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First Year/ Gs 3, 4, 5, 6

**Introduction to Literature**

**What Is Literature?**

In ancient times, literature has been passed down in a long oral tradition of storytelling, myths, ritual speeches, etc.  Over so many centuries, literature was handed down by oral tradition. The term ‘literature’ was originally defined as ‘all what is written’ regardless of its subjects, language, style, and thematic concerns. In Western Europe, in the 18th c, all books and writings were referred to as ‘literature’. In the Romantic Age, literature became imaginative. Later on, literature incorporated aspects specifically related to it and not to other disciplines. From the nineteenth century on, literature becomes more like the literature we know nowadays. It emphasizes the aesthetic side of language and literariness.

**Why Study Literature?**

Literature provides us with the necessary knowledge about what is going on around the world. It teaches us history and civilization of different countries. From the writings of ancient civilizations like Egypt, and China, to Greek philosophy and poetry, from the epics of Homer to the plays of Shakespeare, from Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte to Maya Angelou, works of literature give insight and context to all the world's societies. Literature, thus, is a tool to familiarize readers with civilization and history in entertaining ways.

Literature is related to culture; through literature, one can discover other cultures and learns to respect them and tolerate differences between his own culture and other cultures.

Literature sharpens our critical responses and increases our ability to argue.

DEBATING LITERATURE

Ultimately, we may discover meaning in the literature by looking at what the author writes or says, and how he or she says it. We may interpret and debate an author's message by examining the words he/she chooses in a given novel or work or observing which character or voice serves as the connection to the reader.

This decoding of the text is often carried out through the use of literary theory using mythological, sociological, psychological, historical, or other approaches to better understand the context and depth of a work.

Whatever critical paradigm we use to discuss and analyze it, literature is important to us because it speaks to us, it is universal, and it affects us on a deeply personal level.

Nevertheless, it is possible to sift out some of the criteria scholars have applied in order to demarcate 'literary texts' from 'non-literary texts'. These criteria include:

• Fiction   
• Specialized language  
• [Lack of pragmatic function](http://www2.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/intranet/englishbasics/Basic01.htm#prag)   
• [Ambiguity](http://www2.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/intranet/englishbasics/Basic01.htm#amb).

**Fiction**

One characteristic feature of literary texts arguably is the fact that they are fictional. People usually agree that literary texts, even if they attempt to represent reality in some form or another, are ultimately products of a writer’s imagination and that at least the characters and their conversations are fictitious. Thus, some of the characters in Sir [Walter Scott](http://www2.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/intranet/englishbasics/Basic01.htm)’s[**historical novels**](http://www2.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/intranet/englishbasics/ProseTypes.htm#historical) for example, are pure inventions although they are situated in authentic historical contexts, and they have fictitious conversations though they represent historical figures that actually existed.

**Specialized Language**

People often say that literary language is ‘special’ and that it differs considerably from normal everyday language. The linguist [Roman Jakobson](http://www2.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/intranet/englishbasics/Basic01.htm) spoke of the **poetic function** of literary texts in his essay “Linguistics and Poetics: Closing Statement” (1960), i.e., the fact that literary texts draw attention to the language they employ. As the Russian Formalists maintained in the early twentieth century, literary texts make use of language in such a way that it becomes strange and unfamiliar in a given context. They called this process ‘**defamiliarisation’**.

**Lack of Pragmatic Function**

I read a novel as a novel because it is presented in a certain way (bound, with a title on the front page, sometimes the word ‘novel’ in the subtitle, and a plot summary as well as commentary on the back cover). Moreover, I use the novel as a novel and not as a cookery book, a newspaper or an encyclopedia of garden plants, for example. Why is that? One might argue that these texts, in contrast to literary texts, have a definite **pragmatic function**, i.e., they are written and used for a specific purpose, e.g., to assist with the cooking or gardening or, generally, to inform the reader. A piece of literary writing, on the other hand, need not have been intended by the author for any specific purpose. It sometimes seems as though literature was just written into time and space, to nobody in particular and without any function.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to take that as a basic rule. Even literary texts do have a purpose, e.g., to criticize, to educate or even just to entertain. The fact that authors like [Salman Rushdie](http://www2.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/intranet/englishbasics/Basic01.htm), for example, are persecuted by political and religious groups shows that something must be attributed to their writings which other people consider dangerous or at least influential in some way or another. While non-literary texts may have a more clearly defined and generally agreed-upon function, literary texts can have a range of purposes which again depend on the reader. Thus, I can read a book simply to have a good laugh or, for that matter, a good cry, or I draw analogies with my own life and try to gain consolation or advice from the text. The text as such may not necessarily tell me how I have to use it but the reading practices I have been taught in school, at university, etc. will certainly influence my approach to texts. In other words: Even if we claim that a literary text has no immediate pragmatic function, we usually start to ascribe one to it in our usage or treatment of that text. While non-literary texts seem to have an inherent pragmatic function, i.e., they were ‘born’ to be a telephone book, a time-table, a women’s magazine, etc., literary texts gain their more specific and possibly individual pragmatic function in the reading process.

**Ambiguity**

People generally accept the view that literary texts are far more ambiguous and thus often more complicated than non-literary texts. If one reads a recipe, for example, or a time-table or an instruction manual, the meaning expressed in these texts is presumed to be more or less fixed and not open to interpretation. In fact, these texts must not be open to interpretation because then they just would not ‘work’. A time-table has to be precise in order for people to be able to rely on it. And ten people using the same recipe for carrot cake should reach approximately the same result by following the step-by-step instructions.

As classroom discussions show, different students can come up with rather different interpretations of what a specific literary text ‘means’ or what it tries to convey. This is also reflected in the vast amount of divergent critical interpretations of literary texts published over the years. So what is it that makes literary texts so ambiguous? For one thing, there is obviously the ‘human factor’: When we read a text we usually bring to bear on it certain expectations and interests, and inevitably we start looking for exactly those things that seem relevant to us. This example illustrates that literary texts indeed must have some quality which makes them more ‘open’ than non-literary texts. One can say that literary texts always express meaning on different levels or in different layers. In other words: They express something beyond their literal ‘meaning’, and these other layers of meaning can be explored by attentive reading and analysis. The deeper one digs the more interesting one’s findings are likely to be. At the same time, one needs suitable equipment for ‘digging out’ hidden meanings. That is where literary studies become important and where the fun begins once one has mastered the tools at hand.

**Literature as a Reflection of Society**

That literature is a reflection of the society is a fact that has been widely acknowledged. Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues or good values in the

society for people to emulate. Literature, as an imitation of human action, often presents a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. In literature, we find stories designed to portray human life and action through some characters who, by their words, action and reaction, convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment. It is impossible to find a work of literature that excludes the attitudes, morale and values of the society, since no writer has been brought up completely unexposed to the world around him. What writers of literature do is to transport the real-life events in their society into fiction and present it to the society as a mirror with which people can look at themselves and make amends where necessary. Thus, literature is not only a reflection of the society but also serves as a corrective mirror in which members of the society can look at themselves and find the need for positive change.

The wonderful thing about literature is that it has so much to offer to its reader. Whether it be a look at racism, the casualties of war, poverty, the class structures that exist, faith or lack there of, death, immigration, censorship, survival, the past, the present, the future, love and even hate, every great piece of literature is didactic. There is always a lesson to be learned from each good literary piece. Whether we choose to learn that lesson is up to us, but the potential is always there.

Literature, and art in general, is a way of expressing one’s feelings, by creating a beautiful ‘something’ that enriches the others. Literature has a major importance in our society, because it defines us as individuals and it makes us better persons.

The action of reading forms a significant part in an individual’s development. From reading, individuals form ideas and concepts about the world in which they live. These ideas and concepts form together an ideology of sort. From this ideology stems individual motivation, action and engagement.

Literature has the ability to initiate change, and challenges us to see ourselves in a different light.

**Importance of Literature Providing Perspective**

When you read a piece of literature, you get to read about a life experience through the eyes of someone other than yourself. You get a new perspective when you see a film about another culture or life situation. When you read literature, you get to walk in the shoes of a character whose life is different than your own.

A good book can help you think outside the box, empathize with people who have experienced things you have not experienced and teach you about things you’d never encounter on your own. The best pieces of literature are so well-written that they afford you, the reader, the opportunity to feel the feelings of the characters described, allowing you to test-drive ideas through a fictional world.