



Lecture 01

Introduction

I. What is Literature?

Even though literature as a concept is associated with 'letters' or written works (letters, poetry, books...), it does not have an exact definition. Throughout history, literature held different meanings depending on the period of discussion. The use of the term literature goes back to the works of the Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427-347 BC) in relation to **poetry**. It was not until the 14th century (the Middle Ages) when literature entered the English language and it was used to describe a person's knowledge of letters and languages. During this period, access to literature was limited to people from higher classes—the nobles—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.

By the late of 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 poems that use nature as a source of inspiration. By the turn of the 20th century, however, literature has started to cover various forms of writings (novels, diaries, autobiographies, ...) as it turned to reflect the real-life events from surrounding communities and the writer's personal experiences. Nowadays, the concept of literature is even broader as films, TV series, and animes are approached as a type of literature. These works discuss various topics from different social, political, and economic perspectives.

*Alex Thomson's Definition of Literature (2004)

In his essay 'What is Literature?' (2004), Alex Thomson identifies 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** as the language used by the writer in a literary text should be creative and has an artistic and aesthetic values (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 word 'genre' originally comes from the Latin word *genus* which means kind or type. In literature, genus 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), **drama** (theatre), and **poetry**. These genres can first be distinguished by their writing styles, prose or verse.

1. Prose: 'Prose' comes from Latin and it 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.

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 through their play with the language, which adds an aesthetic sense to their works.

✎ Example: *A Dream Within a Dream* (1849) by Edgar Allan Poe

All that we see or seem → A verse
Is but a dream within a dream

III. Why Do We Study Literature

1. Pleasure: The imaginary world created by literary texts provides the reader with an escape from reality and creates alternative worlds and possibilities.
2. Language: The creative and artistic use of language in literature enriches the reader's dictionary, improving by that their communication skills and the ability to self-expression.
3. Mirror of Society: Since the modern period, literature has started to reflect the real world with its real events and problems. Therefore, literature opens the readers' minds to other experiences and teaches them about other communities, cultures, and experiences from different parts of the world.

References

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- Thomson, A. (2010). "What is literature?" In Cavanagh, D, et al., (Eds.). *The Edinburgh introduction to studying English literature*. Edinburgh University Press.

Suggested Readings

- Amigoni, D. (2000). *The English Novel and Prose Narrative*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Arata, S., Haley, M., Hunter, P., & Wickeeds, J. (Eds.). (2015). *A Companion to the English Novel*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Blamires, H. (2003). *A Short History of English Literature*. (2nd ed.). Routledge.
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- Drabble, M. (Ed.). (2000). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford University Press.