

Lecture 1: Introduction to Literature

Etymologically, the Latin word “**litteratura**” is derived from “**littera**” (letter), which is the smallest element of alphabetical writing. 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. The origins of the two central terms are, therefore, not of great help in defining literature or text. It is more enlightening to look at literature or text as cultural and historical phenomena and to investigate the conditions of their production and reception.

Before writing developed as a system of signs, “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.

1. What is Literature?

Literature, is a body of written works. The name has traditionally been applied to those imaginative works of poetry and prose distinguished by the intentions of their authors and the perceived **aesthetic** excellence of their execution.

literature is first and foremost humankind’s entire body of writing; after that it is the body of writing belonging to a given language or people; then it is individual pieces of writing.

Definitions of the word *literature* tend to be circular. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* considers literature to be “**writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest.**”

As an art, literature might be described as the organization of words to give pleasure. Yet through words literature elevates and transforms experience beyond “mere” pleasure.

What is and what is not literature?

- But not everything expressed in words—even when organized and written down—is counted as literature. Those writings that are primarily informative—technical, scholarly, journalistic—would be excluded from the rank of literature by most, though not all, critics.
- The purest (or, at least, the most intense) literary form is the lyric poem, and after it comes elegiac, epic, dramatic, narrative, and expository verse
- The essay was once written deliberately as a piece of literature: its subject matter was of comparatively minor importance. Now, as in the past, some of the greatest essayists are critics of literature, drama, and the arts.
- Many works of philosophy are classified as literature. The *Dialogues* of Plato (4th century BC) are written with great narrative skill and in the finest prose;

- Some personal documents (autobiographies, diaries, memoirs, and letters) rank among the world's greatest literature.

2. Literary genres

The term **genre** usually refers to one of the three classical literary forms of *epic*, *drama*, and *poetry*. This categorization is slightly confusing as the epic occurs in verse, too, but is not classified as poetry. Although this old classification is still in use, the tendency today is to abandon the term “epic” and introduce “prose,” “fiction” or “prose fiction” for the relatively young literary forms of the novel and the short story.

Oral Tradition: There is a surprising variety of **oral literature** among surviving preliterate peoples, and, as the written word emerges in history, the indications are that the important literary genres all existed at the beginning of civilized societies: **heroic epic**; songs in praise of priests and kings; stories of mystery and the supernatural; love lyrics; **personal songs** (the result of intense meditation); love stories; tales of adventure and heroism (of common peoples, as distinct from the heroic **epics** of the upper classes); satire (which was dreaded by barbaric chieftains); **satirical combats** (in which two poets or two personifications abused one another and praised themselves); **ballads and folktales** of tragedy and murder; **folk stories**, such as the tale of the clever boy who performs impossible tasks, outwits all his adversaries, and usually wins the hand of the king's daughter; **animal fables** like those attributed to **Aesop**; riddles, proverbs, and philosophical observations; hymns, incantations, and mysterious songs of priests; and finally actual mythology—stories of the origin of the world and the **human race**, of the great dead, and of the gods and demigods.

Classical Literary Genres:

1. Epic

The Epic is, in fact, a precursor of the modern novel (i.e., prose fiction) because of its structural features such as plot, character presentation and narrative perspective.

According to Webster's New World dictionary, “*epic is a long narrative poem in a dignified style about the deeds of a traditional or historical hero or heroes; typically a poem like Iliad or the Odyssey with certain formal characteristics.*” The style is exaggerated and the characters involve heroes, mythical creatures, and gods dealing with grand themes such as wars and great journeys.

Examples: Homer's *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

The Iliad and *Odyssey* are considered to be the oldest Greek Epics.

The Epics of Gilgamesh and the Ramayana are considered to be the oldest epics in the world.

2. Lyric poetry

Lyric poetry expresses personal emotions or thoughts of the speaker, just like the songs of today. Also, just like songs, lyric poems always have a musical quality, or a specific melody which makes it easy for you to sing along with. The term 'lyric poetry' actually comes from the ancient Greek word **lyre**, which refers to the instrument in that era that accompanied the reading of the lyric poem. Almost like the first version of a live concert.

Lyric poetry, for the most part, is short and written in first-person point of view. There is always some specific mood or emotion being expressed. Often that mood is about the extremes in life, mostly love or death or some other intense emotional experience. No matter the theme, though, all lyric poems are known for brevity, emotional intensity and musical quality.

3. Drama

Drama is a play that can be performed for theatre, radio or even television. It is a narrative representation through *dialogue* and *performance*. These plays are usually written out as a script, or a written version of a play that is read by the actors but not the audience.

This is where theatre comes in.

Drama, as in a play, is meant to be performed on a stage in front of an audience at the theatre. So, drama refers to the script, while the word theatre is the performance of the script.

It has different types, mainly Tragedy and Comedy.

- **Tragedy:** The events of the story are tragic with darker themes, and the hero manifests a “Tragic Flaw” which is a feature that leads the hero to his downfall.
- **Comedy:** Comedies often deal with lighter themes and have happy endings. It often involves witty, unusual, and funny characters.

Examples: Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet,” “Hamlet,” “McBeth,” “As you Like It,” etc.

Today, Literary genres are classified into these four major categories: **Drama, Poetry, Prose Fiction, and Criticism.**

Other Literary Genres:

- **Satire:** Satire is a style of writing that intends to ridicule and point out society’s flaws. This ridicule is often masked in humor. When using satire, the writer’s intention is to expose what he thinks is a “problem” in society. This “problem” could be popular or political.

Example: Political cartoons provide a writer an avenue to critique society. The cartoonist does this through humor. The cartoon is received well because the audience, whether in support of the cartoonist’s view or not, can laugh at the subject matter. However, the writer intends to point out a particular flaw that he thinks needs to be corrected. The Simpsons.

- **Farce:** The farce is a type of comedy that has exaggerated and funny situations to entertain the audience.
- **Allegory:** it is a literary work that has two levels of meaning as a whole. One is the literal meaning of the story and its events, and one is symbolic often referring to larger contexts and real events.
- **Fable:** A fable is a story that has animals as characters acting as human beings. It has a moral or a lesson to teach the readers.
- **Essays, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, letters.**

3. The importance of Literature

Literature is an essential and integral part of human existence. Ever since humanity started, Literature started with it (in its early forms). Instead of thinking of it as a separate abstract discipline, it should be thought of as part of human existence and experience. This can be seen if we consider that most literary forms have a narrative aspect that tells some story or another. In this regard, stories are important to our existence because as human beings we perceive ourselves as part of a big “life story.” When we talk about ourselves, we often talk in narrative form that has a beginning, middle, and end. Likewise, when reading stories, we find some points of identification and recognize features that are uniquely human and transcend cultural and ethnic barriers. We relate to stories that offer us universal values. In this way, stories, and literature in general provide us with cultural and personal identities.

It is “the mirror of society and humanity.” In other words, it is a recording of past and present human experiences in that it allows us to know how a specific culture or civilization lived (from customs and traditions, to dressing, communicating, to thinking itself) at a certain period of time. It is also a recording of human glories, failures, and tragedies. Through literature we can learn lessons from the past failures of past people and learn from their successes. This can also help us understand important parts of lives and complex values and preoccupations such as death and life, joy and sadness, tragedies, peace, etc. Such an understanding is essential because it will allow us to understand other human beings and develop empathy towards humanity as a whole.

Not only that, reading literature and the great works of great authors can help us see life from different points of view and develop a fertile imagination about the possibilities around us. This in turn can help us develop critical thinking and broaden our perspectives to “think outside the box.” It offers us access to different forms of expression and thinking that permit us to embrace new ways of thinking and life.