

Literary Genius: 25 Classic Writers Who Define English and American Literature

reviewed by [Jeffrey Johnson](#) in the [December 29, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Literary Genius: 25 Classic Writers Who Define English and American Literature

Joseph Epstein, ed.

Paul Dry

In his introduction, Joseph Epstein offers a broad definition of literary genius: “Timelessness, grandeur of vision, originality of outlook—all these in concert and worked at a high power comprise genius in the writer.” Literary artists till some of the same fields of human experience that are staked out by writers of sacred texts and theological works.

Of these 25 authors, apparently only John Milton unabashedly wore the mantle of a Christian writer. According to the essay here by Reynolds Price, Milton wrote under the “increasing conviction that he was ordained by God to be a writer of what he considered the highest kind, an epic poet.” Price praises Milton’s lasting influence, writing that he was one who “lodged himself where he longed to be—as a spur in the depths of our minds, a balm to our souls, a companionable hand in our solitary journeys.”

Readers attuned to underlying influences of religion in writers will find this compilation loaded with assertions and arguments to think about and affirm or deny. According to essayist Bruce Floyd, Emily Dickinson “could not find solace in religion.” John Simon approves Stevie Smith’s opinion that T. S. Eliot’s deepening engagement with Anglicanism represented “a retreat from largeness to smallness, a flight in fear to a religion of fear, from freedom to captivity.” There are descriptions of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “progressive moralism,” which was neither Puritanical nor Calvinist; of Walt Whitman’s “revolutionary free-verse form that derived its cadences from the King James Bible”; and of patterns of meaning in Willa Cather’s fiction, especially related to Christocentricity in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Genius is a rare gem in tragic and flawed human lives. It flashed early in John Keats, who died at age 25; it remained and matured in Samuel Johnson, Mark Twain and others who lived long enough to reflect on the long trajectories of their lives. Ernest Hemingway’s genius was to create fictional dreams out of restless human movement; country boy William Faulkner found his genius when he discovered that his “postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about.”

Barry Moser, a former Methodist preacher and noted illustrator of the *Pennyroyal Caxton Bible* (1999), has produced exquisite woodcut portraits and illustrations to accompany each entry. The etchings seem too fine and moving for a paperback book. They shimmer with vitality, animating the pages with iconic interpretations of the extraordinary creative achievements of these 25 ordinary human beings.