Extensive reading - Lecture 1 & 2 (Pr. Handour)

Course objectives:

By the end of the semester, the students should be able to:

1. *Scheme and scan the literary reading material listed below to get familiar with its content.*
2. *Critically engage with the assigned short stories and poems.*
3. *Extracts and discuss the main themes of each literary work.*
4. *Be familiar with some distinctive features and artistic devices of literary discourse.*
5. *Analyse a literary excerpt and develop a theme into a well-written four paragraph essay.*

Short stories:

1. *"Young Goodman Brown" by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1835).*
2. *"The Black Cat" by Edgar Allan Poe (1843).*
3. *"Clay" by James Joyce (1914).*
4. *"Her First Ball" by Katherine Mansfield (1921).*
5. *"The Duchess and the Jeweller" by Virginia Wolf (1938).*
6. *"Flight" by John Steinbeck (1938).*

Poems:

1. *"The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats.*
2. *"The Journey of the Magi" by T.S Eliot.*
3. *"Sonnet 18" by Shakespeare.*
4. *"Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats.*
5. *"She Walks in Beauty" by Lord Byron.*
6. *"Daffodils" By William Wordsworth.*

Towards a definition of literature:

"Literature" has been defined in a number of different ways, which makes it a highly polysemic signifier. For this reason, it is not a simply- defined, but rather a fuzzy multi-dimensional concept. In simple words, literature designates a kind of imaginative and creative writing closely bound up with fiction, which is a kind of literally untrue writing.

Seventeenth century English literature encompasses Shakespeare, Webster, Marvell and Melton; but it also includes the essays of Francis Bacon, the sermons of John Donne and the various writings of Thomas Browne.

Trying to understand literature against the backdrop of the paired opposite of fact and fiction is nonetheless problematic. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the novel seems to have been concerned with both fact and fiction whereas the news reports were hardly if ever concerned with factual events. Hence the dividing line between fact and fiction has always been shadowy and vague and "our own sharp discriminations between these categories simply did not apply" (Eaglton 2). For instance, Gibbon, who thought that he was essentially engaged in writing "historical truth" and the authors of Genesis, who believed that whatever they have written refers to univocal religious facts, are now read as fact by some readers and fiction by others. In the same vein, Newman's theological meditations are not unanimously read as a repository of unchanging truth, but they can be, cogently enough, approached as literature. Therefore, any attempt to draw a clear-cut distinction between fact and fiction cannot work in the sphere of literature. What we take for fiction can be construed as something factual and what we regard as fact can be interpreted as something fictional.

This being the case, one needs to look for an alternative approach to literature. Perhaps we need to define literature not only as imaginative or creative writing, but also as a kind of writing which uses language in "peculiar ways". In this regard, literary writing goes beyond imagination and creation to perpetrate, in the words of the Russian formalist critic Roman Ja Jakobson, an "organized violence" on "ordinary speech." Literature has the potential to transform ordinary language into something unfamiliar. In his book, A

Defence of Poetry, (1821), Shelly anticipates this formalist contention of defamiliarization since for him poetry "strips the veil of familiarity from the world ... it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity ... It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know."25 if, for example, you come to me and utter 'Thou still unravished bride of quietness', then I instantly know that I am in the presence of the literary. This sense of unfamiliarity is attributable to the texture, rhythm and resonance of the words, which are steeped in abstract meanings. Put differently, this defamiliarization is due to the absence of proportion between the signifiers (the material elements of language) and the signifieds (the mental image/ concept).

Russian Formalists:

To the Russian formalist and New American literary critics, the advocates and upholders of close reading, literature should remain disinterested. That is to say, the literary text should be politically detached and unconcerned with any "specific program of action". The main goal of literary criticism according to Mathew Arnold, a key canonical figure in the British criticism, is that of merely appreciating "the object as in itself it really is." The literary text is at variance with religion, psychology and sociology and solely represents a certain peculiar organization foisted on everyday speech. It has its own laws, structures and devices, which should be subjected to rigorous critical analysis without stretching far beyond to some transcendental truth. In other words, the text is self-referential as it is both apolitical and ahistorical. It is neither a vehicle for ideas, nor a reflection of social, cultural, psychological or political reality. It is a self-sufficient autotelic entity.

For a formalist critic Henry Fielding's novel Joseph Andrews is not about a character of that name. It is just a means to an end. It is a device for holding different kinds of the narrative technique together. Likewise, Nineteen Eighty-Four would not be read as a castigation of the totalitarian oligarchy and its power machines, but as a self-contained text that has nothing to do with ideology and politics. On this theory, Eaglton points out:

> *What was specific to literary language, what distinguished it from other forms of discourse, was that it 'deformed' ordinary language in various ways. Under the pressure of literary devices, ordinary language was intensified, condensed, twisted, telescoped, drawn out, turned on its head. It was language 'made strange'; and because of this estrangement, the everyday world was also suddenly made unfamiliar. (Eaglton 7)*

The alienating and estrangement effect literature exerts on ordinary language must be underlined. Paradoxically, it is when the veil of familiarity is stripped of language that a more intimate possession of experience occurs. Unlike natural science and biology textbooks, for instance, the language that literature implements serves a general rather than an immediate or specific purpose. These non-pragmatic overtones bring formalist critics under scathing critical attacks from their opponents who argue, convincingly enough, that literary language is populated with our social, cultural and political concerns. For their turn, many formalist critics do not deny that history and politics may interfere with literature, but the critic's business does not consist in stretching to facts that lie outside the text. This focus on how literary discourse works rather than what it is about further accentuates the formalist claim that literature inaugurates a sort of self-referential language that talks about nothing, but itself.

Notwithstanding this non- pragmatic approach to literary discourse, it is still rather intractable to define literature objectively. Its definition remains open-ended as it depends on how somebody decides to read rather than on the nature of the reading material. This claim is redolent of Barthesian (in relation to Roland Barthes) notion of the death of the author which paves the way to the birth of the reader and consequently to myriad interpretations of the literary text. "There are certain kinds of writing - poems, plays, novels - which are fairly obviously intended to be 'non-pragmatic' in this sense, but this does not guarantee that they will actually be read in this way" (Eaglton 7). I might read George Orwell not because some of his novels provide information about totalitarian political regimes like those of Stalin, but because I derive sheer joy and pleasure from reading this

paramount literary figure. According to Eaglton, "Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust upon them. Breeding in this respect may count for a good deal more than birth" (Ibid). literature is in dearth of essence. A literary text may be read "non-pragmatically" as it may be read "poetically." What people generally call literature is sometimes based on their idiosyncratic judgment:

> *We have still not discovered the secret, then, of why Lamb, Macaulay and Mill are literature but not, generally speaking, Bentham, Marx and Darwin. Perhaps the simple answer is that the first three are examples of 'fine writing', whereas the last three are not. This answer has the disadvantage of being largely untrue, at least in my judgement, but it has the advantage of suggesting that by and large people term 'literature' writing which they think is good. (Eaglton 8/9)*

Still the term "fine writing", the equivalent of "belles lettres" in French, is not devoid of ambiguity: it designates a kind of writing which is highly esteemed, while not forcing you into regarding a specimen of it to be good. Literature is not fixed, but rather dynamic; it is in a constant state of flux. What was regarded as literature in one historical epoch may not be regarded as such in the next, and vice versa. In this respect, Eaglton is right to interrogate a Marxist value judgment about Greek art:

> *Karl Marx was troubled by the question of why ancient Greek art retained an 'eternal charm', even though the social conditions which produced it had long passed; but how do we know that it will remain 'eternally' charming, since history has not yet ended? Let us imagine that by dint of some deft archaeological research we discovered a great deal more about what ancient Greek tragedy actually meant to its original audiences, recognized that these concerns were utterly remote from our own, and began to read the plays again in the light of this deepened knowledge. One result might be that we stopped enjoying them. We might come to see that*

we had enjoyed them previously because we were unwittingly reading them in the light of our own preoccupations; once this became less possible, the drama might cease to speak at all significantly to us. (10)