

USE OF ENGLISH

WHAT IS LITERATURE?

Literature is a broad term that encompasses almost everything we read, see, and hear. The term “Literature” is derived from the Latin *litteraturae*, meaning “writings”, and the French *belles lettres*, meaning “fine letters”. Initially, “Literature” referred mainly to fictional and imaginative writings and was divided into three genres or categories. These categories or genres are **poetry, prose** and **drama**.

It is the **form** of each category that distinguishes it from the others. For instance, all the first three genres could share the same theme or subject matter – such as Corruption, Love, Education, etc. – but each one looks different on the page. What this means is that a page of poetry is distinct from a page of play/drama since poetry does not indicate speaker, and nor does it provide stage direction in parenthesis the way the play-text does. And prose is distinct because all the lines run to the edge of the page and do not stop arbitrarily the way that the lines in a poem, for instance, do.

Nowadays, however, the term “Literature” has been expanded to encompass even writings that are factual or truth-telling. There is now a fourth genre or category of literature called “**Life Writing**”. This refers to non-fictional writings such as autobiography, biography, diary, journal, memoir, travelogue, letters and essays.

WHAT IS FICTION?

The term “**fiction**” denotes any literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that actually happened. Sometimes, fiction is used as a synonym for the novel. Note, however, that fiction is not the same as a lie or falsehood or untruth. This is because, in fiction, there is no attempt by the author to deceive the reader or audience as is the case with the lie or falsehood. Fiction is simply a product of the imagination. Writing or producing a work of fiction is a **creative** enterprise whereby the author invents a story-world or depicts a series of events that never happened, but not with the intention to deceive.

THE GENRES OF LITERATURE

1. Poetry

Poetry is often considered the oldest form of literature. This is because it has existed since before writing was invented, when our ancestors told oral stories in some sort of poetic form to make them easier to remember and recite. Today, poetry is usually written down, but is still sometimes performed.

A text is said to be a poem when it has **meter** or **rhythm**, and when it focuses on the way the syllables, words, and phrases sound when put together. Poems are often made up of fragments and phrases rather than complete, grammatically correct sentences. Also, poetry is nearly always written in **stanzas** and **lines**, creating a unique look on the page. However, not all poems have a strict line arrangement or regular rhyme pattern. Such poems are called **free-form** or **free-verse**.

Some features of poetry include:

- a) **Rhyme:** a rhyme is achieved when two or more words sound similar, for example: *fly*, *high*, *bye* or *see*, *tree*, *agree* or *fist*, *insist*, *assist*, etc. In a poem, the rhyme is usually achieved when the last words of two or more lines have the same sound, for example:

Do you see the little *fly*

Up the wall so *high*?

You can see here that “**fly**” rhymes with “**high**”. Rhyme is what gives poetry its musicality.

- b) **Verse:** a verse refers to the lines of a poem. Most of the time, a verse is not a full or complete sentence, it is just a line of poetry. Consider this excerpt from Niyi Osundare’s poem, “Poetry Is”:

Poetry
Is
Man
Meaning to
Man

From this example, you can see that a verse could even be just one word.

- c) **Stanza:** this word is derived from the Italian for “stopping place”. A stanza is a grouping of the verse lines in a poem, stanzas are often separated by a space in the printed text. The stanza is the equivalent of the paragraph in prose writing. In other words, a passage or story, or essay is made up of paragraphs, while a poem is made up of stanzas. A paragraph is made up of sentences while a stanza is made up of lines or verses. The excerpt given above from Osundare’s poem is a stanza.

2. Prose

Prose can be defined as any kind of written text that isn’t poetry. The most typical varieties of prose are novels and short stories, while other types include letters, diaries, journals, and non-fiction. Prose is written in complete sentences and organized in paragraphs. Instead of focusing on sound, which is what poetry does, prose tends to focus on **plot** and **characters**.

Read the following story by Jomo Kenyatta.

THE GENTLEMEN OF THE JUNGLE

By Jomo Kenyatta

Once upon a time an elephant made a friendship with a man. One day a heavy thunderstorm broke out, the elephant went to his friend, who had a little hut at the edge of the forest, and said to him: “My dear good man, will you please let me put my trunk inside your hut to keep it out of this torrential rain?” The man, seeing what situation his friend was in, replied: “My dear good elephant, my hut is very small, but there is room for your trunk and myself. Please put your trunk in gently.” The elephant thanked his friend, saying: “You have done me a good deed and one day I shall return your kindness.” But what followed? As soon as the elephant put his trunk inside the hut, slowly he pushed his head inside, and finally flung the man out in the rain, and then lay down comfortably inside his friend's hut, saying: “My dear good friend, your skin is harder than mine, and as there is not enough room for both of us, you can afford to remain in the rain while I am protecting my delicate skin from the hailstorm.”

The man, seeing what his friend had done to him, started to grumble; the animals in the nearby forest heard the noise and came to see what was the matter. All stood around listening to the heated argument between the man and his friend the elephant. In this turmoil the lion came

along roaring, and said in a loud voice: "Don't you all know that I am the King of the Jungle! How dare any one disturb the peace of my kingdom?" On hearing this, the elephant, who was one of the high ministers in the jungle kingdom, replied in a soothing voice, and said: "My lord, there is no disturbance of the peace in your kingdom. I have only been having a little discussion with my friend here as to the possession of this little hut which your lordship sees me occupying." The lion, who wanted to have 'peace and tranquility' in his kingdom, replied in a noble voice, saying: "I command my ministers to appoint a Commission of Enquiry to go thoroughly into this matter and report accordingly." He then turned to the man and said: "You have done well by establishing friendship with my people, especially with the elephant, who is one of my honourable ministers of state. Do not grumble any more, your hut is not lost to you. Wait until the sitting of my Imperial Commission, and there you will be given plenty of opportunity to state your case. I am sure that you will be pleased with the findings of the Commission." The man was very pleased by these sweet words from the King of the Jungle, and innocently waited for his opportunity, in the belief that naturally the hut would be returned to him.

The elephant, obeying the command of his master, got busy with other ministers to appoint the Commission of Enquiry. The following elders of the jungle were appointed to sit in the Commission: (1) Mr. Rhinoceros; (2) Mr. Buffalo; (3) Mr. Alligator; (4) The Rt. Hon. Mr. Fox to act as chairman; and (5) Mr. Leopard to act as Secretary to the Commission. On seeing the personnel, the man protested and asked if it was not necessary to include in this Commission a member from his side. But he was told that it was impossible, since no one from his side was well enough educated to understand the intricacy of jungle law. Further, that there was nothing to fear, for the members of the Commission were all men of repute for their impartiality in justice, and as they were gentlemen chosen by God to look after the interests of races less adequately endowed with teeth and claws, he might rest assured that they would investigate the matter with the greatest care and report impartially.

The Commission sat to take the evidence. The Rt. Hon. Mr. Elephant was first called. He came along with a superior air, brushing his tusks with a sapling which Mrs. Elephant had provided, and in an authoritative voice said: "Gentlemen of the Jungle, there is no need for me to waste your valuable time in relating a story which I am sure you all know. I have always

regarded it as my duty to protect the interests of my friends, and this appears to have caused the misunderstanding between myself and my friend here. He invited me to save his hut from being blown away by a hurricane. As the hurricane had gained access owing to the unoccupied space in the hut, I considered it necessary, in my friend's own interests, to turn the undeveloped space to a more economic use by sitting in it myself; a duty which any of you would undoubtedly have performed with equal readiness in similar circumstances.”

After hearing the Rt. Hon. Mr. Elephant's conclusive evidence, the Commission called Mr. Hyena and other elders of the jungle, who all supported what Mr. Elephant had said. They then called the man, who began to give his own account of the dispute. But the Commission cut him short, saying: “My good man, please confine yourself to relevant issues. We have already heard the circumstances from various unbiased sources; all we wish you to tell us is whether the undeveloped space in your hut was occupied by anyone else before Mr. Elephant assumed his position?” The man began to say: “No, but” – But at this point the Commission declared that they had heard sufficient evidence from both sides and retired to consider their decision.

After enjoying a delicious meal at the expense of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Elephant, they reached their verdict, called the man, and declared as follows: “In our opinion this dispute has arisen through a regrettable misunderstanding due to the backwardness of your ideas. We consider that Mr. Elephant has fulfilled his sacred duty of protecting your interests. As it is clearly for your good that the space should be put to its most economic use, and as you yourself have not reached the stage of expansion which would enable you to fill it, we consider it necessary to arrange a compromise to suit both parties. Mr. Elephant shall continue his occupation of your hut, but we give you permission to look for a site where you can build another hut more suited to your needs, and we will see that you are well protected.”

The man, having no alternative, and fearing that his refusal might expose him to the teeth and claws of members of the Commission, did as they suggested. But no sooner had he built another hut than Mr. Rhinoceros charged in with his horn lowered and ordered the man to quit. A Royal Commission was again appointed to look into the matter, and the same finding was given. This procedure was repeated until Mr. Buffalo, Mr. Leopard, Mr. Hyena and the rest were all accommodated with new huts. Then the man decided that he must adopt an effective method of protection, since Commissions of Enquiry did not seem to be of any use to him. He sat down and

said, 'Ng'enda thi ndagaga motegi,' which literally means 'there is nothing that treads on the earth that cannot be trapped,' or in other words, you can fool people for a time, but not for ever.

Early one morning, when the huts already occupied by the jungle lords were all beginning to decay and fall to pieces, he went out and built a bigger and better hut a little distance away. No sooner had Mr. Rhinoceros seen it than he came rushing in, only to find that Mr. Elephant was already inside, sound asleep. Mr. Leopard next came to the window, Mr. Lion, Mr. Fox and Mr. Buffalo entered the doors, while Mr. Hyena howled for a place in the shade and Mr. Alligator basked on the roof. Presently they all began disputing about their rights of penetration, and from disputing they came to fighting, and while they were all embroiled together the man set the hut on fire and burnt it to the ground, jungle lords and all. Then he went home, saying: 'Peace is costly, but it's worth the expense,' and lived happily ever after.

Comments:

-- Rt. Hon. – abbreviation for “Right Honourable” used as an official title for high governmental officials - The man is a symbol for the African. - The animals are symbols for the European colonizers. - Kenya is an independent republic in East Africa. More than ninety percent of the population is African, but from 1895 to 1963, it was ruled by Great Britain. Most of the large plantations were owned by the British, and Africans worked as labourers on these farms. Only after many years of struggle, including violence and bloodshed, did Kenya become an independent nation in 1963.

Features of Prose:

- a) **Plot:** this means the arrangement of the events of a story. The most common type of plot is the “**linear**” plot which has this structure: **Beginning – Middle – End**, or **Departure – Adventure – Return**. However, not all plots are linear or chronological. The story above has a linear plot since the events of the story are narrated sequentially.
- b) **Characters:** characters are the people, animals or things whose actions drive the plot or story. This means that characters can be human or non-human such as animals, trees or even things. Characters can be either **round** or **flat**, or they could be **major** or **minor**. Major characters are characters that play significant or important roles in a story. Without them, there would be no story. Minor characters are not as important as major characters

and therefore, even without them, the story could still remain. Most major characters are round. Round characters show change, development or growth. Flat characters, on the other hand are static.

- c) **Setting:** this refers to the place or places where the story takes place. It can be a room, house, country, the forest, or even another planet. Settings can be actual places that we know, or they could be places that are imagined by the author or writer of the story. In the story above the setting is the forest.

3. Drama

Any text meant to be performed rather than read can be considered drama. Dramas are usually called plays. The greater part of a drama is **dialogue**, with periodic **stage directions**. Dramas are meant to be acted out in front of an audience. The writer of a drama is called a **playwright**. Some features of drama include:

- a) **Dialogue:** this refers to the talk or conversation between two or more actors or characters.
- b) **Monologue:** is used to refer to a situation where a character speaks alone to no one in particular or speaks to himself (*interior monologue*)
- c) **Stage Direction:** this refers to the instructions given by the playwright on how the stage is to be arranged or how certain actions are to be done. It is usually written in italics.

The major types of drama are:

- i. **Tragedy:** a type of drama or play that has a sad ending.
- ii. **Comedy:** a type of drama that has a happy ending and often makes the audience laugh.
- iii. **Tragi-comedy:** this type of drama contains features of both tragedy and comedy.

4) Non-Fiction

Non-fiction is also called “Life Writing” because it generally refers to texts that tell the stories of real people’s lives. The most common types of non-fiction are:

- a) **Autobiography:** this is the story of a person's life told by himself or herself.
- b) **Biography:** this is the story of a person's life told by someone else.
- c) **Diary or journal:** this is a record of the day-to-day events or happenings of a person's life which are recorded by that person as they happen.
- d) **Travelogue:** this is an account of a journey or travel recorded by the traveler, showcasing the strange people, places, things and customs that are encountered in the course of the journey.

Other Types of Literature

These include: **Oral Literature** such as folklore, fables, legends, myths and folktales; and **Graphic Novels and Comic Books**.

Conclusion:

In a nutshell, literature is divided into three major genres, poetry, prose and play/drama. Prose works can be further divided into fiction and nonfiction and each of these has its own features and characteristics. The beauty of literature is that it is all around us. Whenever we tell stories or recount our experiences, we are engaging in literature. It is in literature that human beings record and keep the best that has been known and thought in the world. Literature preserves our thoughts, experiences, emotions and knowledge. It is through the constant engagement with literature that we improve our vocabulary, gain general knowledge and sharpen our mental faculties. We cannot get by, it seems, without literature in our lives.

Review Questions

1. What is the meaning of the term Literature?
2. How many genres of literature are there?
3. What are the distinguishing features of each genre of literature?
4. What is the major difference between fiction and nonfiction?

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