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Module: Literary Texts
First Year License (L1)
Groups: 1/2/3 &4
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Lesson 01: An Introduction to the “Literary Texts Module”: What is literature, what is a text?

Description of the course

Literature, it goes without saying, is one of the overarching fields in the world of academia. Despite the fact that First year students do have a general background in literature, but their entry to the world of literature in a department, whose language of instruction is English, may pose difficulties of understanding for students who are familiarized with literature in Arabic. This course is namely an introductory gate that endeavors to pave the ground for students to establish a link with literature and to make them aware of the ambiguity and difficulties regarding the term's conceptualization. A set of definitions are suggested and students are required to read, compare and deconstruct each one with the aim of forging a definition of their own. More precisely, the course provides a site of discussion on the nature of text. The course furthermore focuses on the on the pertinent question: Why authors tend to express themselves through literary oeuvres? Finally, yet importantly, the objectives behind teaching and studying literary texts should be highlighted in that students recognize that the content is meant for providing an important conceptual apparatus that enables them to study British and American literatures with a relative ease.

Course Goals and Objectives:

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Identify the vagueness, elusiveness and opaqueness related to literature definition.
- Conceptualize crucial terms such as literature and text.
- Discuss the reasons for which writers express their feelings and thought in literary forms.
- Use the knowledge they learn to forge a definition of their own.
- Tell some oral stories famous in their region.

The course main points:

- Introduction
- Problematic concerning the ‘written aspect’ in defining of Literature
- Defining of Literature
- Defining text
- Why authors tend to express themselves through literary oeuvres?

Introduction

Literature is one of the most important fields that is being taught almost in all schools and universities across the world. Nevertheless, despite the fact that everyone among us knows well how to employ the term ‘literature’ appropriately in every day’s discourse, the term remains vexed and loaded. In other words, if we look up the term literature in any dictionary or current encyclopedia and we will be struck by the ambiguity of its usage as well as by a certain lack of material in the endeavors to conceptualize or define it. In most cases, literature denotes ‘written texts’ or it is referred to as ‘the entirety of written expression’. Yet, this poses another problematic. If we assume that literature is the entirety of written expression, can any written document be considered as literary?

Jean Paul Sartre what is literature

1. Problematic concerning the ‘written aspect’ in defining of Literature

To answer the question so far, students are invited to peruse the passages suggested below to find out the differences in form.

Passage I

Chemical Formula: H₂O

Characteristics: Breakable at 100c° and evaporation

Molecule Description: two molecules of Hydrogen + one molecule of Oxygen.

Water (or chemically known as H₂O) is composed of two molecules of Hydrogen and one molecule of Oxygen. It provides the human body with these two chemicals to hydrate it because when the body produces energy (i.e., heat), they (i.e., H₂O molecules) are consumed.

Passage II

Rakan opened the bottle of water and drank to quench his thirst because he worked hard all day in the hot summer sun. The water tasted sweet and cool. “I can drink a barrel of that sweet water,” he thought to himself.

The answer is that the two reading passages treat the same topic, but both are different in terms of the form. The first one is a scientific description of water and the second is a literary account for Rakan’s thirst. In this passage, the reader finds literary and formal terms such as the verb “quench” and figurative language in Rakan’s saying: “I can drink a barrel of that sweet water”.

So to solve this problematic one may choose to say that literature is a body of written works with the restriction that not every written document can be regarded or categorized as literature in the more exact sense of the word. The definitions, hence, usually include additional adjectives such as “aesthetic” or “artistic” (Klarar 01) so as to distinguish literary works from non-literary texts such as touristic guides, newspapers, telephone books, fashion magazines, legal documents, and scholarly writings.

Notwithstanding the previous claims, a further debate *vis a vis* the nature of literature may float to the surface. While literature denotes written texts, scholars have been, and still, questioning whether the terms also applies to the spoken or sung texts "oral literature", to be exact. Mario Klarar in his book *An Introduction to Literary Studies* argues:

Not only the visual—writing is always pictorial—but also the acoustic element, the spoken word, is an integral part of literature, for the alphabet translates spoken words into signs. Before writing developed as a system of signs, whether pictographs or alphabets, “texts” were passed on orally. This predecessor of literary expression, called “oral poetry,” consisted of texts stored in a bard’s or minstrel’s memory which could be recited upon demand. It is assumed that most of the early classical and Old English epics were produced in this tradition and only later preserved in written form.
(02)

In a typically Algerian context, storytelling enjoys a profound sense of sublime. None can resist the temptation of grandmother's orally told stories that transport the listeners to another world. Since, storytelling does the purpose of generating an aesthetic pleasure among listeners, orality can be considered as literature. Interesting is the idea that a marriage between the oral performance and the written word can be seen in drama. It is only in drama that this union between the spoken word and visual expression invite the audience to see how the written text is performed on the stage.

Picture 01: Grandmother telling a story to her grandchildren



Picture 02: The Orphans' Cow: an Algerian old story told by Algerian grandmothers



It is only in drama that the union between the spoken word and visual expression survives in a traditional literary genre, although this feature is not always immediately noticeable.

2. Defining of Literature

After paving the ground for literature, it is possible at this level, to go through some definitions of the terms. In handling the vagueness and the lack of substance that characterize literature, here are some suggested definitions:

1. In its modern descriptive sense, literature is defined by Oxford Dictionary (seventh edition) as:

*“Pieces of writing that are valued as **works of art**, especially novels, plays, and poems (in contrast to technical books and newspapers, magazines, etc): French literature”*

The definition above stresses the written aspect of literature and mentions precisely classes or group of literature: prose, poetry, and drama that have an artistic value.

2. Charles Swann and Raymond Williams – *Theory of Literature*- define it:

“As 'imaginative' writing in the sense of fiction - writing which is not literally true.”

The second definition above accentuates imagination that gives way to fictional works to arise. Without imagination, the works of literature may not evoke the reader's pleasure.

3. Encyclopaedia Britannica defined literature as:

“The best expression of the best thought reduced to writing”

4. In his book *American Literature and Culture 1900–1960* Gail McDonald defines literature:

“Literature,” also a vexed and loaded term, is here used to refer to poetry, drama, novels, short fiction, and, occasionally, autobiography. Given the voluminous written materials from which to select examples, I have chosen to be literal about “literature” – that is, as defined by “*the letter*” – referring to written and published materials.

Therefore, I do not consider oral traditions. The emphasis is primarily on the category of writing designated as imaginative or creative, what once was called *belles lettres* (02).

Etymologically speaking, the Latin word “litteratura” is derived from “littera” (letter), which is the smallest unit of alphabetical system.

3. Defining text

A piece of written or printed material regarded as conveying the authentic or primary form of a particular work.

Oxford Living dictionaries

The original words of something written or printed, as opposed to a paraphrase, translation, revision or condensation.

The free dictionary

Mario Klarer assumes that “the word text is related to “textile” and can be translated as “fabric”: just as single threads form a fabric, so words and sentences form a meaningful and coherent text.

An Introduction to Literary Studies

4. **Is literature a new mode of expression to the last centuries?**

Literature as a mode of expression is not new to the last centuries. An exploration of prehistoric paintings in caves, which hold “encoded” information in the form of visual signs underlies an earliest manifestations of the human being to express

Picture 03: Prehistoric painting



Picture 04: Prehistoric painting



5. Why authors tend to express themselves through literary oeuvres?

It is usually said that literature reminds us of our humanity. In this regard, the authors' creative outlets are certainly expression of an emotional or intellectual experience, be it in poetry or in prose. They combine words artistically to create meaningful situations as only meaning "*can give words their verbal unity*" (Sartre 30). Given the fact that literature reflects society, works such as poems, novels, short stories and drama give a true picture that mirrors the thought of nations. However, behind the very act of writing a human wish to leave behind a trace of oneself through creative expression, which will exist detached from the individual and, therefore, outlive its creator.

Activity:

- 1- Go back to the definitions suggested by your teacher and try to forge a one of your own.

- 2- Do you remember any oral tale or story that your grandma told you once? Try to write the most important events that characterize the story you remember to tell it to your friend.

References

- Mario Klarar. *An Introduction to Literary Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *'What is literature?' and other essays*. Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Charles Swann and Raymond Williams – *Theory of Literature*
- *Oxford Dictionary* seventh edition
- Gail McDonald. *American Literature and Culture 1900–1960*.
- *Britannica Encyclopedia*
- *Encarta Encyclopedia*
- Oxford Living dictionaries
- The free dictionary

Pictures

Picture 1: <https://alghad.com/%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AA-%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88/>

Picture 2: <https://al-ain.com/article/bakarat-elyatama-algeria>