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.
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
Types of Prose Fiction

- Allegory: Is short story like fable. The characters represent ideas (hope, love, jealousy).
- Parable: Short story with religious principle, moral.
- The Novelette: Short novel
- Short Story
- The novel can be long or short. Characters replicate real life ong fictitious prose narrative
- Romance: is short fiction in which story/characters are too detached from the real life (e.g., Walpole's Castle of Otranto)

Examples

Fable: The Ant & the Grasshopper: [http://www.umass.edu/aesop/content.php?n=0&i=1](http://www.umass.edu/aesop/content.php?n=0&i=1)

Allegory: The Wise Woman's Stone

- A Wise woman who was traveling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveler who was hungry, and the wise woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him. She did so without hesitation. The traveler left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime. But a few days later, he came back to return the stone to the wise woman. “I've been thinking,” he said, “I know how valuable the stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something even more precious.” “Please give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone.”

Source: [http://home.acceleration.net/clark/PaperVu/quoter/Allegor_Stor_ies.html#Fish&Whistle](http://home.acceleration.net/clark/PaperVu/quoter/Allegor_Stor_ies.html#Fish&Whistle)

For analyzing any prose fiction:
• Read and understand the story once
• Re-read the story
• Understand the plot: How are events organized.
• Identify themes
• Relate themes with acts, activities
• Relate the characters to the theme
• Relate language to characters, themes
• Draw conclusions regarding life, conflicting issues etc.
• You cannot draw conclusions or morals straightaway after reading the story. Look for:
  Theme

  Point of view

  Plot

  Characterization

  Setting

  Irony

  Symbolism

  Climax (anti-climax)

\textbf{Theme}

• Ideas about life outside the story
• Ideas about real world
• The ideas from other works that reflect truth in literature (Literature becomes a form of philosophy and universal wisdom about the nature of the world)
• Themes may represent intellectual dilemmas rather than messages that resolve these dilemmas.
• There may be several, alternate or even contradictory themes within one story/novel.
• Sometimes, there may be no clear themes
The story/novel may seem to have images, actions, characters, atmosphere
Their ideas may be incompletely developed.

Plot

Events and things that happen in a narrative, actions, statements, thoughts and feelings.
Events of the narrative

Plot: arrangement of events, linkage of events, author’s presentation of events

Story all the events that we encounter in the narrative.

Types of plots:

- Traditional: diagram
- Open ended
- Multiple plot lines

Beginnings and endings

- Internal conflict takes place within the mind of characters and external conflict take place between individuals
- Protagonist/antagonist hero/villain

Characterization:

- Simple/complex
- Static/dynamic
- Direct/indirect revelation
- Representing characters’ thoughts
- Stream of consciousness (different levels of characters conscious minds)

Setting

- Physical and sensuous world
- Place where the action takes place

Irony

- Contrast between appearance and reality
• Verbal irony

• Situational irony (the situation differs from what common sense indicates it is)

• Irony in attitude (the reality is different as compared to what happens)

• Dramatic irony (character states or hears something that means more to the audience than to others)

Symbolism

• Symbol is something that represents words else public symbols (mean almost the same in every society/culture) private symbols (are specific to society/culture/text)
ENGL 201 Introduction to Literature

Lecture notes for week 4

Non-Prose Fiction

What is Prose?

Prose work communicates a writer’s life experiences in an imaginative manner

- Autobiographical Literature: When prose is ONLY about writer’s life experiences
- Historical Literature: When prose recounts historical facts in an imaginatively way (not necessarily as accurately as history)
- Biographical: When it is about the life of another person

Characteristics of prose work

Prose is:

- Dramatic: The writer creates a real or imaginary
- world, and presents actions and reactions to this world in form of:
- Dialogues
- Conversations,
- Symbols (concrete objects used to represent serious ideas)
- Images (a series of concrete objects
- represent ideas, one following the other like a story
- Descriptions.

Prose works bring together:

- Narration: recounting events as they occur –spatial/ chronological order
- Description
- Exposition (speech primarily intended to convey information or
• Arguments
• Exposition
• Comparison & Contrast
• Cause and effect
• Classification and other

Messages in Prose
• Prose works usually convey a message or messages.

Narrative techniques used in prose

First person narration:
• First hand information
• The narrator becomes an eyewitness.
• Use of ‘I’.

Conversational Technique
• variety of rhetorical forms such as
dialogues, conversations, monologues, explanation or exposition,
• argumentation, cause and effect

Narrative techniques used in prose

Omniscient narration:
• The narrator may or may not be a commentator
• The narrator tells the story and stops to guide the reader or convey moral comments
• The readers are expected to make their own reasoning

Coherence in prose

• The technique of a good prose writer includes the
• ability to organize the prose work in a clear-cut fashion that has a
• beginning, middle, a climax and an end.

Language is prose blends various language forms:

• Standard English
• Pidgin
• English
• Non-standard English
• Colloquial
• Slang

Authorial Comment

• In the middle of the discussion/argument the author asserts the right to interrupt narrations.
Interpreting Drama

Elements of Drama

Some elements are similar to fiction e.g.,

- Irony,
- Symbolism,
- Characters.
- Plot
- Story
- Action

Difference between drama and other literary genres

- One difference between and other forms of literature is: performance.
- Drama is different from poetry and prose narrative because it can both be read as a text and watched on stage. The ultimate experience of drama is the presentation on stage before an audience
- the concept of MIMESIS or imitation is often emphasized in relation to drama.
- MIMETIC implies that drama is imitating life.

Playwright: This is the author or writer of a drama text or play.

Characteristics of Drama:

Action

- Action keeps the plot of a play moving.
- The play emerges from the performance of actions before an audience.
- Acting generally generates other actions.
- Conflict evolves in the process these actions
Conflict leads to climax
The plot of drama ends in a resolution or denouncement.

Dialogue

Drama is impossible without dialogues
Dialogues: Communication between characters
Like narration in the story, drama depends on dialogue between the characters.
MIME: is the kind of drama which does not involve dialogues.

Conflict: Conflict is an outcome of a struggle for supremacy between the protagonist and antagonist of the play. The conflict is usually resolved at the end of the play. This is called conflict resolution or denouement.

Characters: Persons, animals, other creatures or things that the playwright has created to act out the play/drama. There are generally two types of characters: Flat characters are static characters who do not change until the of the play. Round characters, in contrast to the flat characters, are dynamic and they grow and develop with the play. Everything about these characters is revealed in the play and they are usually the protagonists.

Protagonists: This is the main character in a play.

Antagonists: These are the characters whose main aim is to challenge the protagonists.

A scene is the performable parts into which a drama is divided.

A plot is the central plan or an outline of events in a play.

A prologue suggests an introductory scene of the play. It can also be an address/speech made before the beginning of a play performance.

An epilogue is the direct opposite of a prologue. This is a short scene is at the end. It serves the purpose of a final address or a final speech at the close of dramatic performance.

While Reading a drama, we look for:
  - In reading a play, we look at literary devices.
  - You should read the play observing how they might be produced and performed.
  - While reading a play think about how a play is imagining audience.
  - Try to capture how playwrights first conceived them
  - You can interpret how you can interpret the play for the audiences reading/watching them today.
  - Length of the written version and performed version
  - Performance should not be long enough to make the audience too bored.
Audience: The presence of an audience affects how plays are written and how productions are designed. The actors pretend to be real people involved in real relationships. The audience can also be part of the play.

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