ENGL 201: Introduction to Literature
Lecture notes for week 1

What is Literature & Some ways of Studying Literature

This week:

- Definitions of literature
- The role of language in literature
- Characteristics of Literature

What is Literature?

Critics views:

- 1920s-30s: literature had certain properties that experts trained in this field could identify (metaphor, meter, rhyme, irony, plot)

- New Critics: gave importance to great works of literature and narrowed the literary canon. New critics were male and interested in Western (and European) Literature and culture, excluded literature of color and literature from the traditional cultures.

- The concept has changed in the past 50 years:
  
  **John Ellis:**

  - Literature is not defined by properties (rhyme, meter, image etc) because non-literary works (adverts, songs, jokes) too have these properties.

  - Literature is identifiable with how people use it.

  - People use literature for enjoyment (a physics book?)

  **Terry Eagleton:**

  - Literature is a social construct (the concept of literature is created by the society)

  - Literature with shared inherent properties does not exist

  - Literature and literary canon are constructs established by the society
- Anything can be literature (not necessarily Shakespeare)
- Language (oral or written)
- Most critics believe that language is a key aspect of literature
- Authors use language in a special way:
  - For example:
    - Denotative meaning: use of language for its ability to provide signs that mean one thing only
    - Connotative meaning: is the meaning that words have in addition to their direct meaning (e.g., mother)

  Literature is Language

- Defamiliarization (Viktor Scklovsky, 1920s): language that is different from everyday language. The art of making language unfamiliar, breaking conventions.
- Example:
  - Nursery Rhyme:
    - Swan, swan, over the sea:
    - Swim, swan, swim!
    - Swan, swan back again;
    - Well swum swan

  Literature is Fictional

- Invented material: imaginative literature fantasy fiction
- Stylized material: (newspaper report vs poem)
- Stylized material (non-fiction)

  Literature is True

- Factual accuracy
Directly stated ideas (ideas about life that author wants to convey to readers)
Author → work → reader

Indirectly stated ideas: use of literary conventions (plot, metaphor, symbol, irony, suspense)

Typical characters, probable actions: characters typify real people and they recount events that can happen in real life

Literature is True

Concrete things represent ideas:
Example of a short allegory:
Fear knocked at the door.
Faith answered.
There was no one there.
Names can represent ideas:
Hamlet → Melancholy
Othello → Jealousy
Ophelia → innocence
Romeo → love sickness

Literature is Expression

Expression of the individuals who compose it
Reflects their personalities, emotions, styles, tastes, beliefs
As interpreters we have to determine objectively what the ideas of a given work reflect. We don’t necessarily have to agree with them.

Literature as experience

The experience of reality

Literature is aesthetic
- It gives pleasure (which is hard to define)

How?
- The way writers are using literary conventions (metaphor, plot, symbolism, irony, suspense)
- Plot (order of events gives a sense of coherence)
- Arrangement of language, connecting details, recognizable ideas
- Aesthetic quality of literature is another way of looking for deeper meanings

Literature is intertextual
- Literature is intertextual and it relates to other works of literature
- Genre: ‘type’ or ‘kind’ (French word)
- Genres are identifiable by their literary conventions
- Conventions: are features of literature, whether of language, subject matter, themes or form, that readers can easily recognize.

How can we identify intertextuality in literature?
- What can we learn about a work by considering works related to it?

Allusions: references to other works
- Can we understand the genre in which the work is written?

Genres are products of particular cultures and times (narrative fiction, pastoral poetry etc)

Unfamiliar genres
- What values does the genre convey?

Genres are cultural phenomenon. They emerge from authors and reflect the interest, the way of life and values of a particular culture (e.g., detective fiction in 19th century)
- Why was the genre appealing?
- How does the author challenge or change the genre?
Are all genres undergoing a kind of metamorphosis? (e.g., magic realism)

- How do individual conventions of a genre add meaning to a work?

Framework of all literary genres: Fiction, Poetry Drama (Alistair Fowler)

Writers deliberately choose the genres in which they write, how the conventions in genres work and how they communicate ideas, and each literary convention is a place to look for meaning.

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**ENGL 201 Introduction to Literature**

**Lecture notes for week 2**

**Defining and Interpreting Literature**

This week:

A. Defining Literature

B. Interpreting Literature

- What is interpretation?

- Interpretation as a process

- How do we interpret?

- How to be active interpreting readers?

**Defining Literature**

- Gyasi (1973) : "anything that is written"

- Rees (1973): "writing which expresses and communicates thought, feelings and attitudes towards life".

- Moody (1987) “literature springs from our in born love of telling a story, of arranging words in pleasing patterns, of expressing in words some special aspects of our human experience”
Boulton (1980): “literature from a functional perspective as the imaginative work that gives us R’s: recreation, recognition, revelation and redemption”.

Literature is:
- imaginative
- expresses thoughts and feelings
- deals with life experiences
- uses words in a powerful, effective and captivating manner
- Literature promotes recreation and revelation of hidden facts.

Forms of Literature

Forms are taken to mean the mode in which literature is expressed.
- Prose Fiction
- Prose non-fiction
- Poetry
- Drama

Interpreting literature

What is meaning in Literature?

What is meaning and where do you find meaning in works of literature?

There are 3 levels of meaning
- Level 1 of meaning: The sense and signification of a word, sentence
- Level 2 of meaning: The significance and purpose underlying truth

The Language and details of a work

In some texts the meaning is easier as compared to the other works

For example:

17th century author like John Donne and George Herbert are very difficult to read
Modernists and post-modernists: Eliot, Woolf, Joyce, Morrison employ innovative techniques which obscure the meaning.

Level 3 of meaning

- Relates to the world outside or the story / poem mirrors the world outside
- Connecting to outside works through themes

What is interpretation?

- Definition
- Examinations of details
- Exploring meaning
- Coherence of all elements
- Synthesis between themes and details

Interpretation as a process

- Interpretations must emerge from the details of the work
- The communication process
  
  author → work → reader

How do we interpret?

Interpretation involves:

- Involves thinking about details and interconnecting ideas, being analytical and critical
- It’s not like reading for fun when we are generally passive readers
- We agree and disagree with author

How to be active interpreting readers?

- Get the facts straight: understanding the language and details of the work
- Connect the work with your self
Develop a hypothesis when you read (raise questions about what the details mean: why does the character act the way he/she does?). Plan to return to these ideas later such questions and their tentative answers will get you thinking and relate them to the important details later.

- Write as you read
- Re-read the work
- Talk back to the text (dialogue)
- Learn from the interpretations of others
- Analyze works of literature

**Task for next class:**

- Prepare 1 minute presentation:

  Review your lecture notes for the last two classes and spend a few minutes in class explaining what you have understood so far. Relate some information from these notes with your interpretation of the story ‘Yours’ or ‘Cat in the Rain’ (copies of these stories were provided in class).