October 2023

Lecture 01

Introduction

I. What is Literature?

Throughout history, the term 'literature' had different definitions and meanings according to the period discussed. Generally, is it commonly defined as 'written with letters,' which means any written text in any field. From a cultural perspective, literature is associated with works of imaginary narratives and creative language such as novels, short stories, poems, or plays. In some cases, literature is also referred to as 'belles-lettres,' which only includes literary texts that reflect the beauty of language and fine writing instead of focusing on the content. However, since the 18th century and up until the 20th century, literature moved beyond these boundaries. In the modern understanding of literature, films/oral compositions, animations, and graphic stories are now discussed as a form of literary works.

From a historical perspective, the use of the term literature goes back to the works of the Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427-347 B.C.) in relation to poetry. It was not until the 14th century (the Middle Ages) that literature entered the English language as a way to describe a person's knowledge of letters and languages. Access to literature during this period was limited to people from higher classes while commoners and those of lower classes did not have access to any form of education. Throughout these ages, literary works told stories of old legends and myths, of heroic quests and imaginative creatures in a poetic form like the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* (c. 700-750 AD) for example.

In the 18th century, literature in English developed a new meaning that of professionalism and occupation, in which writers and poets started to be paid for their writings. Since then and well into the 19th century, especially during the Romanticism period, English literature was dominated by lyric poetry that uses nature as a source of inspiration. By the turn of the 20th century, however, literature has started to cover various forms of writings (novels, autobiographies, memoirs...) as it turned to reflect real-life events from surrounding communities and the writer's personal experiences.

*Alex Thomson's Definition

In his essay 'What is Literature?' (2004), Alex Thomson introduces three main points that help in defining literature. The first point is **fiction**, which allows the literary text to move between reality and imagination freely, therefore creating entertaining stories. The second aspect is the **style** and language used by the writer as literary texts should be creative and have an artistic value (Mays, 2017) that directs the reader's attention to how the story is written (e.g., poetry). Finally, Thomson turns to the importance of **how a literary text is approached and read** by readers. On this point, Thomson explains that what used to be defined as literature in the past might not be considered as one in the present or future. For example, the work of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789) was read for its historical views when it was published, but nowadays Gibbon's work is read as a literary text because of its writing style.

II. What is A Literary Genre?

The term 'genre' originally comes from the Latin word *genus* which means kind or type. In literature, literary texts are categorised into genres (i.e. groups) that share the same characteristics such as style of writing, content, or purpose.

When it comes to literary texts, they can be divided into three main genres: **fiction** (novel, short story, novella), **poetry**, and **drama** (theatre). These genres can first be distinguished by their writing style: prose or verse.

1. Prose

'Prose' comes from Latin which means straight and forward. Prose is the most used form of writing, in which it applies the usual grammatical structure and natural flow of speech. This style of writing is commonly used in novels and short stories, i.e., fiction.

2. Verse

The word 'verse' refers to a single line of poetry or sacred book. Verse is a writing style that poets tend to use in order to shadow their change of thoughts and it adds an aesthetic sense to their work.

III. What is World Literature?

The term World Literature was first coined by the German writer and critic **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** in 1827. In a conversation with his student Johann Peter Eckermann, Goethe remarks that "National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (quoted in Damrosch, 2018, p. 3). What Goethe aspired for is to create a network for elites and intellectuals to **exchange knowledge**.

Goethe's term '*Weltliteratur*' came in time when he was interested in works from different parts of the world. He was reading his own works translated into English and French, while at the same time reading Persian and Chinese literary texts in their French translations. Even though Goethe aspired for a world literature that creates international relationships between different writers and readers, he view was limited to Western literature, that is works written in English, French, German, or Latin. By so doing, Goethe was not able to separate himself from his privilege of being a Western European (**Eurocentric view**) who saw literary texts from other parts of the world as unworthy, for even if they reflect a way of thinking and behaving like Europeans, they still do not rise in value to that of West European texts.

Despite Goethe's cautionary remarks that world literature should be strictly limited to Western texts, with the spread of technology and globalization, *Weltliteratur* is no longer limited to the elite circle he once envisioned. Along with colonialism, non-European writers from different social belongings succeeded in entering the world literature scene through their creative literary works. This type of works is referred to by Goethe as **bad world literature**, that is literary texts that do not reflect any form of exceptionality or literal quality. In other words, modern world literature is not about literary texts that moved from the center (the West) to the peripheries (former colonies), rather with the new open global market, writers from different parts of the world are provided with an opportunity to publish their literary works anywhere, everywhere. Perhaps the list of non-Western writers winning Western prizes and awards in literature is an example of how modern world literature is different from Goethe's vision. For instance, the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka won the Noble Prize for literature in 1986, and Jokha Alharthi—an Omani writer—won the Man Booker Prize for her novel *Celestial Bodies* (2010) in 2019 after it was translated from Arabic into English. These two examples show how world literature nowadays has moved beyond the few selected European writers to cover an international range of writers despite their origins background or the language used in their works.

1. How to Define a Literary Work as World Literature?

When we discuss world literature written in English, often these literary texts are produced from former colonies of the British Empire, such as Africa (Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt...), Asia (India, Pakistan, Malaysia...), the West Indies, etc. However, with the large number of written literary works from these regions, how can a reader define which text is considered part of world literature and which text that does not? To solve this complication, David Damrosch (2003) sets two main conditions that help in defining world literature. The writer states that "A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin" (p. 6). It should be noted first that world literature is not a stable field, works can be considered part of world literature at some point in history and then drop out of the list at another time. Therefore, in Damrosch's statement, the text should be viewed first as a literary text, whether it is fiction, poetry, or drama. Second, because world literature is about the circulation of literature beyond its national boundaries—point of origin (translated or in their original languages), it should maintain its artistic value, resist cultural changes, and adapt to different places and times. In other words, world literature is formed by literary texts that create an impact or speak to the reader across time and space.

✎ For example, George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is written to describe the political unrest in the post-WWII era between three authoritative global powers. Since its publication, expressions like "Big Brother" and "newspeak" (meaning controlling people's thoughts) have become widely used in political and social studies. In recent years, after the former American president Donald Trump used the term "fake news" to mislead people, Orwell's novel saw a rise in sales as readers related Trump's strategy to that used in the novel. Therefore, despite being published in 1949, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is still, until today, used to describe and study oppressive and authoritative political rules and their different strategies control and oppress their people.

2. Why Do We Read/Study World Literature?

➢ <u>Reading Across Time</u>: Reading literary texts from different eras provides the reader with an opportunity to understand how images, themes, and problems are discussed and approached

through the centuries. Moreover, writers sometimes tend to use references and images from earlier works that introduce the same idea from a different perspective.

➢ <u>Reading Across Cultures</u>: While reading literary texts from different cultures expands the reader's knowledge of other communities and societies, it might also be challenging. By reading a text from another culture, the reader faces unfamiliar settings, characters, and points of view that form an obstacle in the process of understanding the literary work. Therefore, the reader has to use their prior knowledge to compare the foreign text to and be critical of the founded similarities and dissimilarities that the text presents.

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