

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Lecture - 04
How to Read and Appreciate Literature?

Hello! Welcome again to our course Elements of Literature and Creative Communication. I hope all of you are doing well today. During the previous three lectures, we have had an interesting roller coaster ride on various aspects of literature.

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RECAP

- Literature, and its innate ability to get under our skin
- It helps us live a thousand lives, within a single life!
- (Story) Valmiki and the hunted bird. How he created a song (*shloka*) out of his suffering (*shoka*)
- Literature facilitates this alchemy of transforming our deepest emotions into immortal literary pieces
- *Parakaya Pravesha* - reading, as an exercise in empathy
- Literature as Global; transcend space and time
- How does Literature benefit us?



Moreover, we also went through a couple of very, very exciting stories. I am sure you enjoyed all those stories. Before we go to the fourth lecture, let us have a quick recap of what we did in the previous class. We discussed how literature has an extraordinary ability, almost to the extent we can call it a spiritual ability. What is this spiritual ability? The ability to get under our skin and transform us from within, literature has that ability. How literature does that, we discuss that. We also discuss this concept of *Parakaya Pravesha*, a concept quite relevant to understanding the philosophy of Shankaracharya and how literature achieves this philosophical vision of *Parakaya Pravesha*. We also discussed this in the context of the origin of Ramayana. We discussed how in Valmiki, the *Shoka* transforms into *Shloka* and how that became a kind of an epic template for the Ramayana to begin *Sokam Shlokathvamagathaha*, related to the death of the Krauncha bird, and the subsequent cursing of the hunter by Valmiki. We also discussed how literature acts as a catalyst in enhancing

empathy and how literature makes us more humane. We also discussed Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's concept of Glocal - of how some texts, while being rooted in the local, can also appeal to the global. It is a portmanteau term. Literature in its true sense is always glocal, in the sense that while being rooted in the local, it appeals to the global. It is global in its spirit and aspiration. We also discussed how literature benefits us by enhancing our analytical skills and reading, writing, and other cognitive skills.

In this class, we will discuss another important aspect related to understanding literature. Until now, we discussed Literature's definitions, its different forms like short stories and fables, and how our understanding of Literature should keep evolving. Else, monolithic definitions end up becoming just fragments of our imagination.

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LITERATURE AND COMMUNICATION

- Two aspects of Language: Communicative and Literary
- Ways of seeing: "Seeing comes before speaking" – John Berger
- "Reading is that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude." - Marcel Proust

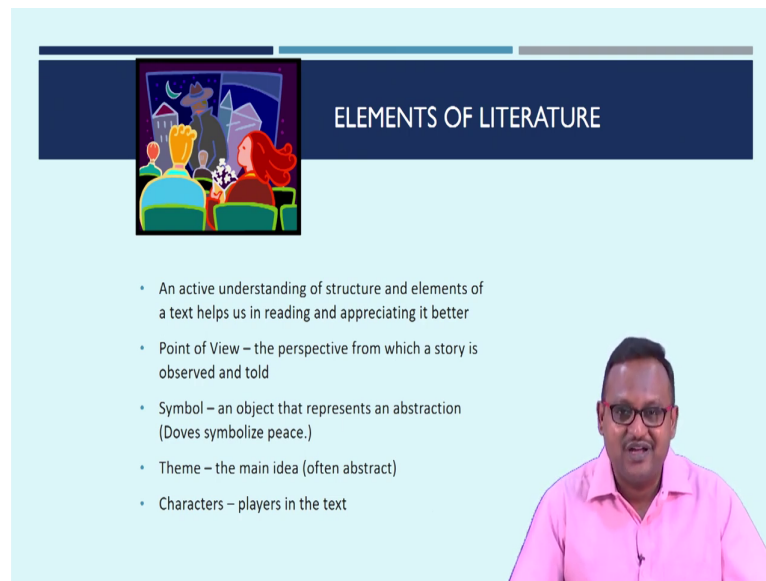
In this class, we will take a slightly different strand; and we will discuss how to read and appreciate literature. Before that, let us discuss two aspects of language. Every language has two components: the communicative component and the literary component. The communicative component is what you and I keep using every day when we speak a particular language, be it Hindi, Tamil, or Bangla. We participate in a kind of communion; When we speak with each other in our language, we participate in a kind of linguistic communion. We share our emotions and receive others' emotions in return, hence enhancing our collectivistic sense of community. That is the first aspect, the communicative turn. We can even categorize two turns of language; one is the communicative turn, the other is the

literary turn. The literary turn is what is interesting. In its literary dimension, language acts as a custodian of culture. Remember, the concept of history is of recent origin, especially in India; It is the western notion of history which is of recent origin. Earlier, most of our historical elements were passed on to us either in an oral epic or in the form of tales and novels. So, literature acts as a kind of a custodian of culture. Thereby it preserves culture and also passes it on to the next generation. So, if we remember this aspect of literature, our appreciation and admiration for literature are enhanced beyond just a tool of entertainment. Literature also acts as a preservative agent of culture, tradition, society, people's belief systems, and value systems. Here let me invoke an important book called 'Ways of Seeing' by renowned British novelist and poet John Berger. By analysing various important paintings, he puts forth the concept of 'seeing' from a fresh perspective. Of course, the crux of the book cannot be reduced to a book to a single sentence, but the spirit of the sentence is to say that human beings develop the faculty of seeing much before they develop the faculty of speaking, right. If you observe a child, their faculty of seeing develops before their faculty of speaking.

So, what does literature do? By offering us multiple perspectives, presenting the story before us, presenting a vision before us, and presenting a value set before us, it helps us see things from multiple perspectives. In other words, it creates a multitudinal understanding of a singular concept. It acts as a kind of a corrective agent. By the time we start reading literature, we will have already picked up both the skills of seeing and speaking. It does a kind of a retrospective job of going back to the roots and correcting how we look at society. So, thereby it enhances our understanding of society. It develops new ways of seeing. It develops new ways of speaking about it. When we change the way we see society, there is a change in the way we communicate about it. Therefore, if you wish to enhance your communication skills, you wish to learn to see things from a different perspective, you must learn to read and appreciate literature.

Here is a very interesting quote by 20th century French writer Marcel Proust, "Reading is that fruitful miracle of a communication that happens in the middle of solitude." So, I said earlier that reading is an activity wherein a soul starts interacting with itself first and then interacts with its world. And all this happens in the universe of silence. Marcel Proust, a prominent literary figure, symbolist, modernist, has had an extraordinary influence on modernist British writers.

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The slide features a dark blue header with the title 'ELEMENTS OF LITERATURE' in white. To the left of the title is a colorful illustration of a group of people sitting in a room, looking towards a screen that displays a cityscape at night. Below the header, there is a bulleted list of five elements of literature. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset showing a man with glasses and a pink shirt speaking.

- An active understanding of structure and elements of a text helps us in reading and appreciating it better
- Point of View – the perspective from which a story is observed and told
- Symbol – an object that represents an abstraction (Doves symbolize peace.)
- Theme – the main idea (often abstract)
- Characters – players in the text

Moving on from here, we will discuss various elements of literature. These elements of literature are not particular to one particular form or any form of literature, be it poetry, novel, or short fiction. An awareness of this will help us understand and appreciate literature all the more. We will focus on how we are going to learn to read literature and appreciate it better. So, to facilitate that, we will focus on some essential concepts and elements of literature. As classes roll by at a relevant pace, we will take up these concepts for a detailed discussion.

The first thing that comes is 'point of view' in poetry, fiction, and drama. Perspective or point of view plays a significant role. Remember, a novel accommodates various characters. But each character has its own perspective and way of perceiving reality. When different perceptions of realities are presented before us, there is a kind of a clash between its competing versions. Thereby it gives us a plethora of options to look around and pick the right one or to accommodate all the perspectives to any extent possible. Therefore, understanding the perspective in a work of art becomes very important. Not everything in a novel is an author's perspective. -an author may differ from what his or her characters are speaking. We must always remember that one of the first mistakes we make when we are exposed to literature during the initial days is to confuse authorial voice with the characters' voice. What the character says is different from or need not be the same as what the author says. Once we identify this, the rest of it is a kind of a smooth journey.

The second thing is we need to identify various **figures of speech**. These figures of speech are used plenty in literature, especially in poetry, but also in other forms of literature in other genres of literature. Then comes **Symbol**; it is an object that represents an abstract idea whose meanings are much deeper than what they appear at the surface. In order to understand the symbol, you must go beyond, or beneath, the surface and get to the bottom, and only then we would be able to understand a symbol. The next is a **theme**. Usually, nobody writes a novel, or no great writer writes anything with a set theme in mind. When a work of art is produced, it would invariably have various thematic elements so, if we can identify the overall theme of the work of art, whether it is a novel or a short story or a drama or a play or a poem, if you can identify that, then how to read literature to a certain extent.

And of course, **characters** - various characters come and these characters are as good as real people. So, if connecting with real people in the world around us is not possible, at least connecting with the characters that we read in literature can help us a lot.

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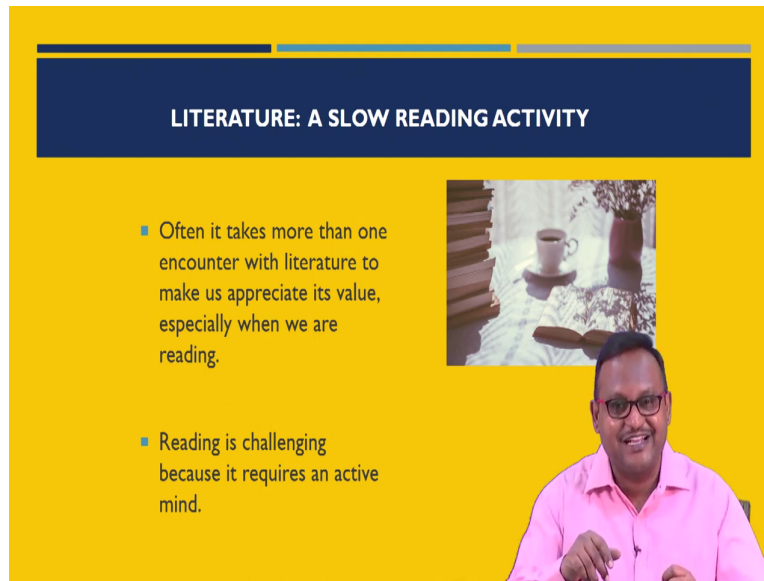


We are continuing our discussion on elements of literature. The next is **tone**. What is the overall mood of the work? Is it one of a pessimistic tone? Is it one of the positive tones? Is it one of the neutral tones? What is the tone if we can learn to identify the overall tone? Remember that the novel's canvas is so big or the canvas of a literary work is so big it would have multiple moods. Here, understanding the underlying mood is essential. Then comes **Setting**. Setting plays a very important role because remember if it is a novel, especially if it

is a novel or a short story or a play, it has to be set in a particular social context, the society in which it is located, the time period in which it is located, the cultural context in which it is located, the political context in which it is located. These act as filters. Setting acts as filters. There are many filters through which the theme gets developed, and we must identify the correct setting. Most of the time, it is not just one, but a combination of many things that we must gradually learn to identify. **Plot** - There is a difference between plot and story. The plot is not what is said, but how it is said, the sequence of events, the sequence of action, which is very important. We will discuss all these elements, especially when discussing fiction and short fiction. The next is **narration**. Narration is very important for us because, a work of art will have multiple narrative techniques. Is it the first-person narration with the author speaking employs the omniscient narrative strategy? If the protagonist starts speaking, then it is the first-person narration. Second-person narration, third-person narration follow as usual. So, we must learn to identify the narrative voice, which helps us understand the context a little better, and also it helps to understand different perspectives.



Language plays a very important role. We have already discussed this in one of the earlier classes. Literature is about form and content. What you say is as important as how you say it, or how you say is as important as what you say. So, here we must pay attention to the choice of words. Why does a writer use a particular word? See, it is a myth. Think of synonyms, like you can use one word in the place of other. You have a dictionary of synonyms at your disposal. However, philosophically speaking, no two words are alike; though it may give an impression that it is alike, no two words are alike. There is a difference, at least in terms of a shade, it is different. So, a language does not have any redundant words. Bakhtin says that no language has a redundant word. We call it a synonym for our sake, but otherwise, the shades of meanings are different. So, we must pay particular attention to the shades of meaning when we say the choice of words here.

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LITERATURE: A SLOW READING ACTIVITY

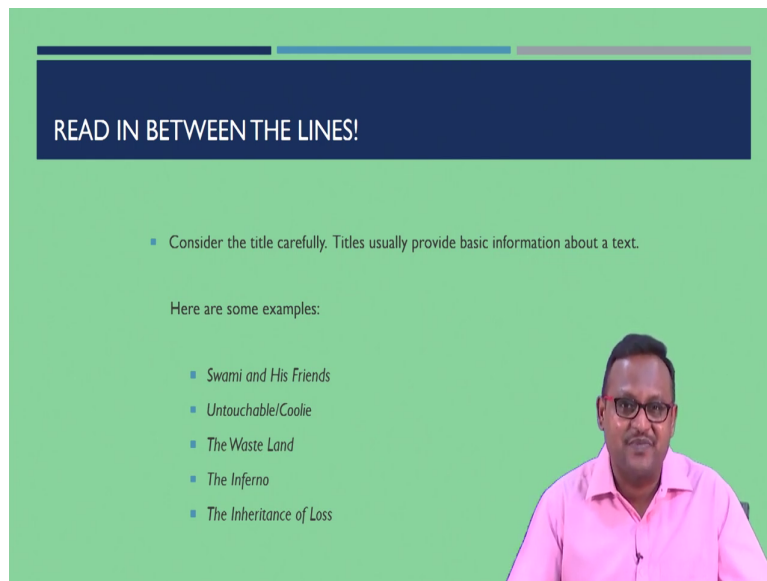
- Often it takes more than one encounter with literature to make us appreciate its value, especially when we are reading.
- Reading is challenging because it requires an active mind.



Having been made familiar with certain common elements in elements of literature, now we are going to focus on how literature is a slow reading activity. Nietzsche, a well-known philosopher, popularized this phrase; He often called literature a “slow reading activity”. But this slow reading activity is on the decline, especially these days when fast is the new mantra of our age. So, talking of slowing that becomes slightly anachronistic, slightly out of time, is not anachronistic. Nevertheless, reading is a slow activity. Why is it a slow activity? Because it involves an interaction with yourself. Reading is an interaction with oneself. That requires a lot of pauses, a lot of introspection, a lot of critical analysis. Therefore, it is a slow activity. And because it is a slow activity, most of the time, we may not be able to understand a work of art in a single reading. We might require multiple readings. One of the classic definitions of a ‘classic’ is that it is a work of art that never exhausts meaning; the more you read, the more layers of meanings you discover. Therefore, if you do not understand a work of art in the first go, especially if it happens with poetry, don’t lose heart because the poem’s soul resides not in the explicit meaning. More of it later when we discuss poetry. The greater number of readings you do, the more layers of meanings you discover you unearth. When you read a great work of art it takes you out of your comfort zone and unsettles you, and that is the reason why you need to have an open mind, an active mind because it keeps challenging us. Reading keeps challenging us. What does it challenge? It challenges the prevalent notions. It challenges our preconceived biases. It challenges reading challenges our well-established notions. That is why we need to take it slowly because it keeps challenging

us. What do we do when a literary work challenges us? We pause and adjust what we have understood until that point in time with what we are about to understand. Now, a kind of a recalibration takes place, and then a new understanding comes, a new insight arrives, that is how we grow. Because reading entails growth, it is often challenging, more often than not unsettling and challenging.

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READ IN BETWEEN THE LINES!

- Consider the title carefully. Titles usually provide basic information about a text.

Here are some examples:

- *Swami and His Friends*
- *Untouchable/Coolie*
- *The Waste Land*
- *The Inferno*
- *The Inheritance of Loss*

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What do we mean by reading in between the lines? There are two types of meanings in literature: the dictionary meaning, the other is the symbolic meaning. They are also known as denotative meaning and connotative meaning. The denotative value is its dictionary meaning, and the connotative value is contextual. Please remember that a text always makes sense in the context in which it is written. Even if you parse the word context, con and text, ‘con’ means deceptive - a text is often deceptive. You must put the word, in the world in which it is written, a word in the world, text in the context, that is what is called reading in between the lines. We must go behind the layers of meanings, beneath the surface meaning, so that we can explore a little more. For instance, most of the time, when you look at the titles of the novels, sometimes they are abstract. For instance, *Swami and His Friends*; when you read the title ‘Swami and His Friends’, it may indicate that the protagonist is called swami, while the other characters are his friends. So, you need to identify these things because they provide a broader context. Think of *The Waste Land* again by T S Eliot. Once we broadly understand the context, it becomes easier to go a little deeper and understand the deeper meanings.

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Let's quickly go through how to 'read actively'. Mark unfamiliar words, quickly underline what you do not know so that you can come back and understand it, and keep track of your feelings and your responses to that to the text. Jot it down, note it down in a notebook, and when you are reading, ask essential questions, they are very, very important. Reading is not to be done in a hurry, but reading is something we do in leisure. It is a leisurely activity. Therefore, keep asking important questions.

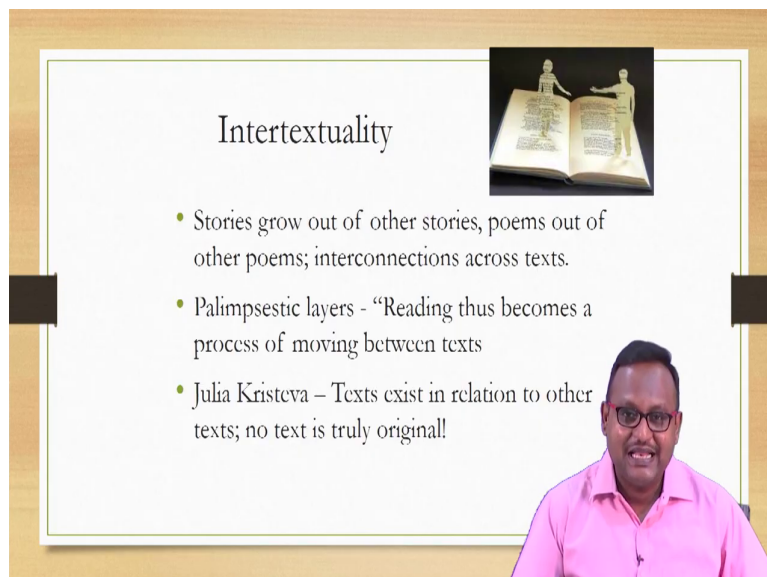
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So, here is a continuation of how to 'Read Actively' - Identify the themes, underline important ideas or quotations, try to understand and interconnect things, work out what kind of relationships exist within the text. If you are keen on taking your understanding of literature a little deeper, then maybe when you should do all these things, and you will be exposed to different dimensions of literature.

In this class, we have learned some important elements of literature. So, our understanding of these concepts or understanding of these elements will help us enhance our experience of literature. We also learnt how to read systematically, and exploit the process of reading and optimize its benefits.

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The slide is titled "Intertextuality" and features a list of three bullet points. In the top right corner, there is a small image of an open book with two golden figures standing on its pages. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset of a man in a pink shirt and glasses.

Intertextuality


- Stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems; interconnections across texts.
- Palimpsestic layers - "Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts"
- Julia Kristeva – Texts exist in relation to other texts; no text is truly original!

Let us discuss Intertextuality. I said we would minimize the use of jargon, but this is one exceptional jargon that we need to learn. Intertextuality is a literary concept that was popularized in the 60s by a noted theorist called Julia Kristeva. As the term suggests, there is a kind of interlink between texts, the kind of interconnections that exist across literary works. When a geologist explores soil, they will explore different layers of soil - similarly, a text will have different layers; they are called palimpsestic layers. An active reader or a sensible reader would be aware of the presence of multiple texts within a text. This is called intertextuality. In that sense, stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems, novels out of other works etc. A literary work is always borrowed in its true sense because it is influenced by some work or the other. But some literary pieces are rooted in such a manner that when you

read them you automatically start listening to some echoes. If you are a sensible reader, you start listening to the echoes of some other texts in them.

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AND FINALLY...



- Stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems; interconnections across texts
 - Disney's *The Lion King* ~ Shakespeare's *Hamlet*
 - James Joyce's *Ulysses* ~ Homer's *Odyssey*
 - Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* ~ Shakespeare's *Othello*
- Palimpsestic layers ~ "Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts"
- Inversion of the gaze
- Know then thyself: teaches us many things about ourself and the world around us.

For instance, you will have watched Disney's *The Lion King*, adapted from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. If you have read *Hamlet*, you can start locating traces of *Hamlet* in this children's movie, but that should not prevent us from watching. Similarly, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a major Irish writer, 20th-century modernist writer; his book is indebted to the Greek classic *Odyssey* by Homer. Readers who are exposed to both literary works would be able to find traces of *Odyssey* in *Ulysses*. Similarly, if you have watched the movie *Omkara* by Vishal Bharadwaj, it is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, but a creative adaptation. So, you can start listening to the echoes of a text in another text. This is called intertextuality. When you have learned to spot these things, your journey as a reader is complete as you can make some wonderful interconnections across the texts. In that sense, reading becomes a process of moving across texts, moving between texts. Some kind of an interstitial activity, or interdimensional activity, moving between spaces, reading appears like that, or you perceive reading to be kind of an enterprise between moving between spaces.

Our eyes are located in such a way that they are made to look what is outside them. But literature has the capacity to invert the gaze, as a result of which you start looking within. When I say start looking within, please connect it with the story of the Buddha and the layers

of consciousnesses. It starts to turn the gaze within. It inverts the gaze, and as a result of it, when you read, you start introspecting.

So, that is an extraordinarily rewarding enterprise. And, philosophically or spiritually speaking, it is said that true salvation lies when yourself. In fact, after having known himself Shankaracharya went on to declare "*aham brahmasmi*", which means - "I myself I am the Brahman ultimate".

When we realise who we are and what we can do, that is the ultimate reward literature offers. By inverting our gaze, it helps us look for answers within and it helps us come to terms with who we are, what we are. I am sure these introductory things will have helped in enhancing your experience with literature, and they must have given you cues as to how to read and thereby enhance your appreciation for literature.

Thank you. Let us discuss other concepts in the next class.