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Post-Graduate Certificate in the  
Teaching of English

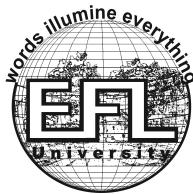
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# INTERPRETATION OF LITERATURE

BLOCK

**I**

Literature and its  
Contexts



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# **INTERPRETATION OF LITERATURE**

## **BLOCK I**

### **LITERATURE AND ITS CONTEXTS**

#### **Contents**

Introduction to the block	i
Unit 1	
What is literature?	1
Unit 2	
Form and experience	15
Unit 3	
The contexts of literature I	31
Unit 4	
The contexts of literature II	43



## INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOCK

This block constitutes an introduction to the course *Interpretation of Literature*. In the first unit we discuss the basic question, what is literature? This discussion has become necessary in view of recent developments in critical theory which point to the difficulties in arriving at a single, precise definition of literature.

Units 2 to 4 deal with major twentieth-century approaches to the interpretation of literature. Unit 2 discusses the view of literature (held by the New Critics) as an autonomous and organically unified verbal structure. Units 3 and 4, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of contexts in the interpretation of literature. The contexts of literature may include the context of the author, the reader and the socio-political and cultural frameworks within which the text operates. Unit 3 discusses (a) the importance of situating the text within the context of the writer's personal and creative life and (b) the reader's role in constructing meaning out of the text. Unit 4 deals with the larger contexts of society, history and culture as these determine both the production and the reception of a text.



## **Unit 1**

### **WHAT IS LITERATURE?**

#### **Contents**

1.0 Introduction	2
1.1 Dictionary definitions	3
1.2 What others have said	3
1.3 Identifying works of literature	5
1.4 What constitutes a literary passage?	8
1.5 The bases of our understanding of "literature"	13
1.6 Evolution of the meaning of "literature"	14
1.7 Summary	14

## Unit 1

### WHAT IS LITERATURE?

#### 1.0 Introduction

I attempt, in this unit, to shake some of the certainties that we associate with the term "literature". The aim is not to confuse you but to point out the various assumptions that underlie our general understanding of the term. The aim of the discussion is also to make our notion of "literature" less exclusive than it seems now.

What is literature? Perhaps you might not be surprised that we start with this basic question, for it is quite natural and customary to ask and answer it when we begin the study of any discipline. Your linguistics (or phonetics) units, for example, start with a definition of the subject concerned.

But perhaps from another point of view the question might well have surprised and also embarrassed you. After all, you might think, we have been studying literature for quite some time now - years if not decades - and surely there is no need to define it as though it were something new! (It is like a couple, after they have been married for twenty years, asking each other questions like "What is marriage? Who is a husband? Who is a wife?") The case here is certainly different from linguistics and phonetics which could well be "new" disciplines for many of you.

Nevertheless I would like us to attempt an answer to the question "What is literature?" for the following reasons:

1. The inquiry might serve as an appropriate introduction to the course in interpretation of literature as we have designed it.
2. It might make us aware of problems and issues with regard to the study of literature which we had not been aware of before.
3. One of the general objectives of the PGCTE programme is to acquaint you, as teachers of English, with some of the recent approaches to English studies. You will realize, when you have completed the present course, how our approach to the very notion of literature has been changed over the last few decades. Going a little farther back, you might realize that your present "definition" of literature (or broad understanding of the term) is not anything absolute or timeless (i.e. it is not a view which has always been held) but something which evolved about a century ago. We shall of course say more about this later.
4. The inquiry may have the much larger consequence of making us realize the vagueness, the fuzziness, the openness of terms which we had taken all along to be very precise. (You may learn, from your linguistics and grammar courses, that very common and simple notions like "word" and "sentence" are really impossible to define with any exactness. Or think for instance of a term like "life" which even scientists and doctors have found it difficult to define. Or a still more physical and palpable notion like "city". How do you define a city? In terms of size? Delhi is much larger than Madras and yet both are called cities. On the basis of population? Shanghai has a population which Adelaide may shudder at. In terms of facilities? Hyderabad might well blush at what it has to offer when compared to Los Angeles. And yet all these are cities!)



## 1.1 Dictionary definitions

Shall we then go back to the question "What is literature?" May I ask you to answer the question first yourself?

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### Activity A

What is literature? Answer the question in not more than 50 words. You may, however, offer two or more definitions. Write the answer(s) on a piece of paper and then compare them with the definitions given below.

#### Discussion

Here are some definitions which I have collected:

1. Literature is written works (such as novels, plays and poems) which are of artistic value (e.g. Tamil has a very ancient literature.)
2. Literature is all the works, articles, etc. on a particular subject. (e.g. There is now a vast literature on the subject of artificial intelligence.)
3. Literature is printed material, especially giving information. (e.g. Have you got any literature on this new washing machine?)

All these three definitions I have taken from the dictionary and, needless to say, definition (1) above is the one most relevant to our purposes. "Literature is written works which are of artistic value". But what is artistic value? The dictionary says "artistic" means "of, concerning, or typical of art or artists". "Art" itself is defined as "the making or expression of what is beautiful, e.g. in music, literature, etc." Perhaps you might wonder at the circularity involved in all these definitions. "Literature is art" and "Art is music, literature, etc." But we have picked up at least one idea now, that literature is "the making or expression of what is beautiful". But did you realize that "beauty" itself is not only a vague but also a changing concept? What was regarded as beautiful in the last century may not be so now. What is considered beautiful in the north-east of our country is not considered so in the south. (That is one reason why the men and women in the two regions dress so differently.) But yet, you might argue, "literature" is works which are regarded as containing "beauty" at all times and in all ages. But "beauty" here is understood in a particular way and this particular way has changed over the centuries.

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## 1.2 What others have said

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### Activity B

Study the following statements about literature and note down the common features that they highlight:

1. Literature and butterflies are the two sweetest passions known to man.  
(Vladimir Nabokov)
2. Literature is language well used.  
(Laurence Lerner)
3. Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost degree.  
(Ezra Pound)
4. Writing is not literature unless it gives to the reader a pleasure which arises not only from the things said, but from the way in which they are said; and that pleasure is only given when the words are carefully or curiously or beautifully put together into sentences.  
(Stopford Brooke)

5. Literature is news that stays news.  
(Ezra Pound)
6. Literature is the art of saying something that will be read twice.  
(Cyril Connolly)
7. Literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity and unity.  
(Lionel Trilling)
8. Literature gives us a picture of life - not the picture that is actually (historically) true, but a picture that has its own kind of truth - a "truth" that includes important elements that science, from its very nature, is forced to leave out. The truth of literature takes the form, not of abstract statement, but of a concrete and dramatic presentation, which may allow us to experience imaginatively the "lived" meanings of a piece of life.  
(Cleanth Brooks,  
John Thibaut Purser and  
Robert Penn Warren)
9. While the other arts . . . are the algebra of emotional expression, literature is the arithmetic . Music and the plastic arts seek to express the generated essence of man's predicament in the universe. Literature, for the most part, attempts to illuminate some particular predicament of a particular man or a particular woman at a given time and place.  
(John Strachey)
10. Literature is the expression of a nation's mind in writing.  
(Channing)
11. Literature becomes free institutions. It is the graceful ornament of civil liberty, and a happy restraint on the asperities which political controversies sometimes occasion.  
(Daniel Webster)
12. Literature, strictly considered, has never recognized the people and, whatever may be said, does not today. Speaking generally, the tendencies of literature, as hitherto pursued, have been to make mostly critical and querulous men.  
(Walt Whitman)
13. All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge.  
(De Quincey)

### Discussion

Did you note down the features of literature that each of the statements above focuses on? Did you feel that each of them leaves out something which *you* know to be a quality of literature? Did you perhaps feel that *all* of them leave out something important? For example, on reading statement (1) did you feel like retorting, "But people don't spend a lifetime studying butterflies!" Similarly, the immediate response to (2) might be, "Advertisement is also language well used!" Statement (10) might provoke the questions, "Does a nation always have a mind? Or do we mean the mind (thinking/ideology) of a particular culturally powerful group within the nation? And what exactly is a nation?" Statement (13) may provoke the question "What do you mean by power? Do you mean literature

should induce us to action? But didn't a poet himself say that poetry makes nothing happen?

Perhaps we can discuss the statements in a more systematic way. Statement (1) associates literature with butterflies presumably because both are "beautiful" and also because both give us "pleasure". (Nabokov would of course not have denied that both the kind and the degree of pleasure afforded by literature and by butterflies would be quite different.) Statements (2), (3) and (4) stress the relationship between literature and language, they view literature as a *particular* kind of use of language. (5) and (6) bring out the "permanent" or "lasting" quality of literature but do not say how literature comes to have that quality. (7) and (8) do that, that is, they tell us how or why literature is so lasting in its appeal; indeed (7) and (8) claim that what literature gives us is a unique form of knowledge. (9) also relates literature to particularity and individuality. Can we say that (7), (8) and (9) all stress the relationship between life and literature, that by implication they claim universality for literature *by virtue of* particularity and individuality? But note that (7), (8) and (9) do not, as indeed none of the statements considered so far does, in any obvious way refer to history or culture as forces shaping literature. In all these views literature is essentially *apolitical*, in the sense in which we generally understand the term "politics". Statements (10), (11) and (12) seem to offer a "political" view of literature. (10) raises questions like those we have mentioned in the previous paragraph: for example, isn't the concept of "nation" itself political? Let us suppose that there is a particular region within a country which has been demanding separation. Does the literature produced by writers in that region express the mind of that nation of which it is still a part, or does it express the mind of the "nation" which that region would like to be, but which it may never become? (11) seems to associate literature with democracy ("free institutions") but the second sentence in the statement clearly rules out a *vital, active* role in the shaping of democratic institutions; literature is rather a "graceful ornament" and "a happy restraint" on "asperities". (12) offers a polemical view of literature. When Whitman says that so far literature has not concerned itself with the "people", he is attacking what he regards as the elitist nature of literature. He is also by implication saying that literature *should* recognize and concern itself with the people ("the masses"?). Finally, what do you think of (13)? Do you think that the view it has of literature is quite different from all the others so far? Is De Quincey thinking of "action literature", "radical literature", or literature that promotes revolution?

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### 1.3 Identifying works of literature

Even this brief discussion must have given you some idea that "literature" has not been easy to define, that it has meant different things to different people, that some people have tried to understand it by what it *is*, some by what it *does*. But at this stage, you might well say, "Look, literature may be difficult to *define*, but why should we define it? After all, we know a piece of literature when we see it. Isn't that enough?" Such a question is of course quite fair and reasonable. Let us therefore do another kind of exercise!

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#### Activity C

Look at the following titles. Say which of these works you would regard as literature and which you would not. You can say "yes" or "no".

1. *The Iliad*
2. *Macbeth*
3. "Ode to a Nightingale"
4. *Biographia Literaria*

5. *Das Kapital*
6. *The Lives of the Poets*
7. *Homage to Catalonia*
8. *Silappadikaram*
9. *Sakuntalam*
10. *Godan*
11. *Untouchable*
12. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*
13. *Discovery of India*
14. *Doctor No*
15. *Cinderella*

### Discussion

Let me guess at the answers you might have written and let me also comment on them.

- (a) You must have said "yes" right away to 1, 2 and 3. We *know* all these works to be literature, don't we?
- (b) Are *Biographia Literaria* (by S.T. Coleridge) and *The Lives of the Poets* (by Samuel Johnson) works of *literature* or works of *literary criticism*? If they are only the latter, how is it that they are included in the Literature papers in our M.A. (English) courses? I myself studied *The Lives of the Poets* (The Life of Milton to be exact) as a detailed text in the M.L. II (Modern Literature II) paper and some chapters of *Biographia Literaria* in the M.L. III (Modern Literature III) paper in my M.A. course. In fact, there was no other *prose* text that I studied in each of these papers. Perhaps we might say these are works of criticism which also have some *literary qualities*. But note that in some way we have paid them almost the same attention that we have paid to literary texts.
- (c) I am sure all of you would have written "No" against *Das Kapital* (by Karl Marx). The reason should of course be obvious: *Das Kapital* is a work of political and economic theory, not a work of literature. Can I however remind you of the statements of Walt Whitman and De Quincey which we discussed in Activity B? *Das Kapital* meets Whitman's requirement (that the people should be recognized) in a way that no (or few) works of "literature" have ever done. And if we take De Quincey's view ("All that is literature seeks to communicate power") should we not call *Das Kapital* literature, because it "communicated power" to such a large section of the world's population as no work of "literature" has ever done? We may for example ask in this connection, what is the status of *dalit* literature?
- (d) What about 7, 12 and 14 (works by George Orwell, Edward Gibbon and Jawaharlal Nehru respectively)? My first response (like yours I daresay) would have been, "These are primarily works of history which, like the works of criticism discussed above, also have some literary qualities, but they are not works of literature *per se*". Incidentally, I suggest you ask your colleagues in the history department in your institutions about the status of these works as *history*. You might find the answers interesting if not surprising. They might say that these are too *personal* to be regarded as histories. But if you retort, "Is all history very objective and impersonal then?" they might say, "Of course it is not . . ." However they might

point to the fact that Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* is simply not regarded as history, though it is an account of the Spanish Revolution which took place in the nineteen forties. In fact, Lionel Trilling in his book *The Opposing Self* discusses *Homage to Catalonia* alongside *Mansfield Park*, *The Bostonians*, *Little Dorrit* and *The Letters of John Keats* - all of which we *know* to be literature! You might, however, be interested to know that, in recent years, the distinction between "literature" and "history" has been seriously questioned. What we call "literature" and what we call "history" are seen only as different kinds of *texts* both of which however tell us about cultural and political formations in society.

- (e) What did you write for (8), (9) and (10)? Let me guess: "Yes, but these are works of *Indian* literature. *Silappadikaram* is a work of *Tamil* literature by Ilango Adigal; *Sakuntalam* is a *Sanskrit* literary work by Kalidasa; and *Godan* is a piece of *Hindi* literature written by Premchand". Did I guess right? And did you write against *Untouchable* (which as you know is by Mulk Raj Anand) that perhaps it is a work of literature but it is a work not of *English* literature but of *Indian literature in English*? Have I guessed right again? (Sorry if that sounds too wise and knowing! In fact, these would have been my own answers if someone else had asked me the same questions.) There is a very interesting point about these responses which I want you to notice. We felt, even while saying "yes" to (8), (9), (10) and (11), that we had to add these *qualifications*, viz. that they are works, not of English literature, but of Indian literature or Indian literature in English. At the same time we did not make any such qualifications while responding to (2) and (3) but gave a straight "Yes". That is, we simply said that they are works of literature without adding that they are works of *English* literature. In other words, "*literature*" *in our minds has become equated with "English literature"*. Do you agree? (I can give another piece of evidence to support this conclusion. When someone says in India he/she has done an M.A. in Literature we immediately understand that it is an M.A. in English Literature. People who have done an M.A. in Hindi, Telugu or Bengali literature say so, that is, they immediately add after "M.A." "Telugu literature", "Bengali literature" and so on.) This fact also accounts for our hesitation to include these works (in translation) as part of the "English literature" syllabus. Incidentally, what did you say about *The Iliad* by Homer? Didn't many of you give a straight "yes" without any qualification? Isn't this again quite interesting? We call *The Iliad* simply a work of literature and do *not* add that it is not a work of English literature; but we do make that addition (or qualification) while talking about the literature of our own country and our own languages. The point is Homer (or Dante or Virgil) has been talked about so much by critics in relation to English literature that he has come to be regarded as part of English literature. The point I am trying to convey is that our ways of talking about literature over a period of time come to determine our very notion of literature.
- (f) I now come to (14) and (15). I am sure many of you would have given a straight "No" for both. Perhaps some of you said "No" to *Doctor No* (by Ian Fleming)(Sorry for the pun!) and said "Yes" to *Cinderella* but added "children's literature". Once again, did you notice an interesting fact? We say about *Cinderella* that it is "children's literature" but do not say about *Hamlet* that it is "adult literature"; it is simply "literature"! So "literature" has come to mean "adult literature" even as it has come to mean "English literature"! As for *Doctor No*, we would justify our response (that it is not a work of literature) by saying that it is a work of detective fiction, that it is *popular literature* and not *serious literature*. It might interest

you to know that popular literature as well as children's literature is now receiving a great deal of attention from literary scholars. This is because it is now felt that popular literature (or children's literature) bears as close and complex a relationship as does "serious" "adult" literature to the society around, its culture and politics. Studied carefully, they can tell us a great deal about social structures, cultural ideologies and political power relations.

#### 1.4 What constitutes a literary passage?

I am now going to trouble you to do one last exercise. We have tried to arrive at an understanding of "literature" by looking first at statements about literature and then at titles of works. Let us now consider a few *passages* and try to decide which of these we would regard as literature.

#### Activity D

Look at the following passages. (They are all extracts.) Which of these would you regard as literary and which not? (I am simply using the word "literary" as the adjective of "literature".) Suppose we have a scale of points and mark the most literary passage (i.e. the passage which would unquestionably be called literature) as 6 (six) and mark the non-literary or the least literary passage (i.e. the passage which can by no means be called literature) as 0 (zero). How would you rate each of these passages in such a scale? You may of course award any one of the intermediate points 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 within the range for a given passage. Also say in each case why you would give the passage such a rating.

1. Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog dropping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of the shivering little 'prentice boy on deck . . . The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are the muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

(Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6)

Non-literary	Unquestionably literary

2. A fog is a cloud of particles, usually water droplets (water fog), but sometimes of the crystals (ice fog). There is no essential difference between fogs and free-floating clouds in the atmosphere. Fogs produce little precipitation and that at very small rates; in this respect they are similar to many of the free clouds seen in the sky that are not giving precipitation. Fogs and those clouds which do not tend to develop precipitation are said to be colloidally stable; that is, there is no marked tendency within

them for the size of some of the droplets to grow rapidly at the expense of other drops.

(Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6)

3. Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday, we had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning, we shall have what to do after firing. But today, today we have naming of parts. This is the safety-catch, which is always released with an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me see anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy if you have any strength in your thumb. And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this easing the spring.

(Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6)

4. "We were - this is in the dream - we were lost in a forest, you and I, tired and starving. We walked and walked till we came to a little house and we knocked on the door, but nobody answered. We tried the door. It was locked. Then we peeped through a window and inside we could see a great big table piled high with all imaginable kinds of food, but we couldn't get in through either of the windows because they had iron bars over them. So we went back to the door and knocked and knocked again and still nobody answered. Then we thought that sometimes people left their keys under the door-mats and we looked and there it was. But when we opened the door we saw hundreds and hundreds of snakes on the floor where we hadn't been able to see them through the window and they all came sliding and slithering towards us. We slammed the door shut and locked it and stood there frightened to death, listening to them hissing and knocking their heads against the inside of the door.

(Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6)

5. And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep  
In blanched linen, smooth, and lavendered,  
While he from forth the closet brought a heap  
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
With jellies smoother than the creamy curd,  
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;  
Manna and dates, in argosy transferred  
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,  
From silken Samarcand to cedared Lebanon.

(Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6)

6. I love all beauteous things,  
I seek and adore them;  
God hath no better praise,  
And man in his hasty days  
Is honoured for them.
- I too will something make  
And joy in the making;  
Although to-morrow it seem  
Like the empty words of a dream  
Remembered on waking.

(Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6)

7. After the general election, the Central Government continued to shilly-shally about the future of Bombay. The state was to be partitioned; then not to be partitioned; then partition reared its head again. And as for the city itself - it was to be the capital of Maharashtra; or of both

Maharashtra and Gujarat; or an independent state of its own. . . . While the government tried to work out what on earth to do, the city's inhabitants decided to encourage it to be quick. Riots proliferated (and you could still hear the old battle-song of the Mahrattas - How are you? I am well! I'll take a stick and thrash you to hell - rising above the fray); and to make things worse, the weather joined in the melee. There was a severe drought; roads cracked; in the villages peasants were being forced to kill their cows; and on Christmas Day (of whose significance no boy who attended a mission school and was attended upon by a catholic ayah could fail to be aware) there was a series of loud explosions at the Walkeshwar Reservoir and the main push-water pipes which were the city's lifelines began to blow fountains into the air like giant steel whales. The newspapers were full of talk of saboteurs; speculation over the criminals' identities and political affiliation jostled for space against reports of the continuing wave of whore-murders.

(Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6)

8. Do not misunderstand me: I do not want the old governing class back. It governed so selfishly that the people would have perished if democracy had not swept it out of politics. But evil as it was in many ways, at least it stood above the tyranny of popular ignorance and popular tyranny. You are dangerously subject to it. In spite of my urgings and remonstrances you have not yet dared to take command of our schools and put a stop to the inculcation upon your unfortunate children of superstitions and prejudices that stand like stone walls across every forward path. Are you well advised in trying to reduce me to your own slavery to them? If I do not stand above them there is no longer any reason for my existence at all. I stand for the future and the past, for the posterity that has no vote and the tradition that never had any. I stand for the great abstractions: for conscience and virtue; for the eternal against the expedient; for the evolutionary appetite against the day's gluttony; for intellectual integrity, for humanity, for the rescue of industry from commercialism and of science from professionalism, for everything that you desire as sincerely as I, but which in you is held in leash by the Press, which can organize against you the ignorance and superstition, the timidity and credulity, the gullibility and prudery, the hating and hunting instinct of the voting mob, and cast you down from power if you utter a word to alarm or displease the adventurers who have the Press in their pockets.

(Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6)

9. The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal-clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive smell. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it made it an "uncongenial" place to live in.

(Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6)



### Discussion

Let me once again play the guessing game but, as I did earlier, let me also go on to make some comments on the answers which I think you would have given.

- (a) I am sure all of you would have marked passage (2) as non-literary and passage (1) as literature (quite if not unquestionably so). Passage (2) is a scientific, matter-of-fact description of the natural phenomenon called fog and of how the phenomenon happens. It does not of course contain much jargon (except a few words and phrases like "precipitation" and "colloidally stable"). However, the use of language here is *denotative* and *referential* rather than *connotative* and *emotive* and the purpose is to give information or a factual, objective description. Passage (1), which is from Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, on the other hand, gives, not a scientific but an *imaginative* description. It creates an *atmosphere* by giving not a *general* description but by *particularizing* and *concretizing*. The atmosphere created, as we see when we come to the end of the passage, is not only physical but psychological as well: the Lord High Chancellor, who is supposed to administer justice *clearly*, himself sits at the "heart of the fog". We also find in the passage the kind of *patterning of language* ("fog up the river . . . fog down the river, etc.") that we associate with literature.
- (b) I am also certain that most of you would have called passage (3) non-literary. Your reasons for doing so must also be obvious. The passage contains no "poetic" or "literary" words. The situation too - it is an army instructor talking to recruits - does not seem a "literary" situation. But as a matter of fact the extracts are from a long poem called *Lessons of the War* written by Henry Reed. The particular section from which these portions are taken is called "Naming of Parts". I must however apologetically tell you that I played two mischievous tricks while reproducing the passage. I left out some lines and also changed the verse-arrangement to that of a running prose passage. Here are the three stanzas in the original (The portions left out earlier are underlined.):

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday  
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,  
We shall have what to do after firing. But today  
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica  
Glistens like coral in all the neighbouring gardens.  
And today we have naming of parts.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released  
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me  
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy  
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms  
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see  
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this  
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it  
Rapidly backwards and forwards. We call this  
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards  
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:  
They call it easing the Spring.

Doesn't the passage now look more like "literature"? But how? Is it only the punctuation and the arrangement into lines that have made it literature? Or is it the restoration of those few lines in each stanza, which contain

some words of "lyrical" quality (such as "Japonica", "Glistens", "blossoms", etc.), that has made it literature? Then why didn't the poet use such words throughout? After all, the situation is very much the same (an army instructor talking to recruits), but now we have another "voice" too (probably, that of one of the young recruits) which shows itself sensitive to the beauty and delicacy around. I don't wish to interpret the poem for you - I am sure you would like to have that pleasure yourself - but there are just a couple of points I want you to notice: (i) There is no situation or scene which is intrinsically "literary" or "artistic". It is the writer's way of dealing with it that makes it so. (ii) The language of literature too is not necessarily or throughout "literary" in the sense of containing a particular kind of vocabulary or sentence-structure. A piece of literature often achieves its effects by a skilful juxtaposition of different "styles" of speech or writing.

- (c) Passage (4) does seem right out of "high" literature, doesn't it? As a matter of fact it is taken from a crime novel of the American "hard-boiled" type! (*The Glass Key* by Dashiell Hammett). Once again, we can decide whether this is literature or not only by looking at the function the passage has in the entire novel. The point is that works which are not generally regarded as "high" literature may contain passages or sections which possess artistic or literary merit while (as we saw in (b) above), works accepted as literature may well have used passages which seem quite "inartistic" or "non-literary".
- (d) Let us take up passages (5) and (6) together. Did you give them both a high rating as literature? (Passage (5) is from Keats' long poem *The Eve of St. Agnes* and (6) is by the early twentieth-century poet Robert Bridges.) Or did you give (5) a much higher rating than (6)? (I myself would.) The lines from Keats certainly succeed in creating a rich but also dreamy setting. But did you realize that the "success" of this description as poetry, at the time the poem was written (the late 18th or the early 19th century) depended at least partly on certain associations in the British reader's mind? (e.g. the association of the East with certain images of opulence and prosperity, as is seen in phrases like "silken Samarcand" and "cedared Lebanon") Would the lines have the same effect (would they be "literature" in the same sense) today, even to the British reader, much less Indian readers? Then what about (6)? Did some of you give it a higher rating than even (5)? Why did you do so? Was it because it is about "beautiful" things? (In fact the poet has used a very "poetic" word, viz. "beauteous", in place of "beautiful") Or is it because the poem contains a statement of the poet's creed? Suppose someone told you, "The poem simply bandies the conventional notion of poetry. It has no fresh images, except for a weak simile towards the end. It has rhyme and metre, but it certainly is not great poetry or literature", how would you react?
- (e) How did you rate passage (7)? It is to all appearances a *historical* account of certain events in Bombay at a certain time. If we call this literature, what would be our reasons for doing so? (The passage is from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.) We cannot say that the situation is an imaginary one: it was real. Is it the imaginative viewing of a real situation (e.g. the pipes blowing fountains like giant steel whales)? Is it in the patterned use of language? Whatever our views about these, we must admit that the line between history and literature is not always so very clear.
- (f) Passage (8) is from Bernard Shaw's play *The Apple Cart*. (When the Cabinet tries to pressure King Magnus into becoming a mere rubber stamp, he argues his position thus.) How did you rate it as literature?

(That is, before I told you the source! I hope you don't think I am trying to twit you!) What are the features that characterize the passage? Don't you think it is a piece of argument? Isn't the spirit here intellectual and rational rather than imaginative and emotive? If we accept the passage as literature (as you would agree we should) then we have to expand our notion of literature as not only *imaginative* writing but also *argumentative* and *ratiocinative* writing. Note again that the effect of the passage depends also on the way it is spoken, since this is drama.

- (g) Passage (9) is the opening of Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable*. If you did not rate it highly as literature, what were your reasons? Was it by any chance on account of the notion that literature should be about "beautiful" persons, places and things (of *The Eve of St. Agnes* variety)? Or was it because the scene is all too *real* for us even now (though there may not be "outcaste colonies" in any town now) for the passage to be called "imaginative" writing? If you rated the passage as literature what were your reasons again?

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### 1.5 The bases of our understanding of "literature"

Have I confused you beyond endurance? Perhaps some of the confusion will clear if I sum up what we have been discussing so far.

- (i) Literature is mainly *imaginative* writing (poems, novels, plays, etc.) However, works of literature may also contain qualities that we associate with reasoning and intellection. Indeed it might often be difficult to distinguish between intellectual and imaginative processes in a work of literature.
- (ii) Literature has often been regarded as consisting in the expression, in writing, of what is beautiful. But human beings' notion of "beauty" has itself never been constant in different countries through the ages. The idea can therefore only be relative. This explains too the different *evaluations* that have been assigned to the same work at different times.
- (iii) Literature has been said to afford pleasure, but in saying this again we should remember that "pleasure" is a loose and vague word. We do say that the pleasure literature gives is "aesthetic" and we can also safely say, for example, that the pleasure *The Waste Land* affords is different from the pleasure a study of Einstein's theory of relativity gives us. However, the borderline between the pleasure which a piece of literature provides and the pleasure a piece of history or even a work of social sciences gives can often be thin indeed. The distinction is even less clear between literature and drama (which can be called literature *and* theatre or literature *in* theatre) and between literature and criticism which can often be described as literature about literature).
- (iv) Literature has often been differentiated from history on the basis that history is about actual events and persons while literature is about imagined or imaginary events and persons. The distinction becomes weak when a work of "literature" deals, to a small or large extent, with actual "historical" events (like R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*) or when a work of "history" deals imaginatively with actual events (like Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*). Both historians and literary theorists today are arguing that historical narratives and literary narratives are similar and can be analysed as *narratives*, rather than as literature or history. In this sense literature is also history. This view is based on the belief that there is the same kind of relationship between a literary writer, his/her work

and the society around as there is between the "historian", the history and the society around.

- (v) Literature has often been distinguished from other kinds of writing on the basis of the kind of language use. But we may still have to differentiate literature from things like advertising and journalism which often contain patterned language, figures of speech, etc. We generally get over this difficulty by saying that unlike journalism and advertising literature is closely related to *values*. This is right, but we should remember that the values that literature presents or upholds may not always be *universal* values, acceptable for all times and ages. Can we say that the value-system that Shakespeare's historical plays are primarily based on is uniformly relevant today even in England?
- (vi) There is one more point to note about the language of literature: it may not *throughout* be different from the language of ordinary life or of other kinds of discourse. Quite often the language of literature consists in the juxtaposition of different varieties of language including what is popularly called "poetical" or "literary" language.
- (vii) The notion of "literature" has often been associated with the idea of "nation", for instance when we say that literature is a product of the *national spirit*. But this at once makes the concept of literature *political* in a very obvious sense as "nation" is itself a political entity. And when literature is regarded as political in nature, it always takes something away from conventional universalist notions of literature, because politics is about the here and now.
- (viii) "Literature" has implicitly been taken to mean "English (i.e. British) literature", "adult literature" and "serious or high literature". But recent work by scholars has shown the need to include in the term literature from other cultures, children's literature as well as popular literature. This is because the forces that give birth to all these are the same. In our course we shall be concerning ourselves with all that can be called literature in English.

## 1.6 Evolution of the meaning of "literature"

I said at the beginning that the generally held present-day meaning of "literature" (as imaginative writing of worth, such as poems, stories, novels, etc.) came into being only by the middle or end of the 19th century. The earliest meaning of literature was "writings in general" and this meaning is dated 1513 in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The term then came to mean in the 18th century "polite letters" or "polite learning" which included philosophical, historical and descriptive writing, essays on morality (e.g. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, Edmund Burke's *Letter to a Noble Lord*, William Cobbett's *Advice to Young Men* and so on). But by the end of the 19th century, mainly because of the Romantics' view of the privileged status of literary discourse, literature came to be dissociated from both facts and ideas and regarded as a special form of knowledge provided by the imaginative sensibility. This view was reiterated and developed further by the New Critics (from the nineteen thirties to the fifties). In the last two decades, however, the century-old concept of literature has been very critically examined both for its limitations and for its unspoken assumptions.

## 1.7 Summary

In this unit, we attempted to define "literature", and to discuss the difficulties in arriving at a single definition which would accommodate all the characteristics that we associate with literature. We went on to tease out the assumptions that lie behind our understanding of the term "literature". We ended with a brief account of the evolution of the present meaning(s) of "literature".