**Definition of Literature**

What is literature? How do we know some writing is literature and some other writing is not? What are the boundaries? It is so difficult to give a definition that some people just say maybe there is no need to define it because we will recognize it as soon as we see it. If we turn to dictionaries for the meaning of the word “literature”, we may find two or three items. But the first one never goes too far from “written artistic works, particularly those with a high and lasting artistic value”, as is given by the first edition of *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*. The sixth edition of *Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary* defines “literature” as “pieces of writing that are valued as works of art, especially novels, plays and poems (in contrast to technical books and newspapers, magazines, etc.)”. A combination of these two definitions can help us reach a fuller understanding of “literature”. We can see that literature in the first place should be artistic but not some technical writing. Secondly, it usually has a lasting value, which means it has stood the test of time. Thirdly, novels, plays and poems are the common forms of literature. For the convenience of discussion, let us settle for the definition of literature as “written works with high and lasting artistic values” for the moment.

**Necessity of Literature**

In this material-oriented society, which places a high value upon speed, people tend to be suspicious and impatient with literature. Why do we need literature? What is the use of it? Literature takes too much time to read but it doesn’t seem to fulfill any practical need. Teachers of literature are often troubled by these questions and complaints from their students. In fact, literature is very necessary and important.

To deal with the necessity of literature, maybe it is a good idea to start with the origin of literature, which is what made literature happen in the very beginning. Literature is first of all specific to mankind. When human beings were fed and seated by the fire, they started to brood about life. They were capable of distancing themselves from their own life and gaining a relatively objective perspective about it. They started to ask questions and also tried to find answers to them from their observation and experience of the world. Somebody perhaps started to tell a joke or a story to amuse others. That perhaps is how literature came into being. It originated from a human curiosity about themselves and the world. It serves as a food for human spiritual or psychological hunger.

Literature most likely started with an oral tradition since speech appeared much earlier than written language. As written language was developed, oral literature gradually settled down in manuscripts, which helped it to pass all the way down to us, human beings one or two thousand years away. Therefore, literature is a historical record of what life used to be and what our ancestors felt important enough to be written down. Human beings develop from one generation to another and the individual’s life is very short in comparison to the human history. To know literature is to know our past, where we come from and what makes us become the kind of people we are. Literature helps the individual to know his or her position in history and recognize what he or she can do to history. It offers us guidance in understanding ourselves and helps us make better decisions. Though literature is mostly about some unreal people or legendary figures in the past, it addresses the fundamental issues of human existence, such as life, death, nature, society, emotions, which have puzzled mankind from two thousand years ago to today. Questions raised in those ancient literary works seem never to be able to find final answers but people’s interest in finding them seems never to die out but to grow even stronger. Literature is pointing directly at us and it is what ancient people wanted to say to us. It can help us decide what we are going to say to our children, and that is the way tradition or history is formed. So we should never turn away from literature because we, the individuals in history, are actually the links of history and tradition. Literature can stimulate us to find those answers by ourselves and our search for them will also bring meaning to our own existence.

**Forms of Literature**

In terms of forms, literature is usually classified into poetry, drama, prose fiction and essays.

Poetry refers to poems in general and a poem is a composition with words arranged in separate lines and chosen for their particular effects in sound and images. In another word, poems are written in verse with a regular rhythm or pattern of rhyme in the lines. Poetry, with its particular musical properties in language, is pleasant to the ear, easy to memorize and therefore easy to be spread from mouth to mouth. As a result, poetry becomes the oldest form of literature since literature started with an oral tradition, such as *Beowulf*, the epic poem of Old English, and *The Book of Songs*, the earliest existing collection of Chinese poems. They are probably intended to be chanted or sung with accompaniment by some musical instruments.

Drama is a special form of literature, which is intended for performance. A large part of drama belongs to theatre, such as actors, movement, gestures and stage. The literary part of drama is mainly made up of dialogues between characters.

Prose fiction literally means something unreal or made up in the form of prose. Prose3 is the opposite of verse, which means it is written in continuity not in broken lines with a regular rhythm or pattern of rhyme. Fiction, in opposition to non-fiction, refers to a narrative form which is largely based on the imagination of the author instead of actual happenings. It includes myths, parables, romances, novels and short stories.

Essays are short writings in prose discussing a topic from the author’s point of view, such as Francis Bacon’s essays “Of Truth” and “Of Death”. In the early 19th century, the appearance and growth of new types of magazines brought a group of essayists onto stage, such as Charles Lamb and Thomas De Quincey. Since then, essay-writing has become a significant vehicle and a major form for writers to express their thoughts about anything they feel interesting enough for an essay.

**Literariness of Literature**

How is a literary work different from other pieces of writing? What makes literature qualified as literature? The literariness of literature first of all consists in the language. Fine literary language is usually produced by writers with sensitive feelings, acute observation and powerful imagination. Great writers are artists of language, who are extremely good at bringing the readers into the world of their works by manipulating the language to that effect. They are usually very particular and careful with word choice when describing a scene or creating a mood. So to many people, the pleasure derived from reading great literary works far exceeds that from reading newspapers. We read for different purposes. For information and news, we read newspaper while for real pleasure and enjoyment, we go to literature. News report, a matter-of-fact statement about some event in impersonal tone, provides the accurate facts about some event with few adjectives. Literature relies heavily upon the rhetorical and figurative aspects of language to arouse the intended feelings in the readers. Therefore, non-literary language is usually denotative, which means a one-to-one correspondence between the language and what it refers to. It aims at accuracy and allows little space for free association or interpretation. While literary language is connotative, which means the language is hidden with other meanings or suggestive of other implications. As a result, it has strong potential for free association, interpretation and ambiguous understanding.

Of course, literature is much more than connotative language. It has other elements to make it outlive its age and pass down to later generations. It even spreads to other countries and gets translated to be read by people from other cultures. Theme, setting, characters, plot, and point of view, are commonly considered to be the major elements.

Theme is the major point the writer is trying to make through his or her writing. It is usually implied rather than directly stated. It is not so obvious as character or plot and often meant for the readers to work out by themselves.

Setting is the context in which a story takes place, which includes many things such as time, location and social environment. Setting is the background, which helps to create the mood or atmosphere and to reinforce characters and theme.

Characters are verbal delineation or representation of the human or human like beings in a story. They are represented by their action and language to have particular qualities and dispositions. Some critics prefer to classify characters into flat and round ones. A flat character, also called a “type” or “two-dimensional”, can be summarized by a single sentence. A round character is more complex in personality and motivation, and therefore more difficult to describe just in one single sentence. A flat character never changes throughout the whole story but a round one like real people in life is capable of surprising us.

Plot is the arrangement of events and actions to achieve intended effects, such as tragic or comic effects. It is not simply the narration of events in time order. It needs careful planning and calculation. Our life is accumulated with numerous incidents without a pattern. Plot means to select those meaningful events to make a pattern and to bring order out of life. So in our life, time moves forward at a constant pace, but the flow of time for a plot can be disrupted in many ways. Sometimes time seems to crawl at snail’s pace, sometimes it seems to fly like an eagle.

Point of view or perspective is from whose consciousness the reader sees, hears and feels the story. There are usually first person, second person and third person points of view. It has been a very practical concern for writers to decide how to bring about the story before the readers. When the narrator is a main character of the story, the story has a first person perspective. The second person narration is seldom seen perhaps it is rather inconvenient and strange for “you” to tell the story, unless the story is in the form of a letter. When the narrator is outside the story, then a third person point of view is adopted. It is the most frequently used and it can be divided into three kinds, limited, objective and omniscient. When the narrator is outside the story but can see into the mind of one of the main characters, the story has a third person limited perspective. When the narrator can not see through the mind of any characters and only what the narrator sees or hears is reported to the readers, we think the story has an objective perspective. When the narrator can see through the minds of all characters, the story has an omniscient perspective.