

Introductory Lecture

University of Djelfa

Level: L1

Department of Foreign Languages

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Module: Introduction to Literature

Lecture 01: Introductory Lecture

1.1. Learning Goals and Objectives

- a- Define the term literature from different perspectives.
- b- Distinguish between literary and non-literary language.
- c- Recognize the importance of literature to language learning.

Lecture 01: Literature and Language

Across all disciplines, literature remains a very difficult term for investigation as it encompasses wide range of dimensions. Yet, many philosophers as well as scholars provided varieties of definitions that touched its linguistic as well as thematic features. As First year B.A Students of English are concerned, all these definitions are pre-requisite and necessary step to understand the linguistic features of literary genres and the thematic concern of each literary text. This lecture aims at helping students form a working definition of the term literature. The focus is to help students see beyond what is common among people about literature and go deep to understand its deep meaning and concerns.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, literature is an “imaginative or creative writing, especially of recognized artistic value”. The definition distinguishes the language of literature by focusing on its fictional features which make it special as compared to non-literary language or functional text. Also, the definition insists on the centrality of creativity as another feature. Here a reader of a literary text cannot expect a literary text with normal or ordinary language. Creativity is at the hub of literary language as it makes the text has a specialized language different to other discourses of writing. Moreover, the American Heritage Dictionary alludes to the fact that literature is recognized by its artistic value. The latter can be seen in the multiplicity of aims literature can have on different facets of life.

Introductory Lecture

While one can agree on the fictional as well as the high artistic value of literature, other scholars noted the centrality of expressing thoughts through language in giving accurate definition to the term literature. Here the word *thoughts* is very important in understanding the intent of any given literary text. Thoughts can be read to mean ideas, feelings, views, reasoning, perspectives, ways of conceiving things...ect. To this point, literature cannot be seen in a mere expression of a given thought, but it also goes beyond this to express deep experiences, beliefs of humans and that what make the thematic concerns of any literary text special. In addition, language is the medium where these thoughts can be expressed and evaluated. A first point for consideration between literature and language is that language can come in two forms: verbal and non-verbal or written language. While we are accustomed to the second type which is written language as many of us read novels, short stories and poems, the first type is not very known as literature is concerned. Yet, many of today's stories, songs and other forms of literature reached us verbally through our grandfathers and grandmothers. Hence, one cannot neglect this type of language in enriching literature and its linguistic as well as thematic concerns.

The varieties of thoughts expressed through literature can be a good starting point to discuss the thematic concerns of literature. We all agree that any given text has a theme or idea or a moral. But all these diversify from one author to another and from one nationality to another and finally from one context to another. First, it is stated that literature is, according to Camilo Jose Cela, "the denunciation of the times in which one lives". Here literature is a portrayal of a given society, a description of its life, problems, ideas and life philosophies surrounding the people and their reasoning. Within this context, an author of a piece of literature seeks not only the depiction of these realities of life, but he/she also seeks the negation or criticism of these realities. He/she has twofold objectives. The first is to mirror these problems as to let people or readers recognize its existence and effects on their life. The

Introductory Lecture

second is to criticize and propose solutions or differing ways of dealing with things. To this point literature or literary text goes beyond entertainment to become a weapon to educate, teach and reform negative social habits.

As literature focuses on the representation of a given society, it is worth noting that the process of representation is not devoid of expressing national thought. Identification with one's own nation can be seen as an important feature of any literary text. In this regard, Channing advocates that literature is "the expression of national mind in writing". Here the identity of the author can be distinguished easily through his/her writing. For example, an Algerian author speaks his own nationality and in a way or another reflects national thoughts and issues related to his own nation. The famous Algerian author Yesmina Khadra uses his pen to write about a variety of issues surrounding the Algerian society and nation. Many of his works depict, to mention just few, political issues like the Black decades and their effects on the psyche of people. As such, literature goes beyond the mere depiction of a given phenomenon and becomes a tool to speak on behalf of the nation's realities and problems.

Coupled with the focus on national themes and concerns, literature is stated to be about people's morality. Here morality denotes the description of the internal and external struggles of life. To this point, John Morley states that literature is the study of human morality. Conflicts can be the best word that describes these struggles and their effect on the psyche of people. A reader can have a look at a set of external struggles the main character has with other characters and how these struggles shape his own internal struggles. As such, feeling sad, happy, annoyed ...ect is a reflection of this state of mind surrounding different characters and their morality. One good example of the depiction of human morality through literature is given by one Yemeni author. Abbas al-Iryani is short story writer. Her short story 'Heir Apparent', among many others, is about patriarchy and oppression of the Yemeni women. Through few pages, the reader could read about the strict psychological conflict the

Introductory Lecture

protagonist undergoes as a result of her destroyed morality. The reader is in front of a work that depicts the realities of women and the internal and external struggles they face as they try to defy social norms and habits.

Further Definitions to Consider:

- 1- All Knowledge that reaches us through books is literature
- 2- The written thoughts and feelings of intelligent men and women, arranged in a way that shall give pleasure to the reader
- 3- Literature consists of all the books...where moral truth and human passion are touched with a certain largeness, sanity and attractiveness of form
- 4- Literature is the verbal expression of man's affections as acted upon in his relation with the material world, society and his Creator
- 5- The inspiration of some phase of life, and the stamp of some form of beauty, are the characteristics of all true works of literature
- 6- We may be content to set out with a rough definition of literature as consisting of works which whether in prose or verse, are the handicraft of imagination rather than reflection, aim at the pleasure of the greatest possible number of the nation, rather than instruction and practical effects, and appeal to general rather than specialized knowledge

Taken from "Literature: A Lecture by John Henry Cardinal Newman"