21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World Unit 18: African Literature

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GRADE 11/12 | 21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World

UNIT 18

African Literature

Africa is a continent often depicted as exotic, filled with tribes, savannahs, jungles, and safaris. Yet behind this concept is a broader sense of cultural heritage, history, and literary tradition, which spans from the ancient to the contemporary. This unit discusses the nature of African literature and gives information regarding the various literary developments across genres (prose and poetry).





Unit Objectives

In this unit, you should be able to:

- describe African literature;
- identify key features of African prose and African poetry; and
- explain the themes and characteristics of African literature.



Lesson 1: Introduction to African Literature

Studying African literature offers us the opportunity to listen to the voices of African people. African literature is about their experiences, thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and values. This lesson will help you understand the nature of African literature and know its distinguishing features.



What is the importance of literature in shaping African culture?



Warm-up!

Key Words

Form a group of four. Read the words/phrases below. First, provide a definition of the underlined words using your own words. Then, create a one-paragraph essay about what the group thinks African literature is all about using the words/phrases. Be ready to present your group work in class.

Key Words	Definition
variety of <u>ethnic</u> groups	
<u>multicultural</u>	
music and <u>ritualistic</u> dances	
<u>oral</u> literature	
storytelling	

African Literature



Geographically, Africa is the second largest continent at almost 12 million square miles. It houses a variety of ethnic groups, and there are more than a thousand languages, which makes Africa a multicultural continent.

One of its earliest civilizations is that of Egypt, which was established more than 5,000 years ago. This civilization sprang in the lands beside the **Nile River**.

As it had different ethnic groups, it also has various religious systems, many of which are polytheistic with a supreme god and other lesser gods and deities. Ancient Africans also believed in and prayed to ancestral spirits.

Vocabulary

- polytheistic characterized by belief in or worship of more than one god
- deity a god or goddess
- communal used or shared by members of a group

With the onset of foreign trade and cultural exchanges, Christianity was brought to Ethiopia in the early fourth century, while Islam came to northern Africa in the early seventh century. This affected the outlook and perspectives of people in Africa.

Characteristics of Traditional African Music

As with other cultures, Africa also has its own style of music. These are:

- a. **Polyrhythmic** African music featured complex, interlocking, and contrasting rhythms that are achieved by striking bells, clapping hands, beating drums, and stomping feet. Other instruments used in traditional African music include gongs, harp-type instruments, flutes, and types of xylophone, among others.
- b. **Call and response** This refers to the act of having a chorus repeat a lead singer's words in response.



African Ritualistic Dances

The primitive African people love to perform **ritualistic dances**. These dances are often witnessed in important occasions like:

- a. events in the agricultural year
- b. rituals that mark rites of passage
- c. ceremonies of secret societies
- d. healing the sick

Oral Literature

Unlike Western cultures that are associated with advanced forms of writing, African literature is **oral in nature**, meaning it has to be recited and even performed. Literature is not accessed through books but through **storytellers** who pass on epics, poems, and narratives from their memory. This is why in discussing African literature, it is natural to discuss dance, music, and other performances.



In Western Africa, the **griot** is a learned storyteller, poet, performer, and historian. Griots have been handing down their oral culture for over 4,000 years. Griots accompany their stories with music. It takes much effort and training and a long time (several years) for them to familiarize themselves with the numerous traditional songs, rhythms, and melodies.

Features of Traditional African Storytelling

Traditional African storytelling is a unique experience. This is characterized by the following:

a. **It is a communal experience.** As such, everybody belonging to traditional African societies takes part in storytelling. Even the listeners or audience play a vital role, as they participate and make the storytelling interactive. Storytelling in Africa is so interactive, in fact, that the audience often shapes the story, offering their own



suggestions or interpretations.

- b. **Repetition is an important part of the storytelling.** The storyteller may repeat stanzas, words, or phrases, and the audience may repeat those words back to the storyteller as well when doing "call and response." This act of repetition makes it easy to understand the stories as well as to remember them.
- c. **Storytelling fulfills purposes beyond being just a form of entertainment.** It is a way for Africans to enrich their culture as well as pass it on. Through storytelling, they are able to keep traditions alive, teach the youth about codes of conduct, and maintain social order.
- d. **Tone is a vital part of the storytelling.** The way the speaker says a word or statement affects its meaning. As such, how something is said is just as important—if not more—as what is said when doing traditional African storytelling.

Let's Check In!

What are the characteristics of African storytelling? Explain.



Check Your Understanding

- 1. What makes Africa a multicultural continent?
- 2. How would you describe traditional African music?
- 3. What is a griot?
- 4. What are the features of traditional African storytelling?
- 5. In your own words, explain this sentence: "African literature is oral in nature."





Let's Step Up!

Look for a photo from the internet or magazines that best represent African literature. Write a short explanation on why you chose this photo and how it represents Africa's literary heritage.

Let's Revisit the Essentials!

Go back to the essential question on the introduction page and discuss it in class.





In the previous lesson, you were introduced to African literature and its features. Now, we are going to delve deeper into African literature by discussing one of its literary forms—prose. This lesson will help you identify the key features of African prose.





True/False

Form a group of three. Read and analyze the statements below about African prose. Identify which statements are true and which ones are not. Be ready to share and justify your answers.

Statements	True or Not True
In Africa, prose is often used to	
narrate social memories, rules, and history.	
African prose narratives often center on	
people, animals, and histories.	
Only Africans contributed to the enrichment of	
African prose.	
Majority of African narratives are written.	
The Egyptians influenced African prose by	
writing myths that honored their	
gods.	

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African Prose Writing

Prose-writing is continuous yet systematic. In other words, prose best reflects the organized mind, which is evident in stories and essays. In Africa, prose is often used to narrate social memories, rules, and history.

African prose narratives often center on people, animals, histories, etc. For animal narratives, the plot usually focuses on large animals tricked by smaller ones. Such narratives are called **trickster stories**. Another plot focuses on an attacker (e.g., snake or crocodile) that is trying to deceive its rescuer or savior (e.g., child, white man, rat) but is instead outsmarted by a third character (e.g., hare, jackal, spider). The third character foils the attacker into a trap.

Vocabulary

- trickster a
 cunning or
 deceptive character
 in the folklore of
 many cultures
- affluent having lots of money and possessions
- formulaic containing fixed and repeated groups of words or ideas

Empires and Societies that Contributed to the Enrichment of African Prose

Various empires and societies contributed to the enrichment of African prose. These are as follows:

- Egypt This country had a vibrant and strong empire that centered on a polytheistic society. The Egyptians influenced African prose by writing myths that honored their gods. One of the greatest contributions of early Egyptians is hieroglyphics, an ancient system of writing.
- 2. **Ghana Empire** It is a powerful and affluent kingdom that derives its riches from the trade of salt and gold.
- 3. **Mali Empire** It overtook Ghana Empire for supremacy.
- 4. **Songhai** This is the last of the great kingdoms.
- 5. **Timbuktu** This is a city that was part of both the Mali and Songhai empires. It served as a major trading center and was home to libraries with extensive collections of books.



This allowed its people to preserve narratives and leave great contributions to both literature and civilization.

6. **Fasa and Aksum** – These are African territories with notable oral literature. These were civilized societies that became very influential among cultural formations in the northern areas of Africa. They were prominent because they were exposed to a variety of cultures from both the East (India) and West (Rome).

Oral Traditions

The majority of African narratives are oral. There are two prominent oral traditions in Africa:

- 1. **Dilemma tale** This is a form of moral tale that does not have a definite ending and invites the audience to share judgment. It is intended to start discussions regarding moral issues and may be used as a form of instruction or entertainment.
- 2. **Chain tale or cumulative tale** It is a formulaic story, which means it has a pattern. In this kind of story, the characters' dialogue or action repeats, and the plot line tends to be simple. It often contains hilarious messages in the form of jokes and witty statements.

Literary Devices

Aside from the two prominent oral traditions, African prose also made use of many different literary devices. Among the commonly used literary devices in African prose are: **parallelism**, **personification**, **metaphor**, **alliteration**, and **rhyme**. Other literary devices used in African prose include:

- 1. **Epithet** This is often used to describe particular traits or qualities of a character.
- 2. **Apostrophe** This is a literary device used to address a character who is not present or a nonliving object. It is often represented with an exclamation point.
- 3. **Omniscient point of view** This is a narration method wherein the narrator is aware of all the characters' thoughts and feelings.

Prominent African Authors

Below are authors who have made significant contributions to African prose:

- 1. **Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford**, a Ghanaian, is the author of one of the first published African novels written in English. His novel is titled *Ethiopia Unbound*. He was also a political activist, and he wrote books that served to convey his opposition to the various laws imposed by the British on land management.
- 2. **Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo**, a South African, wrote the first published English language African play titled *The Girl Who Killed to Save*. He was also the founder of the Bantu Dramatic Society, the establishment of which led to the creation of many plays.
- 3. **Ngugi wa Thiong'o**, a Kenyan writer, wrote the first full-length East African play titled *Black Hermit*. A versatile writer, he wrote essays, plays, novels, and short stories, some of which were political while some were considered children's literature.
- 4. **Chinua Achebe**, a Nigerian, wrote the novel *Things Fall Apart*, which is regarded as one of the most influential African novels and has received worldwide critical acclaim.

Let's Check In!

Read Athol Fugard's *Tsotsi* and answer the following questions:

- 1. What is the setting of the story?
- 2. Who are the main characters of the story?
- 3. Explain the plot in your own words.
- 4. What themes are present in the story?



Check Your Understanding

- 1. What is the function of prose-writing in Africa?
- 2. Describe African prose narratives.
- 3. Enumerate the various empires and societies that contributed to the enrichment of African prose.



- 4. What are the two prominent oral traditions in Africa? Explain each.
- 5. Enumerate all the commonly used literary devices in African prose.



Let's Step Up!

Read the story *Tsotsi* and analyze it by comparing it to the features and literary devices present in African prose. Present your findings through a slide presentation.

Let's Revisit the Essentials!

Go back to the essential question on the introduction page and discuss it in class.

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Lesson 3: African Poetry

In the previous lesson, we discussed African prose. Now, we are going to discuss its counterpart—African poetry. This lesson will help you understand the features of African poetry.



What is the significance of poetry in the lives of Africans?



Triad Activity

Form a group of three. Choose one African poem from the internet or other print sources. Analyze your group's chosen poem and answer the guide questions below. When presenting the poem in class, one member should read it aloud, and the other two members should answer the guide questions and share the group's insights about the chosen poem.

Guide questions:

- 1. Consider the title of the poem. Does it say something about the poem's subject?
- 2. What is the theme or central idea of this poem?
- 3. Are there any symbols? What do these symbols mean?
- 4. Does the poem appeal to the reader's intellect, emotions, or reason?
- 5. What do you think is the poem's purpose?



Learn about It!

Danilo Francisco M. Reyes, a poet and teacher, once said that "a poem is an answer to an unsaid question." In the context of African poetry, a poem is the response to the experiences of the African race, which includes their experience of god in nature, the violence of colonialism, and the struggles of

Vocabulary

- incantation words that are believed to have a magical effect when sung or spoken
- imagery the use of words or pictures to describe people, objects, places, ideas, or situations



postcolonial life. Poetry's ability to show different imageries with various meanings makes African poetry a rich source of African sentiments.

African Poetry

African poetry, just like its counterpart, prose, is generally oral. Often, it is sung and performed. Forms of African poetry include praise poems for leaders and other prominent people, ritual verse, occupational verse, and the narrative epic. They also had songs about love, marriage, and war, as well as lullabies and incantations.

Two famous African epics in the precolonial era are the *Epic of Sundiata*, which was composed in medieval Mali, and the *Epic of Dinga*, which was from the Ghana Empire.

Because Africa is a continent that houses more than 8,000 languages, there are **five major language families** used in African poetry. These are as follows:

- a. Afro-Asiatic languages
- b. Click languages
- c. Niger-Congo languages
- d. Sudanic languages
- e. Austronesian languages

African Poets

Many African writers had significant contributions in the quality of African poems. These writers include:

1. **Leopold Sedar Senghor** was a president of Senegal who published the first anthology of French language poetry. French was popularly used by the local intellectuals because of the strong influence of their French colonizers. His work was titled *Anthology of the New Black* and *Malagasy Poetry in the French Language*. He, along with **Léon Damas** of French Guiana and **Aimé Césaire** of Martinique, was also one of the initiators of **Negritude**, a literary and cultural movement that started in the 1930s and continued into the 1950s.

Negritude

Negritude promoted the self-affirmation of the black people. Works inspired by Negritude glorified Africa and promoted pride in the African heritage. Among the poems showing Negritude are Abioseh Nicol's "The Meaning of Africa," David Diop's "Africa," and Bernard Dadié's "I Thank You God."



- 2. **Wole Soyinka** is a Nigerian poet who was well-known for his utilization of English in writing poetry. In 1986, he became a Nobel Prize laureate for literature. He was the first African who won the award. Most of his poems depict racial discrimination.
- 3. **Nadine Gordimer** is the second African writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. She is a playwright and a poet. Her writing discusses **apartheid** or the racial discrimination system in South Africa.
- 4. Another influential poet is **John Pepper Clark**, a Nigerian literary critic. His famous collection of poems was called *A Decade of Tongues*, which reflected on postcolonial life in Africa.

Below is an example of African poetry. Read the poem and try to answer the questions that follow.

Heroic Poetry

(from a heroic poem dedicated to the Zulu chief Shaka)

Hero who surpasses other heroes!
Swallow that disappears in the clouds,
Others disappearing into the heavens!
Son of Menzi!
Viper of Ndaba!
Erect, ready to strike,
It strikes the shields of men!
Father of the cock!
Why did it disappear over the mountains?

It annihilated men!
That is Shaka,
Son of Senzangakhona,
Of whom it is said, Bayede!
You are an elephant!

Questions:

- 1. What does the title tell you about the poem's subject?
- 2. What is this poem about? What is its theme?
- 3. What images does the poet use?
- 4. Are there any symbols? What do these symbols mean?
- 5. What do you think is the poem's purpose?

Let's Check In!

What is a poem in the context of African poetry?



Check Your Understanding

- 1. What is a poem in the context of African poetry?
- 2. Describe African poetry.
- 3. What are the two famous African epics during the precolonial era?
- 4. Enumerate the five major language families used in African poetry.
- 5. In a three-sentence wrap-up, describe the most interesting thing you have learned about African poetry.





Let's Step Up!

Search online for at least three works of Negritude poetry. In a short essay, describe how each promoted love for African culture and the black people. Write your essay on a separate sheet of paper. Do not forget to put a title.

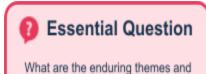
Let's Revisit the Essentials!

Go back to the essential question on the introduction page and discuss it in class.



Lesson 4: Modern African Literature

The educational systems imposed by colonialism gave rise to modern African literature. This is the reason why modern African literature has both native African and European influences. This lesson will help you understand modern African literature.



conflicts in modern African literature?



The T-Chart

With a partner, go to the library and read about modern African literature (e.g., themes and characteristics). You have exactly 25 minutes to conduct a short research and take down notes. Do not forget to cite your source(s). Write your notes on the left-hand column of the T-chart below. Read your notes again and sum them up in the right-hand column. Present your work in front of the class.

Notes	Summary

Quipper



The modern experience of Africa comes from the traumatic colonial violence of the West and the struggles toward national identity. This is at the heart of African modernity. Modern African writing serves as a movement toward the restoration and rediscovery of African culture and thinking.

Postcolonial Africa

As African countries gained independence, there came a **struggle for their national identity**. This was one of the main features of African writing. In the modern times, African writers drew inspiration largely from their experiences after the colonization of Africa.

Vocabulary

- socialism an
 economic or political
 system based on
 government
 ownership and
 control of business
 and methods of
 production
- capitalism an economic system based on private ownership of business and property

Major Themes Used in Modern African Literature

According to Ali A. Mazrui, a writer and professor on African studies, there are **seven major themes** used in African literature produced after the colonization:

- a. the clash between Africa's past and present
- b. the clash between tradition and modernity
- c. the clash between indigenous and foreign
- d. the clash between individualism and community
- e. the clash between socialism and capitalism
- f. the clash between development and self-reliance
- g. the clash between Africanity and humanity

Well-Known Literary Pieces of Modern African Literature

Modern African literature became prominent as a literary tradition, producing classics such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child*, and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. This recognition was further affirmed by Soyinka's winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986.





Modern African Literature in Terms of Language and Style

The colonization of Africa exposed African writers to some European languages, which they then used in their works. Modern African literature is written using both **native African** and **European languages**.

Though written African literature is more dominant in modern literature, oral lore or literature is not lost. Up to this day, literary works of the ethnic groups Yoruba, Hausa, Zulu, and Sotho in native languages still exist.

Because of colonialism, African literature is heavily influenced by the West in terms of both style and language use. Writers such as Mazisi Kunene, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and the late Okot p'Bitek first wrote some of their works in African languages before translating them into English. It is common, however, for many African writers to write in languages such as Portuguese and French as well.

There is the Eurocentric temptation to see modern African literature written in these European languages as an extension of European literature. It goes to show that the West is a major factor in the literary production of Africa. **Eurocentrism** appears to propagate a trend that to be modern is to be Western. However, after modern imperialism, language alone cannot be the sole criterion of a people's literature.

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe

For a more in-depth knowledge of modern African literature, try to read Chinua Achebe's



Things Fall Apart. This novel, which was published in 1958, has been recognized as the finest novel written about life in Nigeria at the end of 19th century. It is also considered as the most widely read African novel. The novel is structured in three parts.

When reading this novel, take note of the setting and society, character and conflict, themes, motifs, use of imagery, structure, technique, and language.

Let's Check In!

Give at least two major themes seen in modern African literature.

Check Your Understanding

- 1. What gave rise to African modernity?
- 2. According to Ali A. Mazrui, what are the seven major themes used in African literature produced after the colonization?
- 3. In what language is modern African literature written?
- 4. What is the impact of colonialism in African literature?
- 5. Think of a metaphor that describes modern African literature and explain why you chose it. For example: African literature is clay because . . .



Let's Step Up!

Write down words or short phrases that come to mind when you think of modern African literature. Among these words, choose three that you think best represent modern African literature. Be ready to compare your list of words with that of your classmates and discuss the reasons you chose those words.

Let's Revisit the Essentials!

Go back to the essential question on the introduction page and discuss it in class.



An Educational Multimedia Presentation

Goal: Your task is to create an educational multimedia presentation about African literature.

Role: You are a young professor of literature. You have been tasked by the head of the Department of English and Comparative Literature in your university to create a multimedia presentation about African literature, which will be presented in the university's literature symposium.

Audience: The target audience is the university's administrative officers, deans, faculty members, students, including very important guests.

Situation: The challenge involves coming up with a multimedia presentation that will allow the symposium audience to gain insight into the quality and significance of African culture and identity through its literature.

Product:

You will create a multimedia presentation using the following guidelines:

- 1. Provide a detailed description and illustration of African literature. Make use of pictures, illustrations, and sounds.
- 2. Explain the key features of African prose and poetry and discuss the themes and characteristics of African literature.
- 3. Show the similarities and differences of ancient African literature and modern African literature.
- 4. You may include an analysis of one African literary piece.
- 5. Provide your own insight about the importance of learning African literature.
- 6. Make sure that your sources are properly cited.
- 7. Submit a printed version of your presentation.



Standards and Criteria for Success: Your project will be graded using the following rubric:

	Criteria	Beginning (0-12 points)	Developing (13-16 points)	Accomplished (17-20 points)	Score
General	Content	The presentation does not adequately cover all the required topics.	The presentation barely covers the required topics.	The presentation covers all the required topics completely and in detail.	
	Organization	The progression of details and transitions between ideas are unclear.	The progression of details and transitions between ideas are inconsistent.	The progression of details and transitions between ideas are clear.	
	Language (spelling, mechanics, grammar, and word usage)	The presentation did not follow spelling and grammar conventions.	Spelling and grammar conventions were inconsistent.	The presentation followed spelling and grammar conventions.	
	Punctuality	The presentation was submitted more than one day late.	The presentation was submitted one day late.	The presentation was submitted in advance or on time.	
Task-specific	Research/Subject knowledge	Subject knowledge is not evident; information provided is incorrect and confusing.	Subject knowledge is evident; some errors in information.	Subject knowledge is evident throughout the presentation; information is clear and accurate.	
	Visuals/graphics/ sounds	Use of visuals, graphics, or	Visuals, graphics,	Visuals and graphics are	

		sounds is limited.	sounds used are relevant.	relevant, attractive, and enhance the content.	
	Citations	No sources are properly cited.	Few sources are properly cited.	All sources are properly cited.	
Total Score:					

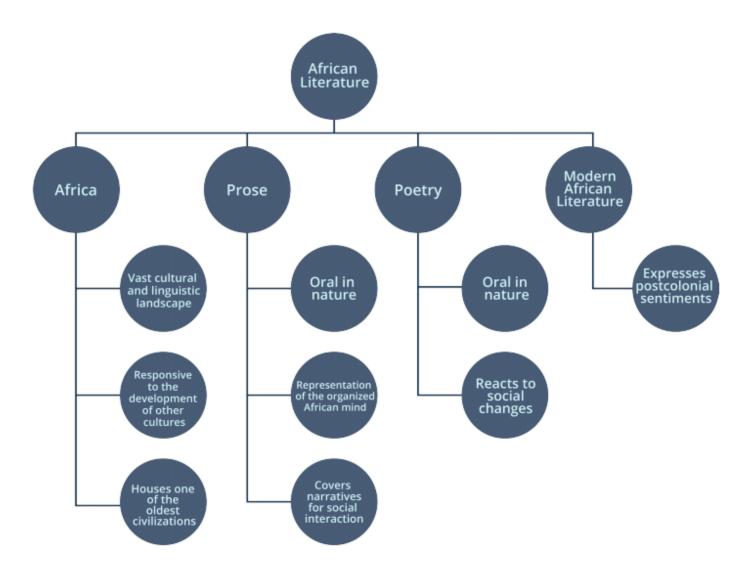


Self-Check: How Well Did I Learn?

Do a self-check on how well you learned the lessons in this unit. Place a checkmark in the appropriate box.

Skills	I think I need more practice and assistance	I am familiar and can perform well with minimal assistance	I am confident that I can perform this on my own
I can describe African			
literature.			
I can identify key			
features of African			
prose and African			
poetry.			
I can explain the themes			
and characteristics of			
African literature.			

Ø Wrap Up



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Recommended Link for This Unit:

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