

LITERATURE

Expressing Human Thoughts, Emotions, and Cultural Context

Introduction

As a field of learning, literature differs from other disciplines in that the goal of a writer is not so much to acquire knowledge as it is to express human thoughts and emotions. Literature is the record of things worth saying. Literature rises above communicating the facts that it may contain. Thus, it goes beyond the writing found in other fields in which texts may do no more than encapsulate findings of historical research or scientific experimentation.

Literature does not stand or fall on whether the facts that it relates are true or not, but this does not mean that Merlin the Magician did not really exist. Stories about Merlin are not “true.” However, in other senses, we *can* speak about whether the characters, plot, and other features of a piece of literature appear to be true or false. Is what the author says about Merlin true to the rules of the character’s universe as the author and the reader understand them? Or does what he says flop about confusingly and murkily? To succeed, the piece of literature must be truly something that people might want to read and feel wiser for having done so.

Goals

Great pieces of literature are those that have stood the test of time and communicate to people on many levels, including behavioral, psychological, scientific, cultural and aesthetic. Literature along with the “arts” is included in the broader category of the *humanities*. They are “works of the imagination and self-reflective scholarship based on carefully gathered evidence to illuminate enduring human concerns as well as present problems and possibilities” -- General Education Goals adopted by the SDSU Senate, November 6, 2001.

Writers might explore the human psyche or propose to excite and entertain. A writer may exaggerate and make fun of people and institutions, perhaps provoking new behavior on their part. Sometimes writers explore social conditions, which they may approach satirically or realistically, inviting social change. They may help explain the world symbolically, in the form of a traditional story. Writers may report true facts but with a careful or even an artistic use of language, resulting in the production of fine essays and works of literary nonfiction. Whatever their specific goal, writers want to express, explore, or explain human concerns and behaviors.

Products

Literature can include any carefully crafted or expressive piece of communication, whether written or oral. Literature may be either complete in itself or acted out as in a play or a film. Plays can be considered to be both literature and theatre. (In Liberal Studies, we generally categorize plays as part of the performing arts.) In novels, stories,

essays, and plays, texts can be in regular language (prose) or in special, concentrated language, called verse.

Process

How an author creates is difficult to determine. Sometimes writers are not completely aware of their processes themselves. Different writers approach their work in different ways. Some may develop their themes and messages from personal experiences, others may focus on external demands or issues, and others may do extensive research. Some write at specified times every day; others write in long uninterrupted sessions and then take days or weeks off from writing. Some outline the entire work before fleshing it out; others allow the characters and situations to determine the outcome. Those with long careers may use more than one method and write in more than one style or genre. In learning to write, many children learn a “writing process” that includes: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing.

Academics in the process of analyzing literature, in particular novels or short stories, often use the following terms and ask the types of questions listed. Authors must deal with all these issues while planning their novels. They may try one approach and then change their minds and try a different one; however, ultimately they have to create an imaginary world in which the various parts work together convincingly.

Theme: Is there one central idea the author explores and develops? Are there less important ideas (minor themes) or parallel themes that enrich or conflict with the central theme?

Plot: Is there a plot? Is it familiar or is it new? Is it central to the writer’s purpose or an excuse for descriptive language, social activism, or philosophical speculation? What is the conflict at the heart of the plot?

Character: Are the characters believable? Are they meant to be?

Setting: Why here? Why then? What is the author trying to get across by making these decisions?

Tone: Is the work serious or funny, obvious or subtle?

Imagery: What pictures do the phrases or the words conjure in your mind?

Symbolism. What culturally significant meanings lurk below the text, plugging into the reader’s preexisting ideas or mental images?

Point of view: Is the narrator omniscient? Is he or she flawed in some way? Is the narrator one of the characters, knowing only what that character would know? Are there multiple narrators and points of view? Is the piece (whether fictional or not) in the first person, the second, or the third?

Audience: For whom is the work intended? Does the audience see the world new and fresh and in more detail through this writer’s eyes?

Style: Is the literary work smooth and flowing? Is it unclear, despite the author's best efforts? Is the work deliberately tortuous and challenging? Is the lack of clarity a deliberate and well-controlled case of ambiguity, in which the author has constructed the work to function on different levels at the same time?

Outcomes

Outcomes are on a continuum. What is a best seller today may disappear tomorrow. If writing is to be considered literature in an academic sense, it must stand the test of time. Humans do not change very much. Thus, writing that reflects real human concerns and behaviors such as love, greed, economic and physical well-being, or fear is likely to be read by different generations and in different countries with diverse cultural perspectives. Great literature has "universal appeal."

Literature takes readers out of themselves for a while and transports them to worlds otherwise unknown. If the new world brings pleasant experiences, then the reader may be entertained. If it brings understanding of deplorable social or political situations, then the reader may be moved to action. When readers connect with how a story's characters experience and value life, they may come to appreciate, understand, and deal with their own experiences. When reading literature, readers work their way through an assortment of worlds.

Quality Control

How can individuals tell whether a written work is likely to be worth their time? They might ask themselves these questions: If the text is old, is it easy to get?

Have other people found it worth reprinting?

Also, have people found it (or its author) worthy of criticism?

If so, that piece of literature may become part of a "canon," garnering attention from one generation to another, rather than being left only for specialists in research libraries.

Finally, does the work have style, readability, or other compelling features? If it is a new work, is there something entertaining or stirring about it? Would readers of different cultural backgrounds expect it to be in the canon someday? How is the canon determined, anyway? Who makes the determinations and what are the criteria?

Note that the answers to these questions are, in part, up to the reader. If readers peruse a book, attend a play or poetry reading, watch a movie, or even view a television program, they help keep literature alive. Literature justifies itself if people read it, listen to it, or see it performed. The test is whether a reader connects, sees something of himself or others in it, and is enriched by the experience.

Readers can also look at how literary critics evaluate a piece of literature. Academic literary critics publish journals and peer-review each other's books and articles, just as historians and scientists do, so there is also a body of "expert" opinion that can be

consulted regarding what various critics have written about specific pieces of literature. Readers can read reviews to determine whether this or that interpretation or biographical work about an author is thought to be well written, well-researched, entertaining, and worth reading.

Historically, literary critics have argued from divergent perspectives. In the 19th century, realistic criticism was quite popular. Psychological criticism arose with psychology as a field of study, especially after Sigmund Freud published his works. Social criticism evaluated the social constructs of literary pieces. In the 20th century, several new forms of criticism arose. “New criticism” began to look at the value of imaginative literature. Feminist criticism was one result of the feminist movement. Deconstructionist critics (late 20th century to the present) take apart or “deconstruct” in order to examine what may be hidden or ambiguous to the ordinary reader. Some critics argue from a cultural view point, asking what the work reveals about the time in which it was written, including the cultural values of the society and of the author.

When researching the criticism of any piece of literature, one must be aware of the point of view of the critic and consider what values are reflected in that criticism. For example, one might want to ask: What does this type of criticism value? What are the goals of the critic in evaluating the work? Does this point of view help the reader understand the work better? Does this type of criticism seem fair or far-fetched for this particular piece of literature?