**Examples of Biography in Literature**

An important subset of biography is literary biography. A literary biography applies biographical study and form to the lives of artists and writers. This poses some complications for writers of literary biographies in that they must balance the representation of the biographical subject, the artist or writer, as well as aspects of the subject’s literary works. This balance can be difficult to achieve in terms of judicious interpretation of biographical elements within an author’s literary work and consideration of the separate spheres of the artist and their art.

Literary biographies of artists and writers are among some of the most interesting biographical works. These biographies can also be very influential for readers, not only in terms of understanding the artist or writer’s personal story but the context of their work or literature as well. Here are some examples of well-known literary biographies:

**Example 1: *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*(Nancy Milford)**

One of the first things Vincent explained to Norma was that there was a certain freedom of language in the Village that mustn’t shock her. It wasn’t vulgar. ‘So we sat darning socks on Waverly Place and practiced the use of profanity as we stitched. Needle in, . Needle out, piss. Needle in, . Needle out, c. Until we were easy with the words.’

This passage reflects the way in which Milford is able to characterize St. Vincent Millay as a person interacting with her sister. Even avid readers of a writer’s work are often unaware of the artist’s private and personal natures, separate from their literature and art. Milford reflects the balance required on the part of a literary biographer of telling the writer’s life story without undermining or interfering with the meaning and understanding of the literature produced by the writer. Though biographical information can provide some influence and context for a writer’s literary subjects, style, and [choices](https://literarydevices.net/choices/), there is a distinction between the fictional world created by a writer and the writer’s “real” world. However, a literary biographer can illuminate the writer’s story so that the reader of both the biography and the biographical subject’s literature finds greater meaning and significance.

**Example 2: *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens*(Claire Tomalin)**

The season of domestic goodwill and festivity must have posed a problem to all good Victorian family men with more than one family to take care of, particularly when there were two lots of children to receive the demonstrations of paternal love.

Tomalin’s literary biography of [Charles Dickens](https://literarydevices.net/charles-dickens/) reveals the writer’s extramarital relationship with a woman named Nelly Ternan. Tomalin presents the complications that resulted for Dickens from this relationship in terms of his personal and family life as well as his professional writing and literary work. Revealing information such as an extramarital relationship can influence the way a reader may feel about the subject as a person, and in the case of literary biography it can influence the way readers feel about the subject’s literature as well. Artists and writers who are [beloved](https://literarydevices.net/beloved/), such as Charles Dickens, are often idealized by their devoted readers and society itself. However, as Tomalin’s biography of Dickens indicates, artists and writers are complicated and as subject to human failings as anyone else.

### Example 3: Virginia Woolf (Hermione Lee)

‘A self that goes on changing is a self that goes on living’: so too with the biography of that self. And just as lives don’t stay still, so life-writing can’t be fixed and finalised. Our ideas are shifting about what can be said, our knowledge of human [character](https://literarydevices.net/character/) is changing. The biographer has to pioneer, going ‘ahead of the rest of us, like the miner’s canary, testing the [atmosphere](https://literarydevices.net/atmosphere/), detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions’. So, ‘There are some stories which have to be retold by each generation’. She is talking about the story of Shelley, but she could be talking about her own life-story.

In this passage, Lee is able to demonstrate what her biographical subject, Virginia Woolf, felt about biography and a person telling their own or another person’s story. Literary biographies of well-known writers can be especially difficult to navigate in that both the author and biographical subject are writers, but completely separate and different people. As referenced in this passage by Lee, Woolf was aware of the subtleties and fluidity present in a person’s life which can be difficult to judiciously and effectively relay to a reader on the part of a biographer. In addition, Woolf offers insight into the fact that biographers must make choices in terms of what information is presented to the reader and the context in which it is offered, making them a “miner’s canary” as to how history will view and [remember](https://literarydevices.net/remember/) the biographical subject.