UNIT1: LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 What is Literature?

- 1.3.1 Literary Devices
- 1.3.2 Stylistic Devices

1.4 Literature as a Language Event

1.5 The Notion of Literariness

1.6 Let us Sum up

1.7 Further Reading

1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

1.9 Model Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- critically examine the issue of literature as fiction and imaginative writing
- distinguish a literary text from a non-literary text
- appreciate the notion of literariness of a piece of text
- think critically about literature as a language event
- develop the notion of language registers

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to a major issue on the concept of literature as fiction and a work of imagination. We shall critically reflect upon different literary texts as starting point to shift your attention to the distinctiveness of a literary text so as to enable you to form your opinion on what constitutes a literary text and what makes a text non-literary.

You will appreciate that the language used by a journalist in his field of work while writing or editing news items for publication in a newspaper is strikingly different from the language used by a scientist in his field of work while explaining a scientific theory or a scientific experiment. Similarly, the language used by a lawyer in his field of work while drafting legal documents may be quite different from the language used in the business or corporate field. In the same way you will understand that the language used for literary writing has a distinctiveness that contrasts with the use of language in other fields.

Our attempt in this unit is to make you sensitive to those language devices used by a poet or novelist or short story writer that makes the language literary. The unit presents a few figurative devices that are used by poets and novelists. These devices include simile, metaphor and so on. There is also a sample of language drawn from a novel that makes you sensitive to the way novelists craft words and phrases in their attempt to create a world of fiction.

1.3 WHAT IS LITERATURE?

A literary critic M.H. Abrams in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Eleventh Edn, 2015), states that the term “literature” has been commonly used “to designate fictional and imaginative writings – poetry, prose, fiction and drama” (p 200). The statement contains two key words “fictional” and “imaginative” that express the notion that

(a) literature is fiction and

(b) literature is imaginative writing

These two key words are taken as norms for designating a piece of text as literature.

However, another literary critic J.A. Cuddon in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory* (1999) considers literature to be “a vague term which usually denotes works which belong to the major genres, epic, drama, lyric, novel, short story, ode”(p 472). Cuddon observes that when we describe a piece of text as literature as opposed to writings from other

fields, the term carries with it the idea that the work in question has "superior qualities that is well above the ordinary run of written works". As example, he states that "George Eliot's novels are literature, whereas Fleming's Bond books are unquestionably not". It is an interesting observation. In spite of the huge popularity and sales of each Bond novel, they are not considered literature. Yet George Eliot's novels like *Adam Bede* (1858), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Silas Marner* (1861) among others are literature.

The observation by eminent literary theorist Terry Eagleton, in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (2000) on "What is Literature" is much closer to the theme of literature as a language event that forms the core of this unit. Eagleton observes that the conventional definition of literature as imaginative writing will not work. There are a large number of literary works that do not fall under the category of imaginative writing notably, the essays of Bacon, the sermons of John Donne, the spiritual autobiography of John Bunyan which are all classed as literature. Even Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion* is considered literature though it is an account of facts.

Hence, in an attempt to define literature, a distinction between fact and fiction will not work. Besides, in the late sixteenth century, the word novel seems to have been used about both true and historical events. Novels and newspapers were neither clearly factual nor clearly fictional. If literature includes much factual writing, it also excludes quite a lot of fiction. The Superman comics and the Mills and Boons novels are fictional but they are generally not regarded as literature. Similarly, it won't do to state that literature is creative and imaginative writing; history, philosophy and natural science are equally creative and imaginative.

Hence, Eagleton attempts to define literature not according to whether it is fictional or imaginative, but because it uses language in peculiar ways. The basic argument is that literature transforms and enriches ordinary language. It does this by deviating systematically from ordinary speech by using a number of resources of the language. They include figurative language like simile, metaphor, personification, metonymy, synecdoche, transferred epithet, irony, hyperbole and a few other concepts.(Refer 1.3.1).They also include distinctiveness in the texture of

the language that is brought about by assemblage of devices which include sound, imagery, rhythm syntax metre, rhyme, narrative techniques and so on.(Refer 1.3.2).Under the pressure of literary devices, ordinary language is intensified, condensed and twisted.

What we would like to emphasise here is that literature expresses itself through a special kind of language that contrasts with the day-to-day language we commonly use. This is the norm or common core language. The user of the language in distinct specific fields enriches the language to suit the different fields in which the language is to be used. The poet or the novelist enriches with 'literariness', the writer of scientific writing enriches it with the terminology and forms that are suitable for scientific writing. Likewise, the journalist makes use of a style that makes journalistic writing distinctive.

1.3.1 Literary Devices

In this section we shall introduce you to a few figurative terms that are a part of the literary devices used by poets and novelists. The use of these terms makes the common day-to-day language literary as you can see from the examples.

1. *Simile*: It refers to a comparison between two different things. The comparison made explicit by using words like as, like, etc. is designed to create an interesting effect as in: The fog moves like a cat.
2. *Metaphor*: It also refers to a comparison but in this case, the comparison is implicit and is achieved through a non-literal sense of a word as in: Francis X D'Souza is a "pillar of the Church" (Eunice de Souza)
3. *Personification*: It refers to giving human qualities, feelings, action or characteristics to non-human objects as in : "I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers". (Shelley)
4. *Metonymy:* It is a term used to refer to the substitution of the name of one thing for that of another as in (The pen(writer) is mightier than the sword (fighter)).

5. *Synecdoche*: It refers to the substitution of one name for another, associated with it as in “All hands to deck” where the word ‘hands’ is a substitution for sailors or ship’s company.
6. *Transferred Epithet*: An epithet is an adjective that is placed before a noun to qualify it. But in the case of transferred epithet, the adjective is shifted or transferred to another noun associated with it as in “The plowman homewards plods his weary way”. Here the epithet ‘weary’ is transferred from plowman to way.
7. *Irony*: It is a term used to refer to an implied discrepancy between what is said and what is meant as in “A very fine friend you were to forsake me in my troubles”.
8. *Hyperbole*: It is a term used to refer to an extravagant exaggeration made by a writer for dramatic effect as in “Ten thousand saw I at a glance” where the reference is to a host of daffodils that the poet Wordsworth had seen.

1.3.2 Stylistic Devices

In the earlier section we briefly looked at a few figurative devices often called figures of speech. These devices are helpful in creating literariness in a piece of text contributing to the formation of a literary style. An interesting figurative device is what is known as *paradox* that is a favourite of both poets and novelists. It is a term used to refer to a statement that seems on the face of it to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes sense. Read the following passage:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of the noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

The passage chosen is the opening paragraph of the novel *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens (1812-1870). An attempt has been made here to show how the use of figurative language makes a plain prose passage enriched with new meaning. It is of course necessary to look at the passage in the context of the theme of the novel where Dickens presents a contrasting picture of the socio-political condition of the two cities London in England during the reign of George III and Paris in France during the reign of Louis XVI during the period of the French Revolution in 1789. The opening paragraph therefore strikes the key-note to the theme of the entire novel.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Give brief answers to the following questions:

(a) Name two literary works familiar to you that do not fall under the category of imaginative writing.

(b) Name two literary works familiar to you that fall under the category of fiction.

(c) Which of the following titles can be called literature?

(i) The Gitanjali

(ii) Tom and Jerry

(iii) The Prince and the Pauper

(iv) Basic Journalism

(v) Oxford Guide to English Grammar

(vi) New Hart's Rules

1.4 LITERATURE AS A LANGUAGE EVENT

A literary work irrespective of whether it is a poem, a novel, a short story or a play, is a language event. The literary text in question is the contemporary day-to-day language that is heightened and charged with literariness. Reading a literary text involves some sort of engagement with the language elements that constitute the text. But it is an engagement that is beyond simply being able to understand the meaning of the words and phrases in the text. In fact, reading a literary text involves two parameters;

first, a reasonable reading comprehension ability and secondly, an engagement with the literary conventions that are being used besides the socio-cultural variables in the text.

A literary text is thus a language event in the sense that the text in question is essentially language that is charged with meaning to the utmost degree. Hence, it has become necessary to refer to the reading competence of the readers in their attempt to engage themselves with a literary text. Readers with a less than required reading comprehension ability or comprehension fluency to make sense of the words in the page, would not be in a position to respond to the literariness of a text.

In basic terms then, an engagement with a literary text can only start with a certain level of language or reading competence presupposed. That is the early stage of the reader to "experience" literature followed by an ability to describe, explain the nature of the experience. At a later stage, the readers will be in a position to develop an understanding of particular literary traditions, decide for themselves which writers have more value in relation to particular philosophies or ideologies, but that argument should emerge from wide and varied reading.

At a time when there has been a spate of glossy paperback production, naturally readers are confused about what to read. No matter how long our life is, we will, at best be able to read only a few books of all that have been published, and the few we read should include the best. We can be happy at the thought that the number of such books is relatively small. Literariness can be one of the norms for making decisions on which work of fiction to read.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q2. Give brief answers to the following questions:

(a) What are the two parameters involved in reading a literary text?

(b) In what sense is literature a language event?

(c) Why should we be selective of what books to read?

1.5 THE NOTION OF LITERARINESS

In this section we shall examine a few passages. We shall try to find out which of them are literary and which are not. If we find them literary, we need to know what literary device has gone into the text to make it a literary text.These are all extracts from different forms of writings. As an example, we shall look at a piece of text given here. While reading the text we shall try to identify the narrator or narrators, the situation or context in which the text occurs, what makes it literary or for that matter, a non-literary piece of text.

To-day, we have naming of parts.Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day, to-day,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And to-day we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

These are the first two stanza of Henry Reed's poem "Naming of Parts". Can you find answers to the following questions:

(a) Who is the speaker here? Is there more than one speaker?
(b) What is the situation in which the lines are said?
(c) Identify points of differences in the use of language in the different lines.
(d) Is the language of the lines literal or poetic?

It may interest you to know that there are two speakers in the lines. In stanza 1, the first four lines up to the full stop and in stanza 2 the first four lines up to the full stop are spoken by a drill sergeant in a parade ground. Those of you who had NCC might have attended classes in which the drill sergeant (havildar) gave you lessons on naming the parts of a rifle. The language of the drill sergeant is matter of fact. It is prosaic; in the first stanza the speaker provides information to the cadets on the class-routine for three days: yesterday, today and tomorrow. In the second stanza, he begins the lesson by providing names of the parts of a rifle.

The remaining lines are strikingly different. The speaker is a cadet with a poetic sensibility. His lines are quite different in the use of language. He has used figurative language all through: in the first stanza “japonica glistens like coral” is a simile. Even the use of the word “glistens” has poetic overtones. In the second stanza the word hold in “the branches hold” is personification. The expression “silent, eloquent” is interesting. The figure of speech is *oxymoron*, a literary device that is used to place two contradictory words side by side to create a subtle sense of meaning as in “hasten slowly”, “darkness visible”, “bitter sweet” and so on. Unlike the language used by the drill sergeant that is rather literal, the language used by the cadet is poetic; it is characterized by literariness.



1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have been introduced to the language of literature which includes both poetry and prose fiction. By critically reflecting upon different literary texts, the unit aimed to make you sensitive to the distinctiveness of a literary text so as to enable you to form your opinion on what constitutes a literary text and what makes a text non-literary. We learnt that the language used by a journalist in his field of work while writing or editing news items for publication in a news paper is strikingly different from the language used by a scientist in his field of work while explaining a scientific theory or a scientific experiment. We noted that the language used by a lawyer in his field of work while drafting legal documents may be quite

different from the language used in the business or corporate field. We understood that the language used for literary writing has a distinctiveness that contrasts with the use of language in other fields. We studied those language devices used by a poet or novelist or short story writer that makes the language literary. These include simile, metaphor and so on. We also examined a sample of language drawn from *A Tale of Two Cities* to illustrate the way novelists craft words and phrases in their attempt to create a world of fiction.



1.7 FURTHER READING

1. Abrams, M.H. and Harpham, G.G. (2015). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Cengage Learning.
2. Cuddon, J.A. (2000 4th Edition). *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory,* Penguin.
3. Eagleton, Terry. (2000). *Literary Theory: An Introduction,* Maya Blackwell.
4. Seturaman, V.S. et al. (1990). *Practical Criticism,* Macmillan. (The poem "Naming of Parts" is quoted from this book at p 159).

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1.

(a) Jawaharlal Nehru's *Autobiography*
Nirad C Chaudhury's *A Passage to England*

(b) You may name any two good novels familiar to you.

(c) Titles (i) and (iii) are literary works.

Ans to Q2.

(a) The two parameters involved in reading a literary text are first, developing a reasonable reading comprehension ability and secondly, developing a competence towards the engagement with the literary conventions that are being used in the text besides the socio-cultural variables.

(b) Literature can be called a language event because a literary text is essentially language charged with meaning to the utmost degree.

(c) We should be selective of what books to read because there have been more books than anyone could read. Besides, they have multiplied through the years. Hence, the few books that we read should include the best.



1.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Give brief answers :

(a) Compare a simile with a metaphor.

(b) What is a transferred epithet?

(c) Name the figure of speech in the line: “Earth has not anything to show more fair”.

(d) “The thirsty earth soaks up the rain” – Name the literary device.

Q2. Comment on the lines:

The fog comes
on little cat feet.
It sits looking
over harbour and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

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