

Hello students, you are with me, Roxana Singh and I will try and take you through definitions of literature.

In this module you will come to know the nature and functions of literature and also its uses. By the end of this module you should be able to build an interest in the reading of literature, understand the demands of an English Elective course and be able to identify the genres of literature.

So Literature - What is it?

The word literature comes from the Latin 'littera', a letter of the alphabet. Literature is all of mankind's entire body of writing. Then, it is the body of writing belonging to a given language or people as in British literature or American literature or Indian, African, Japanese literature. But we also have oral literature. The literature of pre-literate people that was passed on down the centuries by word of mouth. Today we consider the ability to read and write as a marker of civilization and what we call literature refers mainly to the craft of writing.

As you embark on a journey towards a general or honours degree in English Literature, what you will encounter is literature in English, written by poets, novelists, and playwrights from different countries of the world, not just those who live and write in Britain. Many of these will be from the countries that were colonized by Britain between the 16th to the mid 20th century. However, in the course of your undergraduate study with English as an elective subject, you will also get acquainted with works translated into English from other European and world languages such as Hindi, Bengali, and Marathi.

One of the first literary terms you will hear is genre. A literary genre is a type or category of literature. The four main literary genres are poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction. Poetry has many elements of form and structure, but primarily it is a playground of emotion. It evokes feeling. It makes us feel happy, sad, and all the emotions in between at a very visceral level, which is why a Shakespearean play, which is very often in verse-form, is so gripping. The other genres of literature are drama, fiction, and nonfiction, which are all generally in prose.

But here is the crucial question. Why should we spend time reading novels or poems when there are so many more important things to do? What is the use of literature? Isn't it a waste of time? How does it benefit us? Especially when most of it is just imaginary, fictitious, and all really big lies. In fact, the Greek philosopher Plato recommended that in an ideal state, poets should be banned because they perpetrate lies and immorality.

Literature deals with illusion. Writers enthrall their audiences by inciting baser instincts and inflaming the passions. In the epic poetry of Plato's time, the gods are capricious, kings are jealous and spiteful, abducting women with impunity. Heroes are often unheroic, covetous and consumed with irrational vengeance and thieves, cowards and sell-swords roam the land with impunity. So literature seems like a terrible waste of time.

In fact, literature is the best use of time. Why? Because it exposes us to a range of feelings, thoughts, emotions, events and experiences that we would never encounter directly in one lifetime. It would take

years, centuries, millennia to witness all the situations and sensations you would be exposed to even after just two or three decades of reading. So at least by the time we are 60, we may become wise - If we are readers.

Literature imitates life and society. The Greek word for this is 'mimesis', which means imitation. Like a piece of cake that has all the ingredients and flavours of the entire cake, literature gives us a window into life. It is a slice of life. It simulates reality. Within the safety of our home or cozy corner, a novel, play or poem exposes us to divorce, crime, murder and death; to foolish decisions and embarrassing situations. Literature shows us what it is like to lose the love of your life, to feel anger, shame and remorse. To kill. To run away from responsibility. To be from the margins regarding race, gender or colour. To differ from what is believed as the norm regarding sexual preferences. Books allow us to communicate with people who live very far away from us. Through them and with them we can travel the world - visit exotic locales.

Literature makes us into better human beings. Writers open up our hearts and minds. We learn to see things from other people's perspective. Typically literature is subversive. Writers are often anti-establishment, directly opposing dominant social cultural values which expects everyone to toe-the-line, takes patriarchy for granted and rewards money and power. Today, specially, this has become so important when society has become cynical, commercialised and status conscious.

Ultimately, books help us to get to know ourselves better, reduce our feelings of fear and persecution. Literature both affirms and critiques social and cultural values. Literature is a great companion when we are alone or lonely. We are all a little crazy in our own way. We make compromises in many areas of our lives, but we cannot admit this now, can we? We can't always say what's really in our head. Often honesty may not be the best policy. It might lead to being ostracized, put in jail or incarcerated. But in books we find other people who think and feel just like us. And this can be so reassuring.

Writers are often like magicians. They seem to know exactly what's on our minds. They can find the perfect words to describe our crazy experiences and unique thoughts, ideas, beliefs and experiences. A field of daffodils, hunger and poverty on Christmas Eve, a first kiss, being jilted or experiencing unrequited love, feeling jealousy, the aching attraction to a stranger on the beach who we would never dare to speak to. Friends may be too busy or desert us sometimes. But books are our true friends - always there, always telling us the truth no matter how bitter.

A lot of literature deals with failure, wrong decisions and actions. Many great poems, plays, and novels are about people who mess up their lives. One protagonist unknowingly kills. Another leaves a hapless widow and innocent children with a string of debts that land them on the street. One escapes from prison and leads a life of duplicity, while yet another has a string of husbands flitting from marriage to marriage, accumulating wealth and property, but never finding true love and companionship. Can you imagine judgment by society or the media? They would be decimated. But great books are not harsh or judgmental. They evoke pity for the protagonist and fear for ourselves for often coming close to messing up as badly as these hapless heroes.

Literature is not just a distraction, diversion or delusion. It teaches resilience, it imparts wisdom. It is actually therapeutic. Indeed in the days of yore, when there were no psychologists, historians, sociologists, or anthropologists, literature fulfilled all these functions. It helped king, courtier or commoner deal with and solve a variety of problems. Think of the Jataka tales. Panchatantra. The stories of Akbar and Birbal. Books live on not because their writers are popular. Books live on because they benefit readers. Literature teaches us to accept ourselves and live with a little bit of wisdom, empathy and grace.
