

Module : Humanities and Social Sciences

Level : 1st year

Teacher: Dr. Nassima Amirouche

Lecture 2: Literature

Objectives:

- Make students more familiar with literature and its categories.
- Highlight the importance of studying Literature.

1. Etymology

The term derives from Latin *litaritura/litteratura* “writing formed with letters”. In its modern descriptive sense, literature denotes written texts; by extension scholars have also applied the term to spoken or sung texts ("oral literature"), writings in particular subject areas ("medical literature"), other collections of material in a given language or national tradition ("English literature"). It is often divided into historical periods ("Victorian literature") as well as into formal categories (prose, poetry, or drama) and genres (such as the epic, the novel, or the folktale).

2. Definition of Literature

Classical authors of ancient Greece and Rome generally never recognized the study of “literature” as a discipline per se; rather, they looked at forms such as drama, history, poetry, philosophy, and mythology on their own terms, or in terms of various schools of philosophical or religious thought. With the revival of advanced learning in late medieval and Renaissance Europe, though, the focus of study became classical literature itself—the sense first recorded by the OED; a person of “letters” was one who knew the classical traditions, and could read the classics. Only after literature in modern vernaculars became too significant to ignore did the current sense of the word develop.

European universities long resisted according writers working in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and other vernacular languages the same status in their curricula as that given to writers of classical Latin and Greek. Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and their contemporaries were always conscious of the perceived inferiority of their native language, even as they rivalled and surpassed the literary achievements of their classical precursors.

3. Scope of literature

In its broadest sense, literature came into being with the first use of pictographs, hieroglyphs, or alphabetic scripts, although it is more common to designate as "literature" only those texts which contain a degree of imaginative, allegoric, didactic, or descriptive content. Thus, business records, or lists are not generally included. The earliest literature evolved from the transcription of pre-existing oral traditional narratives, and progressed gradually to a point where such materials were first composed in written form.

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Religious texts, while they have of course an entirely different significance to the adherents of the faiths to which they pertain, may also be considered literature when their narrative, figurative, or compositional qualities are foregrounded. The earliest instances of literature, therefore, those termed "ancient", include a variety of texts ranging from the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh to the Hebrew Torah, and onward to the Hellenistic Odyssey of Homer.

With improvements in the production and dissemination of written texts, from Roman copy-houses to the invention of the printing press, along with the increase of a literate reading public, a third sense of "literature," and the one most commonly used today, came into being. Specifically, literature encompasses all imaginative writing in any language, as well as essays, criticism, travel writing, biographies, memoirs, diaries, and collections of letters.

4. Formal Categories

A formal distinction common to many literary traditions is that between poetry and prose. Although the precise distinction between these two categories varies somewhat among world literatures, and though the boundaries between them have grown more blurred according to certain modern literary theories, it may generally be observed that poetry depends upon a relatively fixed array of metrical and phonological patterns used as repetitive devices, and involves a more densely interconnected arrangement of imagery and metaphor.

5. Main Literary Genres

Literature has always been organized in groups of works belonging together as they stand in the same tradition: tragedies, comedies, epics and the like. These groups are traditionally known as the "literary genres". A literary genre is a type or category of literature. Each genre is characterized by certain features and constellation of formal qualities, so that its members share many resemblances.

5.1 The Novel:

The word novel (or novelty) literally means "something new". When the word came to be used for the first time, it actually suggested something fairly lightweight, entertaining and most of the times not of lasting significance.

The novel has emerged as one of the dominant literary forms of modern literature, combining some features of the epic (such as a strong, central protagonist) with elements of historical narrative, travel writing, and the naturalistic dialogue of plays. Many claim Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote (1605, 1615) as the first novel.

Kinds of novels:

Module : Humanities and Social Sciences

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Novels differ not only in size, but also in complexity, content and the philosophical vision they bring vis a vis the issue they are treating. But, once more, making such a distinction is sometimes blurring, because most novelists chose to combine more than one type, namely:

1. **The fictional biography and autobiography:** in which light is shed on the life of one character, be it real or fictional.
2. **Picaresque novel:** in which a certain character is followed in his journey thorough life where he encounters a series of "adventures" which form separate episodes.
3. **Social or Protest novels:** where the character, the world and the whole setting is created as a kind of protest about a certain social or political issue.

5.2 Poetry

The Concise Oxford Dictionary's first definition of 'poetry' is 'Art or work of the poet'. It is also defined as 'elevated expression of elevated thought or feeling in metrical or rhythmical form'. Poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature, saying most in the fewest number of words. Hence, Poetry might be defined, initially, as a kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language.

5.3 Drama

Drama has one characteristic peculiar to itself - it is written primarily to be performed through actors on a stage before an audience, not read. The Greek word, dra_ma (drama), literally means "action," "doing," "performance."

Types of drama:

1. **The Tragedy:** a play dealing with tragic events and having an unhappy ending, especially one concerning the downfall of the main character.
2. **The Comedy:** a play characterized by its humorous or satirical tone and its depiction of amusing people or incidents, in which the characters ultimately triumph over adversity.

Why study Literature?

When students study Literature, they learn to appreciate words and their power. They travel to other realms and times through the texts they read. They understand about their own culture and others'. They learn to empathize with characters, to feel their joys and pain. These characters can also help them learn from their mistakes and question their beliefs and values.

Importantly, they learn to consider multiple perspectives and understand the complexity of human nature.

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Literature develops in students enduring values, such as integrity, compassion, loyalty and responsibility. The texts students explore give them multiple opportunities to discuss and reassess their own values and beliefs. These act as a compass in life as students grow up.

Literature also develops in students critical and creative thinking skills which would allow them to understand the patterns and relations between key issues worldwide. They will also be able to question these issues and understand why these issues persist and what can be done to resolve it. They will also become more adept in speaking to others and collaborating with them to improve their work and action.