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**INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE**

The mystery of having been moved by words.…

- Dylan Thomas

Literature refers to ‘written artistic works’ particularly those with a high and lasting artistic value. To simply put, a literary text is a verbal art. It is known for arousing certain emotions among the readers. In literature, words are used in a special sense for the writer to bring out intentions. In the meaning making process, both readers and writers need to move with words because literature is the use of language to evoke a personal response. According to Dylan Thomas, anyone who is concerned with literature is also concerned with language.

Literature is for social wellbeing and has a place in fostering self- awareness and helps us to have an interaction with a new language and culture. Through characters, literature reveals human motives, it invites identification and reaction and through actions and situations, it brings characters into relationships with one another or into relationships with institutions and forces beyond their control, also, it reveals man in conflict. Through its own compressed world, it focuses upon its central concern without being distracted by other details of life; it sorts out and orders the experiences of its characters; it objectifies experience so that it can be viewed as a whole and reflected upon; it shields the reader from the intensity of actual experiences. Essential features of literature are setting, characters, action, thought - Conflict (internal and external).

For a general reader of literary texts, literature is a world of fantasy, horror, feelings, visions… put into words. For them, literature means to meet a lot of people, to know other different points of view, ideas, thoughts, minds and to know ourselves better. To develop an individual response to a literary text without violating its essential nature as communication and without denying its linguistic benefits is a challenge before every reader of a literary texts. Moody (1987) has rightly said that “Literature springs from our inborn love of telling a story, of arranging words in pleasing patterns, of expressing in words some special aspects of our human experience.

Boulton (1980), on literature says, “Literature is the imaginative work that gives us: recreation, recognition, revelation and redemption”. The effect of reading literature is a kind of sublime. The quality in writing affects a conquest of the readers or the listeners and ‘transports’ them by uplifting the mind by its overpowering force, by ‘filling it with joy’.

As has already been mentioned, Literature is a product of a culture. Began with an oral tradition (orature), and it has a Timeless significance and is universal. It is not for any particular region and people. Literature has elevated thoughts, passions and emotions, and human values. We can list out some features of literary texts as follows (though not exhaustive):

1. Literature is imaginative
2. Literature expresses thoughts and feelings
3. Literature deals with life’s experiences
4. Literature uses words in a powerful, effective and yet captivating manner
5. Literature promotes recreation and revelation of hidden facts
6. Departure from normal sentence patterns
7. Deviations through the choice of words
8. Use of metaphors and elaboration of language
9. Arrangement of words in rhymes and harmonies
10. Verbal means by which the noble thoughts and passions are communicated.

While talking about literary quality, two questions generally come to our mind:

How do we define literature and literariness (literary qualities)? Also, what transforms / makes a verbal message into a work of art, a thing of beauty, a text with its own literary texture?

On the significance of reading literature, Moody (1980) says: “Anyone who neglects literature neglects the greatest part of life. Literature will invigorate the life in you…” The following lines of one of the great Romantics poets, William Wordsworth reinforce in our mind the significance of literature.

One impulse from a vernal wood

May teach you more of man

Of moral evil and of good

Than all the sages can.

On the relevance of literature in this Post-modern world, George Gordon, early professor of English literature at Oxford, comments: “England is sick, and … English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the state”.

The statements on literature made by those great scholars, poets and other literary personalities are perhaps due to the values they found in the literary texts they came across in their lives. This must be the reason why literature is timeless, not time bound. The following books mentioned below are still relevant and quoted in various socio- academic and political contexts. To name a few, some great works are exemplified for your reference, and they are:

The Iliad

Romeo and Juliet

Biographia Literaria

Train to Pakistan

Godan

Untouchable

The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

Discovery of India

Cinderella and so on…

Literature is generally associated with its ability to give pleasure. It is broadly defined as any written or spoken material, but the term most often refers to creative works. It should be made clear from the onset that there is no real consensus or one all-embracing definition of the term literature. Literature includes poetry, drama, fiction and many kinds of non-fiction writing, as well as oral, dramatic and broadcast compositions not necessarily preserved in a written format, such as films and television programme.

Some scholarly definitions of literature are largely according to their wealth of societal experiences within their locations. Until late in the eighteenth century, literature was understood in the terms of humanistic learning, that which was the source of wide and humane knowledge covering imaginative, creative, artistic, or aesthetically oriented writing. Rene Welleck finds that ‘litterae’ in antiquity is simply the study of the arts and letters of the Greeks as they represent the “Greek idea of man”.

According to Raymond Williams, “literature” entered English in the fourteenth century “in the sense of polite learning through reading…. Thus, a man of literature, or of letters, meant what we would now describe as a man of wide reading”. In one sense literature carried a positive value. The identification of literature with texts of value continued as the meaning narrowed in the nineteenth century; thus, the term appears to us both descriptive and sometimes evaluative. In the narrower sense, it embraces primarily poetry, prose, fiction, drama, and the personal essay. These genres are distinguished as ‘imaginative’ ‘creative’ or ‘literature as art’, but no single adjective is adequate. A problem repeatedly noted by scholars is that certain sermons, philosophical essays, histories, and other prose works not intended or originally regarded as literature come to be considered literary. In another sense, there are at least some bases on which literature has been defined. These definitions are not necessarily incomplete but are overlapping. Those who have attempted specific definitions on literature seem to have used some criteria and have combined in a wide range of patterns. An obvious criterion is ‘value’. Sir Sidney Lee’s (1913) statement, “It is needless to cite definitions of literature. We all know it to be the storehouse of the best thought and feeling”, set forth in the lucid, harmonious, and pleasure – giving forms, of which words are capable. Such a characterisation of literature is a happy one.

Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction* pursues the definition of literature as ‘a highly valued kind of writing’ to the conclusion that what is called literature is that which supports an existing ideology and power structure.

According to G.B. Harrison, “Literature is a means of evoking pleasure in a reader by written words”. Another criterion is functionality. Literature is surveyed in both in its ‘narrow’ sense and ‘broad’ sense. The broad definition of literature appears to be vague and amorphous in that it includes works that are not literature per se, like works in fields of Education, Biology, History, and a host of others, because they are written. However, they cannot qualify as real literature. The narrow definition delineates literature from its general purview to what can be called literature as a subject of study. Moody (1987) writes that literature springs from our inborn love of telling a story, of arranging words in pleasing patterns, of expressing in words some special aspects of our human experience. Boulton (1980) defines literature from a functional perspective as the imaginative work that gives us: Recreation, Recognition, Revelation, and Redemption. Literature is a permanent expression in words of some thoughts or feelings in ideas about ‘life’ and the ‘world’. Most of the definitions discussed above recognize the fact that:

1. Literature is imaginative
2. Literature expresses thoughts and feelings
3. Literature deals with life experiences
4. Literature uses words in a powerful, effective, and yet captivating manner
5. Literature promotes recreation and revelation of hidden facts.

The way in which language is employed can serve as a basis of definition. Rene Wellek and Austin’s Warren’s chapter on ‘The Nature of Literature’ gives almost as much importance to the language as to both functionality and fictionality of literature. The resources of language are exploited more deliberately and systematically. Poetic language organises, tightens, the resources of everyday language. The classic statement of this way of defining literature is that of Roman Jacobson in ‘Linguistics and Poetics’. Literature is thus summed up as permanent expressions in words (written or spoken), specially arranged in pleasing accepted patterns or forms. Literature expresses thoughts, feelings, ideas, or other special aspects of human experiences.

At its narrowest, literature refers to a special kind of writing of a country like Indian literature or British literature. Literature here could also refer to a special kind of writing of a period such as 18th century English literature or post-colonial Indian literature. Literature refers also to the study of books which are valued as works of art such as drama, prose, novel, short story, and poetry. Literature also refers to books dealing with special subjects like travel literature or the literature of floriculture. It also includes the oral tradition, the legends, and myths from classical times to the folk tales, and the reworking of local folk tales. Literature further includes our own living tradition of children's games, songs and stories as in the lore and language of school children.

One way we will distinguish literature from history is by method and language of the artist. Literature is an art; literature is literature not because of what it is written about but because of the artistic point of view and the artist’s transformation of ideas and notions. It is worth noting that the word literature can be found in a number of different kinds of statements and human activities. We can talk of literature as something associated with, a characteristic of a particular nation or people or groups of people, for example: Indian literature, American literature, Canadian literature, and African literature and so on.

Literature obviously has some kind of collective significance, transcending the individuals who produce and consume it. Then again, we can talk of the literature of a particular historical period or movement, which may often be found in a number of different cultures, for example, Renaissance literature, Romantic literature, colonial literature, the literature of independent India, and so on. In a rather different way, we can talk of the literature of a particular subject or topic, examples are the literature of shipbuilding, literature of linguistics, and the literature of child development. In this sense, of course, literature means everything of significance that has ever been written about that subject. We can also talk of literature as a school subject on the school timetable as a part of the school curriculum, distinctly different from Economics, Mathematics or Chemistry. From the above definitions, literature often refers to a subject of study, a form of training or written work.

The raw material for literature is language either written or spoken. We can even say that literature is language. It consists of certain rather specialized forms, selections, and collections of language. By language, we mean, those distinctive speech sounds which are used in various kinds of systematic pattern to communicate all necessary messages.

It is with language, literary writers present their views to the reader with one or two emphases. The first emphasis is on his experience and other people's experience, in which case the reader adds something to his store of knowledge about the world; an extreme example of this might be Daniel Dafoe’s ‘A journal of the plague year’. The second emphasis is on the experience in such a way as to help the reader learn something more about himself as a human being; an extreme example here might be Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway. We cannot learn more about ourselves in literature except through someone else's experience which enlarges our knowledge about the world; and we cannot learn more about the world without learning a little about humanity and therefore ourselves. Language is the raw material with which literary writers articulate their artistic point of view as a means of furthering experience of the world and as a means of finding out more about oneself. This is the reason literature is defined as language.

**EXERCISES**

Match the terms with the examples of each one that follows.

**Terms and definitions**

**Apostrophe**: the direct addressing of an abstract quality, object or absent person.

**Alliteration**: the repetition of the initial consonant sounds in two or more consecutive words.

**Assonance:** the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds, usually in the middle of words.

**Paradox**: a statement which appears to be contradictory or absurd, but may be true.

**Oxymoron:** a combination of neighboring words which seem apparently contradictory or incongruous.

**Metonymy**: a figure of speech in which the name of a thing is substituted for another thing with which it is usually associated.

**Synecdoche**: the whole of something is used to mean the part of it, or part of it is used to mean the whole.

**Metaphor**: a comparison made between things which are unlikely each other by describing one as if it were the other.

**Simile**: an explicit comparison made between two unlike things which is usually indicated by using the words like or as.

**Personification**: A kind of metaphor in which abstract or inanimate objects are described as if they were alive and animate.

**Examples:**

1. ‘… With the smoking blueness of Pluto’s gloom…’ ( D. H. Lawrence, Bavarian Gentians)
2. ‘War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.’ ( George Orwell,)
3. ‘The pen is mightier than the sword’.( E. G. Bulwer-Lytton)

D. ‘… Mrs. Spragg herself wore as complete an air of detachment as if she had been a wax figure in a shop-window.’ (Edith Wharton, The custom of the Country.)

E. ‘O heavy lightness! Serious vanity! (W. Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet)

F. ‘His crypt the cloudy canopy…’ (Thomas Hardy, The Darkling Thrush.)

G. ‘I have no relative but the universal Mother Nature: I will seek her breast and ask repose.’ (Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre.)

H. ‘Milton! Though shouldst be living at this hour ‘(William Wordsworth, London 1802)

I. ‘I should have been a pair of ragged claws

Scuttling across the floor of silent sees.’ (T.S. Eliot, the love song of J. Alfred Prufrock.)

J. ‘Dorothea by this time had looked deep into the ungauged reservoir of Mr. Casaubon’s mind…’ (George Eliot, Middlemarch).

**ANSWER KEY:**

Metaphor (J), Simile (D), Personification ( G), Paradox ( B), Oxymoron ( E ), Metonymy (c), Synecdoche ( I ), Apostrophe (H), Alliteration (F), Assonance ( A). (Source: Gillian Lazar’s *Teaching of Literature*)