

Umaiza Asif
Roll no # 1
B.S English (Se)

What is Literature

The word 'Literature' is a modified form of a Latin word (*literatura* or *litteratus*) that means 'writing formed with letters'.

Literature refers to written works that express ideas, emotions, or tell stories using language as a medium. Different poets, writers, and critics have provided varying definitions of literature over time, reflecting its broad scope and influence.

Throughout the history of Literature, many of the great writers have defined it and expressed its meaning in their own way according to the purposes of literature already mentioned. Here are the few famous definitions of literature by some celebrated authors.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784):

Johnson emphasized literature as a means of communication across time and space, a lasting expression of human thought. He says:

"Literature is the art of writing well, and of holding conversation with those who cannot speak with us, from either distance or time."

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965):

Eliot, a modernist poet, believed that literature provides an emotional and intellectual connection between the writer and the audience, going beyond imitation of life.

"Literature is not an imitation of life but an expression of the emotions, moods, and the thoughts of the artist."

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Matthew Arnold (1822-1888):

Arnold argued that literature reflects and critiques human experience, providing insights into morality, society, and culture.

"Literature is a criticism of life."

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941):

Woolf pointed to the vulnerability of writers in their quest to express the truth while often contending with the judgments of society.

"Literature is strewn with the wreckage of men who have minded only reason the opinions of others."

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849):

Poe stressed the profound and honorable nature of literature, elevating it to a vocation, particularly due to its capacity to shape the mind.

"Literature is the most noble of professions. In fact, it is about the only fit for a man."

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963):

Lewis viewed literature as something that goes beyond reality, adding meaning, and emotional richness to human experience.

"Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this way irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become."

Roland Barthes (1915-1980):

Barthes, a French literary critic, highlighted the idea that literature often poses profound questions about existence, society, and the human condition without necessarily providing solutions.

"Literature is the question minus the answer."

Functions of Literature

The functions of literature are diverse and multifaceted, reflecting its ability to influence, educate, entertain, and inspire readers. Following are the key functions of literature:

Aesthetic Pleasure:

Literature provides enjoyment through beauty in language, story-telling. It allows readers to experience pleasure from well-crafted expressive rhythms, and vivid imagery, offering a sense of emotional satisfaction.

Cultural Preservation:

Literature serves as a medium for preserving history, traditions, and values. Through stories, myths, and legends, it carries forward the beliefs, experiences of different societies, keeping them alive for future generations.

Ways of Studying Literature

Studying literature is an art. It involves various approaches which offer unique insights into texts, authors, and contexts. These approaches allow readers to analyze literary works from different perspectives. It enables them to understand themes, structure, historical background, and language. Following are the different ways to study literature.

- Skills
 1. Writing
 2. Speaking
 3. Reading

Art Symbols

Tone: - Serious / Serious

1. Close Reading:

Close reading is a careful and detailed analysis of the text. It focuses on word choice, sentence structure, tone, and literary devices. This approach emphasizes interpreting the meaning and significance of the text based on its language and composition.

While reading a poem or passage, the reader must pay attention to metaphors, imagery, and symbolism. He must highlight words or phrases that contribute to the overall meanings. He should also examine how the author's style affects the message.

For example: In Robert Frost's poem The Road Not Taken, a close reading might focus on the repeated imagery of roads and paths, exploring how the metaphor of choices in life shapes the poem's meaning. The line "I took the one less traveled by" can be analysed to discuss individualism and the nature of decision-making.

2. Historical and Biographical Approach:

This approach involves studying a literary work in the context of historical period and the author's life. It helps to understand how external events, personal experiences, and societal trends influenced the creation of the text.

The reader should study the historical background of the period when the text was written. He should study the author's biography to see how their personal experiences or the social and political climate influenced their work.

For example: When studying Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, the reader needs to understand the historical context of the Industrial Revolution and the author's personal life. He must identify the loss of her children and her exposure to romanticism. He must analyse novel's themes of creation, science, and human

Literature is a reflection of life, history and author's

3. Thematic Analysis:

Themes are the underlying ideas or issues the author is addressing in the text. Thematic analysis focuses on identifying and exploring the central ideas or messages in a literary work.

The reader should identify the ideas, topics, or motifs in the text. He should analyse how these themes are developed through characters, plot, and setting. He should also discuss their significance in the broader context of the work.

For example: In George Orwell's 1984, thematic analysis would focus on major themes like totalitarianism and individual freedom. The theme of government control is reinforced through the portrayal of the omnipresent Big Brother and manipulation of truth by the Party. The reader must have the knowledge to identify these prevailing and dominant themes.

4. Structuralist Approach:

In this approach, the reader analyzes literature by focusing on its internal structure, such as its narrative techniques, plot patterns, or linguistic organization. This approach emphasizes the relationships between different elements of the text rather than looking at external influences.

The reader should examine the structure of the narrative. He must analyze how the plot is organized, the roles of different characters, and recurring motifs. He should look for binary oppositions (e.g., good vs. evil, light vs. dark) and analyze how they create meaning in the text.

For example: While studying Oedipus Rex by Sophocles, the reader uses a structuralist approach. He would focus on its use of fate versus free will. He would identify a clear structure of rising action, climax, and resolution, creating a pattern that is central to the play's meaning.

5. Post-Structuralism/Deconstruction:

Post-structuralism and deconstruction question the stability of meanings in texts. This approach challenges the idea of fixed interpretations. It suggests that meanings are fluid, contradictory, and multiple. The reader continues a process of breaking down binary oppositions (e.g., good/evil, male/female) while exploring the instability within a text.

For example: A deconstructionist reading of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness would question the binary opposition between "civilization" and "savagery," showing how Conrad's portrayal of European colonization is a form of colonialism.

For example: In Charles Dickens' Hard Times, the reader studies the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism on the working class. The novel portrays characters like Stephen Blackpool, who suffers from economic conditions.

9. Postcolonial Approach:

Postcolonial criticism examines literature produced in, or about, colonized regions. It explores themes of identity, power, race, and resistance. It analyzes how colonized cultures are represented and how they respond to colonization.

The reader studies the representation of colonized characters, cultures, and lands in the text. He looks for themes of oppression, resistance, identity, and the effects of imperialism.

For example: In a postcolonial reading of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, the reader would focus on its depiction of African natives and European colonizers. The reader would locate whether the novel reinforces colonial stereotypes or critiques European imperialism.

10. Reader-Response Criticism:

Reader-response criticism emphasizes the reader's role in interpreting literature. This approach argues that meaning is not fixed in the text but is created through the interaction between the reader and the text.

The reader reflects on his personal response to the text. He must consider his experiences, background, and emotions influence his interpretation. He analyzes how different readers might interpret the text in various ways.

For example: In reading J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, a reader might relate to Holden Caulfield's feelings of alienation, while another might find his actions frustrating. Reader-response criticism explores these diverse reactions. The reader must understand the diversity in the text presented by the reader.

Ecocriticism:

Ecocriticism focuses on the relationship between literature and the environment. It examines how nature is portrayed in texts and provides an alternative to the anthropocentric (human-centered) worldview that often dominates literature.

9. Education and Knowledge:

Literature has a key role in educating people, offering insights like history, psychology, politics, and human nature. It helps readers understand different cultures, time periods, and viewpoints, broadening their horizons and knowledge.

10. Identity and Self-Understanding:

Literature allows individuals to explore their own identities, beliefs through the experiences of characters or narrators. It offers insights into human nature, helping readers develop a deeper sense of self-awareness and understanding of others.

11. Entertainment and Escape:

Many people read literature for the sheer enjoyment of a good story. Literature provides an escape from reality, allowing readers to immerse themselves in fantastical worlds, suspenseful plots, or thrilling adventures, offering a break from the monotony of everyday life.

12. Preservation of Language:

Literature plays a vital role in preserving and evolving language. By experimenting with different forms of expression, authors contribute to the development of new linguistic styles, idioms, and vocabulary, while maintaining the richness of traditional language.

The reader looks at how nature is represented in the text. He analyses the relationship between characters and the natural world, and explore themes related to environmentalism, conservation, or the exploitation of natural resources.

For example: In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, ecocriticism could focus on the portrayal of the Dust Bowl and the suffering it causes to both the land and the people. The reader reflects the devastating effects of environmental degradation caused by economic exploitation using this approach.

Inclusion:

The study of literature is rich and multifaceted. It offers a variety of approaches that illuminate different aspects of a text. From close reading to psychoanalytic and feminist approaches, each method allows readers to deepen their understanding of literary works and explore them from new perspectives. By using these approaches, students and readers can develop a more comprehensive and meaningful appreciation of literature and its impact on society, culture, and the individual experience.

Some General Tips to Study Literature

Studying literature can be a rewarding and enriching experience. Following are some general steps and strategies to help study literature effectively:

Focus Selection:

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It should be decided whether the reader wants to focus on poetry, prose, or a specific genre (e.g., science fiction, classical literature).

It is also important to consider exploring a specific literary period (e.g., Romanticism) or movement (e.g., Feminism, Post-colonialism).

Careful Reading:

The reader should take notes in the margins, underline significant passages, and highlight themes or literary devices. He should also write brief summaries of sections to solidify his understanding. He must consider the author's context of the work, and the themes presented.

Research:

The reader must research the historical background of the time when the work was written to understand its influences. He should learn about the author's life and the social context in which they wrote, as this provides insight into their writing.

4. Engagement with Literary Theories:

The reader must familiarize himself with different literary theories like structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, feminism etc. to deepen his understanding of literature.

5. Utilization of Resources:

The reader must read critical essays and analyses of the works of various writers.

6. Diverse Reading

The reader must read works from different cultures, time periods and perspectives to broaden his understanding of literature.

7. Reflection on Themes and Motifs:

The reader must identify and analyze recurring themes, symbols, motifs within and across texts.

