock, Classic Rock, Desert rock, Detroit rock, Experimental rock, Garage rock, Girl group, Glam rock, Glitter rock, Group Sounds, Hard rock, Heartland rock, Heavy Metal, Instrumental rock, Jam band, Jangle pop, Krautrock, Post-rock, Power pop, Protopunk, Psychodelia, Pub rock (Aussie), Pub rock (UK), Rock en español, Soft rock, Southern rock, Surf.

In addition, fans of particular sub-genres typically make even more precise divisions. For example, according to *Wikipedia*, fans of Heavy Metal recognize 26 sub-genres, many with sub-sub-genres, like "Goregrind" as a sub-sub-genre of the sub-genre "Grindcore." All these examples illustrate that, the more interest we have in something, the more we make genre distinctions. (By the way, I know next-to-nothing about metal; so don't ask me any questions.)

### 2. *Distinctions, Expectations, and the Idea of "Conventions"*

A good way to understand genre distinctions is in terms of *expectations*. That is, our expectations are different if we are listening to a song by Petra (Christian rock) or to a song by the Sex Pistols (Punk). Genre scholars talk about these expectations in terms of *conventions*; that is, these scholars define particular genres and sub-genres by identifying a set of conventions. For example, what do you expect when you listen to a Christian rock song; or, how do you know a Christian rock song when you hear it?

### 3. *Conventions – Thematic and Formal*

Typically, literary conventions are divided into two broad categories: thematic and formal. Thematic conventions pertain to *content*; for example, what kind of content do you expect when listening to a Christian rock song? or what is the difference in content that enables us to distinguish Southern Hip Hop from East Coast and West Coast Hip Hop? Formal conventions, on the other hand, pertain to *formal*, or *structural* qualities. For example, what structural qualities do we expect from a jam band, like Phish? or what degree of rhyming do we expect in rap?

### 4. *Manipulating Conventions*

The most important aspect of a generic approach to the study music or literature is not merely the categorizing of a song or a literary work; instead, what we are interested in is examining how the artist/writer manipulates the conventions of the genre. There are three basic ways to manipulate conventions:

- following established conventions (not very interesting),
- turning, spinning, playing with the conventions (much more interesting), and
- using the conventions ironically (the basis of parody and satire).

The first genres we will study are the *grotesque* (in short fiction) and the *sonnet*. The sonnet, we will find, is especially instructive as a genre because it has a long tradition of both thematic and formal conventions. We will find, also, that authors have altered the original conventions in fascinating ways.