

CHAPTER 2 LITERARY APPRECIATION: AN INTRODUCTION

What is Literary Appreciation?

Literary appreciation is the way a reader interprets a literary work. It is generally known as the study of literature. It deals with concrete literary works and involves interpreting them. Literary appreciation is reading, discussing and analyzing imaginative literature. The study may also include assessing the value of a work of literature. Therefore, literary appreciation is the way a reader responds to and interprets a literary work. Literary appreciation can also be referred to as **literary criticism** or **literary analysis**.

Who is a Critic?

A person who appreciates analyses or interprets a literary work is called a critic. He or she reads, discusses and evaluates a literary work. The critic judges the work to determine its quality. He or She explains the meaning of the work, describes its features and states how they contribute to the overall meaning of the work. The literary critic identifies the strength or weakness of a work of art.

The Scope of Literary Appreciation

Literary appreciation involves many things. Among these are understanding the nature of literature, its types and its functions. A literary critic may discuss a literary work, its types and its functions, and its relationship with any other subject. He can discuss a work in relation to history or sociology.

Theme and Style

Two basic ideas are important to literary appreciation. These are the theme and the style of the work of literature. The theme comes from the subject matter of the work. It is the lesson or message a reader can make from the literary work. Therefore, what is subject matter? Subject matter is the overall content and issues being discussed in a literary work. It is from subject matter (topic) that the theme or themes (lesson) come out.

Style consists of the elements, devices or techniques used by the author to compose the work. The elements of style determine the type of the literary work. It is the duty of the critic (reader) to identify these elements, devices or techniques in the work. It is his duty to comment on their uses in the work.

The theme of a work can be taken from any issue or topic. The theme of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is from politics; the themes of Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* and Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* are taken from war. The author makes a point about the issue or the topic. The lesson or the message being expressed is the theme of the literary work. The theme may be implicit or explicit.

The theme of *The Tempest* is the conflict between good and evil. The play is on the idea that magic can be used for good or ill. The play also treats the theme of colonialism. *Arms and the Man* treats the evils of materialism. It also deals with the idea that military heroism is a fraud. Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards* is about the uncritical acceptance of English values, and that it is harmful.

The theme of Asare Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime* is that God gives children only when He wants to. The narrative describes the mystery behind having a child. It shows that neither man nor woman nor any power other than God can give a child. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* treats the idea that evil is inherent in man. The

novel shows that man is both noble and ignoble. Ernest Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is on the struggle of man against nature.

Style takes many forms. But some forms are associated with certain genres of literature. Poems are composed in lines and stanzas; dramatic texts are usually presented in acts and scenes; and prose is written in chapters. Despite these differences, the three types of literature share the use of some literary terms and devices.

Literary Terms and Literary Devices

In literary appreciation, certain words are used to express ideas. These are called literary terms. Literary devices are tools used by the author to express ideas and achieve particular effects. Therefore, there is the need for students to understand literary terms and literary devices. Understanding them will help students to appreciate their importance in any literary work. It will also help in a proper discussion of the work. In subsequent sections of this book (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) particular definitions and descriptions of literary terms and devices are presented.

In literary appreciation, literary terms and devices are studied in the way they contribute to the meaning and the beauty of literary works. Among literary terms or devices are allusion, ambiguity, synecdoche and metonymy. Generally, the terms above are significant in poetry. Literary terms and devices also include plot, characterization and setting. These three terms are used mainly in prose and drama. The terms are devices also in narrative or dramatic poetry. You will learn more about these in subsequent chapters.

How to Appreciate a Literary Work

To appreciate a literary work, a reader needs to do the following:

- (i) Read the work many times until he or she understands it well.
- (ii) Understand the issue(s) around which the work is written.
- (iii) Set out in a sentence or two the point the writer is making on the issues.
- (iv) Identify the literary terms that the writer uses in the work.
- (v) Understand how the writer has used the terms in the work.
- (vi) Discuss what the writer has used the terms for in the work.

In this situation, the student who reads, understands and is able to identify terms and devices in a work is a critic. He or she has appreciated the work. It is the duty of the student (critic) to write out his or her response in an essay form. There are other steps to be taken in appreciating each of the literary genres. These steps arise because of the nature of each genre.

How to Appreciate Poetry

To appreciate a poem, the critic must know that the poem needs:

- (i) to be read aloud to him or herself.
- (ii) to be read with a sense of melody, attention to word order and stanza formation.
- (iii) to be read many times over to be well appreciated.
- (iv) to be interpreted at the surface level (denotative) and at the deeper level (connotative).

Equally important is the knowledge of the poet's background, including his or her age, nationality and education.

Therefore, a good critic must have information about the poem and the poet.

Consider William Wordsworth's first six lines in "Daffodils":

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

When it is read aloud, the critic's attention is drawn to the repetition of certain sounds. Notice that at the end of each of these lines, there are particular sounds that are repeated. For instance, each pair of "cloud" and "crowd", "hills" and "daffodils", and "trees" and "breeze" end with similar sounds. When this happens in a poem, we say that they have a rhyme pattern. The patterns contribute to the music in the lines and did not happen by chance. They are planned. It is significant to note that Wordsworth maintains the same pattern in each of the other stanzas of the poem.

In the first two lines, the poem introduces the subject of loneliness and being lost in thought. But in the next four lines, it draws attention to a bed of daffodils. When the stanza is read once, it will be seen to have two parts. One part focuses on the persona in the poem; the other is on the daffodils. The first reading may show a relationship between the two parts of the stanza. The relationship is clearly that of contrast: the persona is lonely; the flowers are not. When the stanza is read again, the relationship between the persona and the flowers is modified. The flowers become, first, a crowd, then a host, and are described in human terms further on till the end of the poem. In the fourth stanza of the poem, the persona speaks of the influence of the flowers on himself. He describes the daffodils as 'a jocund company'. And in the one following, he concludes that whenever he is unhappy but remembers the *daffodils*, he overcomes his loneliness. It is enough therefore to say that the poem's theme is that nature has some healing powers.

How to Appreciate Prose and Drama

Prose and drama have plots, characterization and setting respectively. To appreciate both literary types, the critic needs to:

- (i) understand all the issues raised in them.
- (ii) understand how the issues are related.
- (iii) consider the order in which the issues occur, which are the causes and which are the effects.
- (iv) state characters who are involved in the issues and how they are.
- (v) state the situations, time and place, when the characters raise the issues.
- (vi) also consider the use of language in the work.

It is the duty of the student (critic) to write out his or her response in an essay form. The composition is the appreciation of the prose or drama.

Take a look at a few issues in Konadu's *A Woman in Her Prime* and Osofisan's *Women of Owu*. In Konadu's work, the events take place in a distant past in Brenhoma. The people spend cowries that time. The village is a primitive one. Pokuwaa, the heroine, discovers signs of pregnancy in her body by looking at her image in the stream at dawn. Here, the water serves as a mirror. Using the stream as a mirror, Konadu sets the story in a distant past. The choice of water as a mirror agrees with the time setting of the prose. There cannot be a mirror at that time. The stream therefore represents a mirror and so is a symbol. Thus, the water-mirror symbolism, the time setting and the money (cowries) spent are chosen appropriately.

The events in *Women of Owu* take place in recent past in Yorubaland. The Ijebus, a party in the war in the play, have contacts with the white men. Unlike the Owus who live in the hinterland, the Ijebus live by the coast and trade with the white men and have guns. Guns are deadly, and are superior weapons to bows and arrows and cutlasses. It is then no news that the forces of the Ijebus and the Ifes destroyed Owu heavily.

In the last two paragraphs above, *A Woman in Her Prime* and *Women of Owu* are appreciated. The composition above on each of the plays discusses some events, the time they took place and the characters that are involved. The composition also discusses the events, their time of occurrence and those who carry them out. In literary terms, the composition is on actions, settings, time and characterization. Each composition is a literary appreciation of the prose in question.

The Uses of Literary Appreciation

Literary appreciation is concerned with many questions about a literary work. It seeks to give answers to these questions. It pays attention to different aspects and elements in a literary work and describes how they relate to one another. It states how the aspects and elements contribute to meaning in the work. But while literary appreciation deals in the first place with literature, it also serves other needs.

The following are some of the uses of literary appreciation:

- (i) It helps the individual to think and judge independently.
- (ii) It helps students to be critical-minded.
- (iii) It makes students to understand the values of literature.
- (iv) It makes students to distinguish the good and the bad literature.
- (v) It sets standards in literature.
- (vi) It helps students to see relationships and similarities between literature and society.
- (vii) It sharpens in students the desire to see beyond the surface of things.

Summary

Literary appreciation is a study of literature. It is also referred to as literary criticism or literary analysis. It deals with the discussion of literary works. The person who appreciates a literary work is a critic. He or She deals basically with the theme and the style of the works. Literary appreciation involves understanding the nature of literature, its types and functions. It also serves other functions, and has its own uses.

Revision Questions

1. What is literary appreciation?
2. List five uses of literary appreciation?

3. Identify four ways peculiar only to the appreciation of poetry.
4. Identify four literary terms peculiar to the appreciation of both prose and drama.
5. Define literary terms and literary devices and explain their importance to literary appreciation.

Objective Questions

1. ‘Literary appreciation’ can also be called _____.
A. literary theory B. literary history C. literary criticism D. literary philosophy E. literary psychology
2. Sound elements are mainly significant in appreciating _____.
A. novel B. novella C. play D. poetry E. short story
3. The person who appreciates a literary work is called _____.
A. an orator B. an appreciator C. a critic D. an evaluator E. an interpreter
4. Literary appreciation
A. finds faults with the author. B. praises the author. C. sells literature. D. sets standards in literature. E. condemns literary works.
5. Theme in literature may also be called _____.
A. the message B. the subject matter C. the style D. the topic sentence E. the rheme
6. The two ideas which literary appreciation examines in a literary work are
A. theme and rheme. B. rheme and style. C. matter and method. D. theme and style. E. theme and vision.
7. The most significant literary elements in poetry are _____.
A. figures of tropes B. figures of speech C. figures of beauty D. tropes of beauty E. figures of vision
8. The surface level interpretation of a poem is _____.
A. denotative B. connotative C. Informative D. pejorative E. indicative
9. One scope of literary appreciation is the
A. understanding of the nature of literature.
B. setting standards in literature.
C. celebration of an author.
D. expansion of the student’s vocabulary
E. identification of the nationality of an author.
10. Plot, characterization and setting are literary terms used mainly in
A. epic and poetry. B. prose and poetry. C. poetry and drama. D. prose and drama. E. prose and lyric.

Answers to Objective Questions

1.C 2.D 3.C 4.D 5.A 6.D 7.B 8.A 9.A 10.D