

CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND TO LITERATURE

What is Literature?

The term “literature” is derived from Latin word ‘litera’ which means letter. Simply put, literature, in an expanded use, refers to all written works, whatever their kind or quality, addressed to a general audience. It is the totality of all that is written in any particular discipline. For instance, all that is written in the fields of medicine, aeronautics, physics or engineering is the literature of that particular field. This is the general use of the concept of literature. The particular or special use of the term ‘literature’ refers to imaginative and fictional writing. This is known as creative writing. There are three basic types of imaginative writing, namely: *poetry, drama and prose*.

There are also the concepts of ‘English Literature’, ‘African Literature’ and ‘Literature-in-English’. Any literary work which deals with the experiences of English people is called English literature. On the other hand, any literary work which treats the experiences of African people and has African setting is known as African literature. When that literature is written in the English, it is described as ‘Literature-in-English’. Therefore ‘Literature-in-English’ refers to any literary work by a non-English author who uses the English language as medium of expression.

In terms of medium, there are two kinds of literature: (a) Oral literature and (b) Written literature. Oral literature is presented by word of mouth and by performance. It is not written. Written literature is any literary work that is written down by individual authors.

Features of Oral Literature

Oral literature is also known as traditional literature. Examples of traditional literature are folk songs, folktales, myths, legends, riddles, tongue-twisters and trickster tales. The authorship of oral literature is generally unknown (anonymous).

Oral literature is flexible in narration because it is told by word of mouth. A story may vary from one narrator to the other because it is not written down. Also, the same narrator may tell the same story in different ways. The audience is usually actively involved in oral literature. They participate in storytelling and performance.

The Genres or Types of Literature

Genre refers to a particular type or kind of work of art or literature. There are three genres of written literature, namely: poetry, drama and prose.

Poetry

Poetry is the oldest form of literature. It is the expression of deep feelings about an experience, an event, a thing or a person, etc. Unlike drama or prose, poetry is written in stanzas. A stanza is a fixed number of lines forming a unit of a poem.

Poetry expresses powerful feelings and emotion. It is written in emotive and figurative language.

The language of poetry is usually dense, that is contracted and brief.

The characteristics of a good poem are rhythm/rhyme scheme and figures of speech. These contribute to the beauty and melody of the poem. Therefore, poetry can be described as literature in metrical form.

Ideas in poetry are uniquely presented. Words can be used in a special way different from their standard meanings. A poet may use a word or set of words in a special way to produce particular meanings or effects. When this is done, it is described as *poetic licence*.

Types of Poetry

There are many types of poetry. Among them are lyric, ode, pastoral, ballad, sonnet, dirge, elegy and epic.

Drama

Drama is another genre of literature. It is a story in action. It is a form of literature that is acted on stage, in a playhouse or theatre. Drama imitates life. It brings onto the stage imitations of real-life situations and actions. In the performance, actors take the position of the characters.

Features of Drama

The major feature of drama is that it is presented in dialogue form. A dialogue is a conversation in a play. A drama is written in acts and scenes. Also, it involves the active participation of the audience.

Types of Drama

The types of drama are comedy, tragedy and tragicomedy.

Prose

Prose is the youngest and the most recent of all the genres of literature. It is a narrative in a straightforward language. It is written in paragraph and chapters, and deals with human experiences and events. It is closer to drama than poetry, especially in the use of characters, dialogue and plot.

Features of Prose

Prose is divided into fiction and non-fiction. Fiction refers to a literary narrative based on the imagination and not necessarily on fact. The main examples of fiction are short story, novella, and novel. Other examples include fable, romance and parable.

Non-fiction refers to any prose work that is based mainly on facts and actual experience. Examples of non-fiction are biography, autobiography and memoir.

Functions of Literature

- (i) Literature provides entertainment.
- (ii) It teaches morals.
- (iii) It mirrors the society.
- (iv) It develops language.
- (v) It widens the reader's vocabulary.
- (vi) It reinforces the reader's language skills.
- (vii) It widens the reader's horizon.
- (viii) It provides opportunity to study the nature of man.
- (ix) It promotes and preserves culture.
- (x) It helps students to develop the capacity for independent thought.
- (xi) It encourages creative writing and creative thinking.

(xii) It provides opportunity for the expression of emotion.

(xiii) It seeks to correct societal problems.

Sources of Literature

Literature originates from sources such as folktales, myths, legends, customs, festivals and rituals.

Characteristics of the Genres of Literature

Prose	Poetry	Drama
This is a long narrative story.	This is a story in a condensed form.	This is acted story.
The writer is an author or novelist.	The writer is called a poet.	The writer is a dramatist or playwright.
It is written in chapters and paragraphs.	It is written in verses and stanzas.	It is written in acts or scenes.
It makes use of everyday expressions.	It makes use of imaginative expressions.	Drama makes use of direct speech.
The people in it are called characters.	The people in poetry are called poetic personae.	The people in it are called characters.

Revision Questions

1. What is Literature?
2. Identify and discuss one genre of literature
3. Compare and contrast the features of prose and drama.
4. Name five types of poetry.
5. State five functions of literature

Objective Questions

The genres of literature include:

- (a) prose, folklore, ballad.
- (b) poetry, drama, prose.
- (c) poetry, sonnet, drama.
- (d) drama, prose, epic.

2. A literary work that is based mainly on facts and actual experience is known as

- (a) comedy.
- (b) allegory.

(c) non-fiction.

(d) satire.

3. Oral literature is flexible in narration because

(a) it is told by word of mouth.

(b) it provides entertainment.

(c) it is very elastic.

(d) it is always melodious.

4. The two main types of prose are:

(a) prose and fiction.

(b) fiction and prose-fiction.

(c) fiction and non-fiction.

(d) drama and prose-fiction.

5. A writer of novel is a novelist; a writer of plays is a

(a) playwrighter

(b) playright

(c) playwrite

(d) playwright

6. The term ‘poetic license’ in literature refers to a writer’s

(a) liberty to enjoy poems anywhere.

(b) freedom to use words for special effects.

(c) ability to write poems on anything.

(d) desire to write poetry for liberty.

7. One of the following is a feature of oral literature:

(a) the authorship is usually unknown.

(b) the audience is not active.

(c) the story is usually fixed and not flexible.

(d) the authorship is synonymous.

8. Poetry is written in

(a) verses and stanzas.

(b) prose and stanzas.

(c) rhyme and drama.

(d) rhythm and lines.

9. Literature performs all except one of the following functions:

(a) It boosts the morale of politicians.

(b) It develops the language skills of the reader.

(c) It promotes and preserves culture.

(d) It encourages students in creative writing and creative thinking.

10. _____ is the most essential feature of drama.

(a) Melody

(b) Action

(c) Stanza

(d) Dialogue