UNIT 7: INTERPRETING LITERATURE

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Defining Literature

7.4 The Basic Forms of Literature

7.5 Interpreting Works of Literature

7.6 Let us Sum up

7.7 Further Reading

7.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

7.9 Model Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- define the meaning of Literature
- grasp the concept of 'literary canon'
- discuss the various forms of literature
- learn about the various National and International prizes for Literature
- gain an idea on the ways to interpret and evaluate works of literature
- develop an interest to further explore various works of Literature

7.2 INTRODUCTION

Literature is a comprehensive term for the rich variety of literary works that capture human imagination, experiences and life in its myriad forms. In the earlier times, any form of written document was referred to as 'literature'. However, literature came to be universally acknowledged as a domain that encompasses a range of creative or reflective writings or works that follow literary conventions and have a distinct literary appeal in its form,

style and content. Literature mirrors the world around us and can be very powerful, as well as, influential in our lives through its reflections and revelations. The invention of the printing press brought about a revolutionary change as it made available books in the printed form. This led to a wide circulation across the world and it provided an impetus to process of printing and publication of books which led to the proliferation of literature. The present unit explores literature in order to highlight some of its major forms while examining the presence of multiple literary traditions and the ways in which we can interpret literature in order to cultivate an interest in exploring works of literature, as well as, enhance our critical reading skills.

7.3 DEFINING LITERATURE

The term 'Literature' is derived from the Latin word *literatura*, where litera means 'writing' which encompasses various forms of literary narratives. However, it would be rather difficult for us to arrive at a singular comprehensive definition of literature. In this subsection, let us make an attempt to meaningfully define the same. Let us begin by thinking what is literature? We must first consider the tradition of oral narratives that had travelled down the ages before these came to be recorded in the form of writing which later developed as works of literature. Thus, storytelling came to be shaped into various literary forms that could be analysed for its underlying factors of narrative style, language, rhetorical devices, characters and thematic content among other literary aspects. In the Introduction to the work titled *Elements of Literature* (1997), the term is aptly described in the following words:

"Literature begins in the creative possibilities of human language and in the desire of human beings to use their language creatively. -Though its origin lies in the joy of creation, literature can be intensely serious. It can use its formal beauty as a way of enabling us to contemplate the most painful and terrible aspects of existence, or as a way of celebrating those things we value most highly in life. In the end, literature enriches our lives because it increases our capacities for understanding and communication.

It helps us to find meaning in our world and to express it and share it with others. And this is the most humane activity of our existence." (xxvii)

Further, imaginative literature is a fascinating realm for both the writer and the reader owing to its delight in the playfulness of language and striking narratives that easily captures the interests and curiosity of readers. In *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing* (2004), imaginative literature is considered to motivate the readers towards enjoying "the possibilities of language and mov[ing] beyond the factual details of an event" (2). It discusses the ways in which literary narratives and literary practices differ from one culture to the other. It is for this reason that it becomes necessary for readers to grasp the cultural contexts of various literatures so as to be able to appreciate it better. With regard to Literature, we may often wonder on certain important aspects such as:

- What or who defines a standard work of Literature?
- What is the real meaning of a canon or literary canon?
- Why are some works considered canonical while others not?
- How does a work of literature make its way to the traditional literary canon?

Originally derived from the Greek word '*kanon*' which has religious connotation, the English word 'canon' is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "a general rule or principle by which something is judged". And 'canonical' defines the acceptance of "being authentic or established as a standard" which generally implies to the list of saints or laws of the church. However, it is also used as a secular term for works of literature. Thus, the term 'literary canon' refers to the tradition of pioneering, groundbreaking or representative Literature that are universally considered as authoritative works that embody or define various parameters of excellence. Such canonical works of literature are considered to act as exemplars of literary standards for writers across the world. Moreover, it is wide base of readers across the globe who universally acknowledges, authenticates and decides the worth or value of a literary work.

However, the problem that arises with an established literary canon is the nullifying effect it has on many good works of literature which may be

excluded from the canons. Such works may remain under-valued and worse, be lost and forgotten with the passage of time. The absence of women's writing from early literary records and the later marginalization, may be attributed to such a tradition of constructing literary canons whereby women writers were perhaps found lacking in the hallmarks established by the male literary canon.This may imply that there was a time when women writers were not taken seriously by readers, intellectuals and critics. However, with the passage of time, like many other traditions, there was an emergence of a female literary tradition in which women writers articulated their voices and celebrated their experiences and experimented with their writings to create a tradition of their own.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Mention the term from which the word 'literature' is derived.

Q2. Why is Imaginative Literature considered a fascinating realm for both the writer and the reader?

Q3. Define the terms canon and canonical with regard to its religious connotation.

Q4. What does the term 'literary canon' refer to?



LET US KNOW

The Western literary canon represents some of the great works of writers such as: Homer, Aeschylus, Virgil, Horace, Geoffrey Chaucer, Dante Alighieri, William Shakespeare, Miguel De Cervantes, Michel De Montaigne, John Milton, Samuel Johnson, William Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Walt Whitman, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Henrik Ibsen, Samuel Beckett among others.

7.4 THE BASIC FORMS OF LITERATURE

Often, we may find ourselves walking into a book shop and feeling thoroughly confused about making the right pick. Thus, it is important to note that literary expressions give shape to a range of literary forms that can be generally classified as the following: fiction, non-fiction, poetry and drama. These forms can be further classified into various genres and subgenres. This section provides a brief idea on the above-mentioned classifications in order to enable the learner to gain a fair idea on the aspects that differentiate these forms.

Fiction and Non-fiction :

Narrative Fiction comprises the most popular practice of novel writing which is an art of representing life, the world around us and its experiences through creative storytelling or narratives. As mentioned in *Elements of Literature* (1997), "[f]act and fiction are old acquaintances" in which the element of fiction takes over most of novelistic narratives (121). Further, it discusses the factors of history and fantasy at two extreme ends of the 'fictional spectrum' with realism and romance in between with which we can better relate to narratives on the experiences of life. The important elements in any work of fiction are plot, characters, action, themes, events, perspective, style and language.

The early forms of fiction comprised tales and stories considered as short forms of fiction apart from the earlier forms of 'epics' which were considerably lengthy. This was followed by the practice of writing longer narratives such as 'novels'and 'novellas' i.e., the chiseled version of the novelistic form. Some of the genres of fiction are: classical, historical, fantasy, fairy tales, fables, legends, folklore, mythology, humor, horror, mystery, short story, science fiction, children's literature, women's fiction, meta-fiction, pulp fiction, experimental fiction among others. As far as fiction is concerned, it is generally classified into realist, romantic, historical, epic, picaresque, folk/regional, epistolary, gothic, thriller, graphic and existential types. Non-fiction comprises works such as biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, essays, diaries, letters, journalistic writings, manuals, self-help

books, travel accounts, academic works, literary criticism and so forth in which factual and genuine information is presented without any distortion. Such works can have a personal touch with regard to the narrative presentation and are reliable to a large extent, in terms of their content. Therefore, the next time you walk into a shop, you may walk in confidently and make your pick of the kind of literary narrative that you may want to read.

Poetry :

Jeffrey Wainwright in his discussion on the elements of poetry writes thus,

"In all its presences the fascination, pleasure and impact of poetry inherent in the patterns of the language where form and content are truly indivisible:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance" (181)

Poetry encompasses in its form the very essence of experiences in the economy of words. Some of the various types of poetry are lyric, limerick, ballad, sonnet, villanelle, ode, satire, parody, elegy, emblem, haiku among others. Due to its condensed structural form, hidden meaning(s) and minimal usage of words, poetry can often be very confusing and difficult to comprehend. At times, reading poetry can turn into a tedious exercise when the reader needs to make significant efforts while trying to literally decode or decipher its layered meaning. The knowledge of the stylistic or rhetorical devices therefore, would be a prerequisite if one is to appreciate poetry in its complete sense. However, for most common readers it is the beauty of language and versification that is enough to attract one towards reading poetry.

Drama :

In drama, fiction is represented through dialogue and performance. As noted in *Elements of Fiction* (1997) that the "essence" of the form is its "imitative action" and that "[d]rama is true to life by being false to our conventional notions of reality" (785). Further it discusses how plot, dialogue and characters are the "indispensable elements of drama" without which a

dramatic work can never take shape. While there are many factors at work in a dramatic text, the details of which the learner can explore individually, some of the basic forms of drama are comedy, tragedy, romance and satire which often tend to blend into the other depending on the content and context of the work.

Music, dance and spectacle further can enliven the text or performance of a drama. The greatest dramatist of all times, William Shakespeare made use of song, spectacle and chorus in his plays too. One of the most significant works on dramatic theory is Aristotle's *Poetics* (335 BCE) which had outlined and defined dramatic conventions and aesthetics of drama. Some of the various genres of drama are: ancient, classical, epic, opera, choral, play, one-acts,monologues, mime, pantomime, melodrama, creative drama, children's theatre, ensemble, farcical, theatre of cruelty, theatre of oppressed, absurd drama, *avantgarde* theatre and modern drama among several others.

While exploring various forms of literature, the learner will do well to be aware of some the prestigious International awards for literature namely: The Nobel Prize in Literature, Neustadt International Prize for Literature, The Booker Prize, The Man Booker International Prize, Golden Wreath of Struga Poetry Evenings, America Award, The Franz Kafka Prize, The Warwick Prize for Literature, International Rubery Book Award, KONS International Literary Award, Grand Prix of Literary Associations and Windham–Campbell Literature Prizes which are given across nationalities of writers. It is worth mentioning that Rabindranath Tagore and V.S. Naipaul are the only two Indian English writers to have received the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 1913 and 2002 respectively. It is important to note that in our national context, the major awards for excellence in Literature are namely the Jnanpith Award, the Sahitya Akademi Award and Saraswati Samman which are given only to remarkable writers of Indian nationality.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Mention the general classification of Literature.

Q6. Write briefly on the literary form of fiction and poetry in your own words.

Q7. What comprises works of non-fiction?

Q8. Mention the three indispensable elements of drama.

Q9. Name some of the International Awards in the field of literature.

7.5 INTERPRETING WORKS OF LITERATURE

Interpreting works of literature is to read between the lines or in other words, engage and examine the hidden meaning in the text of a literary work. However, meanings by nature may be deceptive, playful and not necessarily fixed. For this reason, it is necessary to appreciate the multiplicity of meaning that is derived from one's reading. Meaning is always open to various interpretations and thus, it follows that multiplicity of meaning also tends to lead to multiple interpretations. In many ways, the interpretation of literature varies from person-to- person or from one individual to another as it takes into account the various defining perspectives or personal characteristics of the person himself or herself who is engaged in the process of reading.

This is due to the fact that, a reader's literary interpretation tends to shape up in accordance to his or her thoughts, beliefs, preferences, perspectives, prejudices, emotions, and experiences to mention few such aspects. In other words, interpretation of literature tends to be highly subjective in general. Therefore, it is necessary for readers to have a functional knowledge of literary conventions in order to engage in objective reading of any work of literature. A reader must be able to 'justify' the logic behind his or her interpretation of a literary work as the textual source itself provides sufficient facts or hints, in order to enable the reader to arrive at probable meanings. Some of the basic guidelines on the interpretation of a literature arementioned in *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing* (2004) which are briefly mentioned below:

a. Consider the 'literary objective' that is evident in a work of literature.

b. Be well-versed in the elements of literature and their literary functions.

c. Evaluate whether these elements or literary functions are combined well to the objective of a work.

d. Determine whether the work is "intellectually stimulating" (10).

e. Reflect on whether the literary work gives you a pleasurable reading experience.

Further, the work highlights three important strategies with regard to interpreting literature namely, previewing, highlighting and annotating. While previewing the reader is to note the basic features of a literary work; followed by the practice of highlighting important lines, words and paragraphs in order to examine it in a detailed manner; and finally annotating or writing one's response(s) in the form of side-notes on the text of the work. It is only gradually that one develops his or her critical or rather interpretive reading skills through a keen sense of interest, observation and practice.

Thus, language can be considered as a powerful tool for the way in which it can shape multiple creative expressions as we do find in Literature. It holds the power to literally enchant or lure readers into a reading spell, stirring a range of thoughts and emotions in the readers. Literature provides a wide variety of experiences, enjoyment while also enlightening readers in various ways. As noted by Kirszner and Kendall, "[b]eyond transporting readers out of their lives and times, literature can enable readers to see their lives more clearly" (2).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q10. What is meant by the phrase " interpreting works of literature"?

Q11. Why does interpretation of literature tend to differ form person to person?

Q12. What are the three strategies of reading and evaluation? Explain briefly.