

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Week - 02
Lecture - 06
Ways of Reading .1

Hello, nice to see all of you again. We are in the second week of Elements of Literature and Creative Communication. During the first week, we discussed various insights concerning literature and in this week we are going to discuss different forms and genres of literature and how the trifecta of language, society, and culture interact with literature.


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“The decline of literature indicates the decline of a nation.” – Goethe

Salman Rushdie: "Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart."

Literature offers not just a window into the culture of diverse regions, but also the society, the politics; it's the only place where we can keep track of ideas.

- Literature is only a mirror; it's a cultural map of a society; linguistic landscape of a nation
- Literature: Where Mirrors are Windows
- Literature and Society: 3 Relationships -- Responsive, Reflexive and Subversive



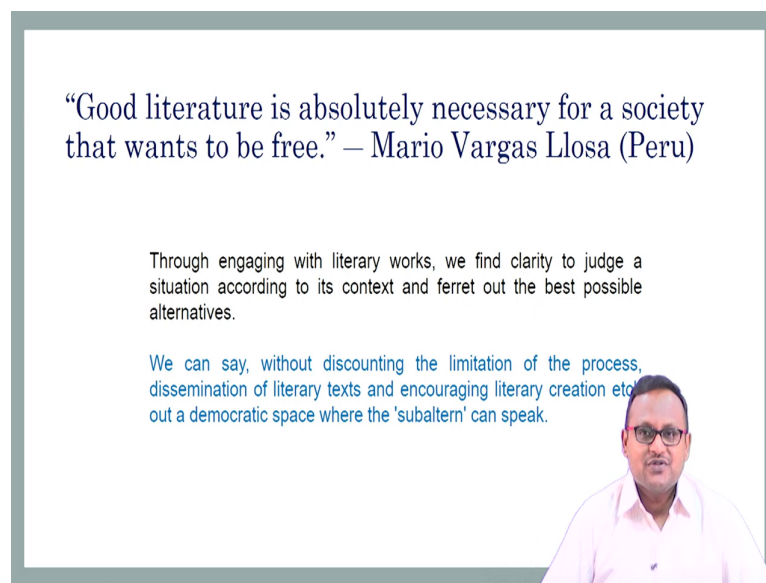
I have some interesting quotes here that discuss the intersections between literature and society. The first one is by Goethe, a poet laureate, an extraordinary poet who proposed the concept of world literature for the first time. Comparative literature and world literature as disciplines have got to gain much from the works of Goethe, and therefore, we begin this class with Goethe's well-known quote. He says - "decline of literature indicates the decline of a nation". He is equating literature and nation and they are directly proportional to each other. So, inversely speaking, the rise of literature in society is indicative of the rise of societal structures, societal standards as a whole. Conversely speaking, if there is a decline in societal standards and societal values - automatically there would be a decline in literary values too.

So, they are related. There is a wonderful correlation between literature and society here. We have Salman Rushdie. He says that “literature is a place I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit where I hope to find not absolute truth, but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart. Literature becomes a place of solace. Literature becomes a place where you can take your battles and fight out things there”. So, literature becomes a place of refuge for Salman Rushdie here. I have an interesting concept discussed in detail by A K Ramanujan, another well-known linguist, writer, poet. In his influential essay ‘mirrors or windows’ he discusses literature’s relationship with society in very many insightful ways. It is true when we say that literature holds up a kind of a mirror to society because it reflects the follies, the foibles, the virtues, the wisest of society, but it is not just a mirror because if we need to find only the reflection of society in literature, we won’t need literature as such. So, this is where literature goes a step ahead and also becomes a window. So, here the concept of mirrors and windows is more like a metaphor. So, the mirror is a place where you find reflection, where you get to see how you are. So, that helps you to shape up your appearance to a certain extent, but a window metaphorically speaking, is a place through which you look at the world around you - like a gateway to the world around you. So, literature on the one hand acts as a mirror reflecting society as it is and also allows the society to interact with the world around. So, here is an extraordinary opportunity that literature is creating. What does it do? It reflects society and also it provides members of society an opportunity to look out through which they get to have a kind of an explosion to the world around them. So, in the same essay, Ramanujan argues that literature can have a kind of a three-way response, a three-way relationship with society. Of course, literature has many ways of connecting with society. We have discussed that in the first class, but here in this particular essay, he brings out 3 relationships that literature and society share with each other. One is the Responsive Relationship. What do you mean by a Responsive Relationship? Well, literature looks at society and responds and it is also true the other way round. Society looks at literature that is produced within its ambit and as a response to that. So, both of them are open to influences from each other. So, it is a relationship of response. The second type of relationship is Reflexive in nature. So, what does Reflexive Relationship mean here? Well, when literature looks at society it goes into a kind of an introspective mode and when society also looks at itself through the literature then it also tries to introspect. So, this is probably a mirror stage, where if some corrections are required to your appearance, you can do that right. Similarly, literature and society can correct each other. The third is a Subversive Stage or a Subversive Relationship. Here is what happens, literature looks at society and finds

society inadequate in many ways. Therefore, it goes into a kind of ballistic mode and tries and acts as a subversive force. It subverts and disrupts so that it can create society afresh, in the way humanity wants it, in the ideal way humanity wants it.

So, these are roughly speaking some kind of relationships that we can forge between literature and society. Please remember these are almost cursory areas and it's not that we exhaust a topic when we discuss them. We initiate you to think about the larger concepts and consequences through these lectures.

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Mario Vargas Llosa is a Major Peruvian writer, also Nobel laureate, a well-known politician, writer, journalist, poet, playwright. He dons many roles. He says "Good literature is absolutely necessary for a society that wants to be free." Look how literature acts as a kind of a corrective agent here. Literature is required for a society to be free becomes a kind of an active agent that ensures freedom in very many respects because literature at its core is a space, or we can call literature an agent, that brings in a democratic space in the ethos, in the sensibilities as well. Society generally should be democratic, literature also brings in a kind of a democratic ethos and democratic sensibilities among us. Therefore, Llosa says that literature is essential to bring in the concept of freedom.

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Let's look at the two excerpts here...

"I'll tell you," said she, in the same hurried passionate whisper, "what real love it. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter - as I did!"

— Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1860)

"This desire to govern a woman—it lies very deep, and men and women must fight it together.... But I do love you surely in a better way than he does." He thought. "Yes—really in a better way. I want you to have your own thoughts even when I hold you in my arms."

— E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (1908)



I have two excerpts here. Please read these excerpts and after reading these excerpts we can take up a couple of questions. These questions are more reflective questions about our perspective towards the subjects discussed here. The first is by Charles Dickens and was written in the 19th century.

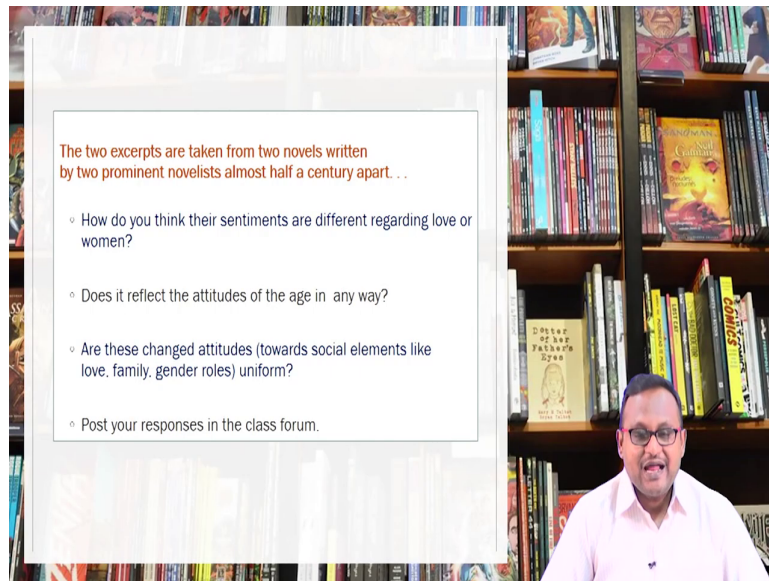
"I'll tell you," said she, in the same hurried passionate whisper, "what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter—as I did!"

The second is by E. M Forster in his novel *Room With A View*, beginning of the 20th century.

"This desire to govern a woman - it lies very deep and men and women must fight it together, but I do love you surely in a better way than he does." He thought. "Yes - really in a better way. I want you to have your own thoughts even when I hold you in my arms."

Obviously, the subject in both these short passages is the relationship between man and woman. They were written in two different time periods. One was in the 19th century, you can call it the mid-19th century. The other, the early part of the 20th century.

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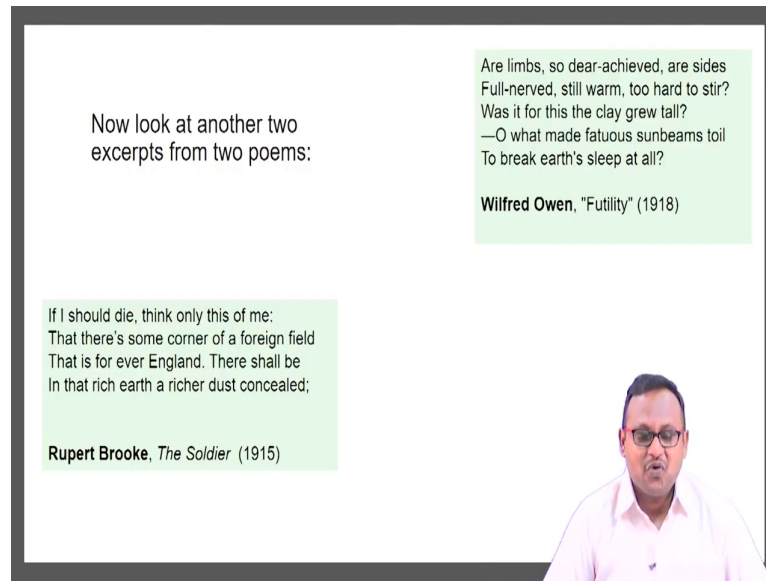


The two excerpts are taken from two novels written by two prominent novelists almost half a century apart. . .

- ◊ How do you think their sentiments are different regarding love or women?
- ◊ Does it reflect the attitudes of the age in any way?
- ◊ Are these changed attitudes (towards social elements like love, family, gender roles) uniform?
- ◊ Post your responses in the class forum.

Now, I have a couple of questions to raise. Do you think, as far as their sentiments regarding their subjects or their treatment of love, is there any change, is there any change in the sentiment? Did you notice any change in the sentiment? Do you think you can correlate with the ethos of the time in which these works were produced? And generally speaking, or in a manner of generalization, do you think they reflect the spirit of the age? Are these changed attitudes are they uniform across society? Both of them have been taken from the same society and culture. So, if you have noticed changes do they reflect the change, in the period in which they were written, or do you think these things are uniform? So, we have already discussed this in the last class. We have created a forum for you. You can answer any of these questions. These are self-reflexive questions. So, therefore, you can post your comments there. Please remember not to be in a hurry to post anything. Pause for a while. These questions do not direct you to answer in a particular way. No, they are just general questions. It is not that you need to agree with them or you need to disagree with them. You can partially agree, partially disagree. That is your call, but they are not indicative of the direction you need to take as far as answering them.

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Now look at another two excerpts from two poems:

Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Wilfred Owen, "Futility" (1918)

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

Rupert Brooke, *The Soldier* (1915)

I have another excerpt this time from poetry and again here unlike the first set of excerpts, these are taken from the early part of the 20th century. Again, the subject of both these excerpts poems, its war, their attitude towards war. The first is by Rupert Brooke from a poem called 'The Soldier' written in 1915.

"If I should die, think only this of me:
That there is some corner of a foreign field
that is for ever England. There shall be
in that rich earth a richer dust concealed".

How war is being eulogized here? How in the course of war if you die, you think you would be dying in a part of the soil though you are far away from the land, that you belong to, You would still want to consider that land, where you are about to die, as your land. The second is by Wilfred Owen, 1918. Hardly a couple of years of difference.

"Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides
full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall? -
O what made fatuous sunbeams toil

to break earth's sleep at all?"

So, as the title of the poem reflects, the poet is disillusioned with the war. In fact, he realizes that all the nobility that is attributed to war has become futile. So, he has a feeling that has everything been wasted. So, here as I said both of them are written during the same time, but by two different individuals. So, look at how they reflect the ethos of society. So, it's not that you need to have a considerable gap between two pieces of work to reflect. In fact, works written during the same period can also present different perspectives related to society. So, more or less they reflect diversity in perspectives. We have also discussed that in the first week. So, that is how we look at literature and society. These are some broad contours. In fact, what we have done so far is to discuss the broad contours of the relationship between literature and society.

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Moving on we are going to discuss different forms and genres of literature. We need to have a closer understanding of the structure of literature as such.

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Forms and Genres

- Poetic Sensibility
- Prose Sensibility
- Form – structural: novel, play
- Genre – substance/content: mystery, horror, sci-fi, romance...
- Architecture and Interior Design
- Verse (to turn/bend); Prose (direct/straight-forward)

So, broadly speaking we can call them forms and genres. Literature can be broadly classified into three distinct forms, poetry, prose and drama. Most of the times people confuse forms with genres. Please notice the pronunciation of the word Genre, it has a French root. Alright, generally speaking, **Form** is related to the structure of the literary piece. In other words, it is structural in its principle, form is related to the structure of a work of art. At the outset, of course, there are complications to that particular simplistic understanding. We are going to discuss these things at a little later stage. There are nuances to the argument we are presenting here. We would be discussing this nuance in particular, at a later stage so that you can distinguish between prose and poetry. **Genre** is related to the content of that work of art. It is related to the content of the work of art. Say for instance you are talking about the element of mystery. You want to write about the element of mystery. You want to write about crime thrillers. You want to write about romance. You want to write about science fiction. So, this is more about the content because when you read a particular work of art, you would know whether it is historical, whether it is crime thriller whether it is a mystery, horror. So, this is about content. So, the content-based division of literature is called Genre, generally speaking, and structure-based division can be called Form. So, in order to understand this concept better, we can use the metaphors of architecture and interior design. Form is more about architecture; the outer structure and Genre is more about interior design. Many people think that prose and poetry, are opposites. No, they are definitely not opposites. They are different manifestations of language. Again, we are going to discuss that in subsequent slides, but for

time being let us know that verse and prose both have Latinate roots and verse means to turn around or to bend. Prose means it is to be straightforward, to go straight forward or direct. They have a Latinate root and accordingly, in prose the meaning is generally simple. It's straightforward, what do you see? Again, there is a nuanced argument to this. We would be discussing that a little later that when you look at a piece of verse then you need a couple of readings to understand that, but leaving aside these classifications, very broadly speaking we can say that there are these types because literature is all about sensibilities right.

So, we can say that there is prose sensibility and there is poetic sensibility. So, forget form, forget structure here, when you read something if the experience that you derive out of it is more intense and more imaginative, it is a poetic sensibility. If it is more philosophical and theoretical, you can call it prosaic and dense, so you can call it prose sensibility.

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Growing Old: Prose and Poetry

Gordon Rattray Taylor:
The Biological Time Bomb

- Between the ages of 30 and 90, the weight of our muscles falls by 30 percent and the power we can exert likewise.... The number of nerve fibres in a nerve trunk falls by a quarter. The weight of our brains falls from an average of 3.03 pounds to 2.27 pounds as cells die and are not replaced....

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

- Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort.
First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no
promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.
Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
Of laughter at what ceases to avenge
And last, the rending pain
Of all that you have done

So, going ahead, how do you distinguish prose and poetry? Now, here are again two interesting pieces. Please go through this and you will be able to automatically differentiate between a prose piece and verse. So this is by a writer called Gordon Taylor, written sometime in the late 1960s. It is an excerpt from the book, *The Biological Time Bomb*. Please read this.

“Between the ages of 30 and 90, the weight of our muscles falls by 30 percent and the power we can exert likewise. The number of nerve fibers in a nerve trunk falls by a quarter. The

weight of our brains falls from an average of 3 point 2 3 pounds to 2 point 2 7 pounds as cells die and are not replaced...”

This passage is discussing the concept of growing old. Look at the details. Look at the diction, and now I have another piece this is by T. S Eliot, a well known Poet, Modernist and Nobel Laureate.

“Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age to set a crown upon your lifetime’s effort. First, the cold friction of expiring sense without enchantment, offering no promise but bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit as body and soul begin to fall asunder. Second, the conscious impotence of rage at human folly, and the laceration of laughter at what ceases to amuse and last, the rending pain of reenactment of all that you have done and be in.”

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Notice here...

- The passages are oddly parallel, hence comparable, even in a formal sense. Both consist of the several items of a catalog under the general title of growing old.
- The significant differences are of tone, diction, pace, precision, and the object of attention
- Prose passage: neutral, material, measurable properties of the process of growing;
- Poem: what the process will signify to someone going through it; musicality;
- “Anyone with a watch can tell you what time it is, but who can tell you what is time?” (Paul Valery)

Both of them discuss the concept of growing up. In that sense you can find parallels between both these excerpts here though they are odd, they are still parallel and therefore, you can compare them. Under a broad rubric of growing old, they list out or catalogue different things, but what you need to notice here is the kind of a significant difference in the tone, diction, pace, precision. In fact, precision is there in both these pieces of text, but that precision, the nature of that precision varies and so is the object of attention. If you read the prose passage you will see how neutral it is. There is no raging rage there. There is no intense passion there. It is neutral, objective to a certain extent, measured in its response to the concept of growing old and its tone is almost a material like tone. Whereas the excerpt from

that poetic piece, also signifies the process of growing old, notice the element of musicality there. Notice the element of musicality there. So, here is an interesting quote by the French writer Paul Valery.

“Anyone with a watch can tell you what time it is, but who can tell you what is time?”

So, you can call this distinction somewhat reflective of the distinction between prose and poetry right. The objective of the prose is to give you what time it is, to give you the time, but poetry is more about understanding the nature of time itself. It is more self-reflexive.

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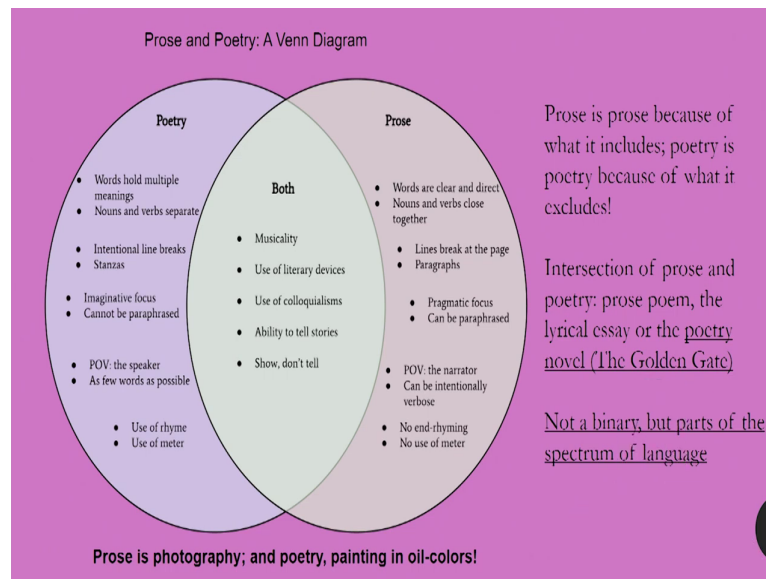
Prose	Poetry
Written in sentences and paragraphs	Written in lines and stanzas
Normal language patterns	Artistic language to express thoughts and emotions
No limit on words	Word limits
Doesn't use a rhyme scheme or rhythm	Can include rhyme and rhythm
Easy to understand	Read in-between the lines!
May or may not be used creatively	Used creatively and artistically

Prose & Poetry

Spectrum of Communication

Going ahead I have some more distinctions between prose and poetry. So, generally speaking, right at the outset, you can distinguish prose from poetry because the prose is written in complete sentences and paragraphs, whereas, poetry has different ways of occupying the space, line fragments, sentence fragments, cryptic words and as far as prose is concerned it makes use of normal language pattern, more or less it mimics the everyday conversation. Whereas, in poetry, the use of language is more artistic in nature. Here the purpose is more to express your emotions than to present information. In prose generally, you can be very verbose there whereas, poetry does not give you that opportunity. The economy of expression is very very important. Prose is easy to understand and poetry requires a couple of readings that is why in the context of poetry we said that you will have to read in between the lines.

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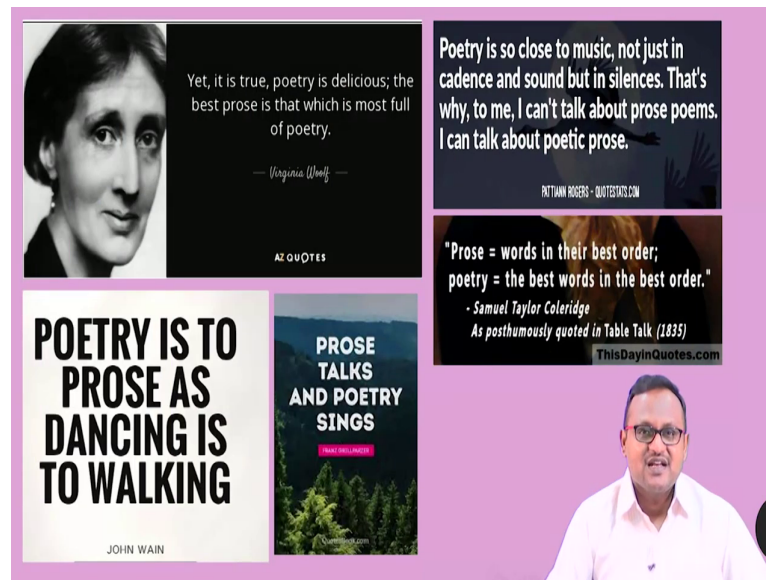
Here is a Venn diagram that brings out the difference between prose and poetry. We have already discussed the differences between prose and poetry, but what I am interested to show you here through this diagram is the space of intersection. So, good prose also can have a musicality to it, an element that elevates that work to the status of a musical piece. Good prose also makes use of different literary devices. It makes use of a language in a very creative way. Both can tell stories. In fact, it's a misnomer to say that you make use of prose to tell stories and you make use of poetry for not saying stories, no that is not true. In fact, if you look at the origins of poetry, they were basically meant to narrate stories.

So, it is a misnomer if somebody says that you cannot narrate a story through a poem. It is not a precise understanding and both of them can have an experiential component. I was discussing the concept of intersections here. So, we also have something called prose poetry. I was discussing exceptions to these generalizations. Intersections of prose and poetry. You have a prose poem, it is called prose poetry or a lyrical essay, even an entire novel is written in poetry.

So, there are a lot of exceptions to this therefore, what I would like to propose, has already been proposed, but what I would like to bring to your attention is that rather than looking at prose and poetry as binaries, rather than looking at them differently as prose and verse, s binaries, it's better if we look at them as a part of a spectrum called language and the different manifestations of language.

So, if you look at it as a part of the spectrum called language then it becomes easy for us to understand exceptions and intersections between prose and poetry. Nevertheless, there are some writers who have taken a strong liking to prose and a strong liking towards poetry.

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So, let us discuss some of them! We have Virginia Woolf, a very influential 20th-century modernist writer. She says “Its true poetry is delicious; the best prose is what which is most full of poetry.”

So you will find her leaning more towards poetry than prose. So, here is another beautiful comparison.

“Poetry is to prose what dancing is to walking.”

Both relate to movement like walking and dancing they are related to movement, but one is more an aesthetic movement, an elegant movement the other is more a day-to-day movement. So, the difference between poetry and prose is something like that.

Almost extending the analogy, we have another one that says -

“Prose talks and poetry sings.”

Here they are compared to talking and singing. Prose is like talking, and poetry is like singing. I just want you to reflect on all these things and see if you agree with them or

disagree with them. I am just taking you through some of these diverse opinions concerning prose and poetry here. And we have Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a well-known romantic poet. So, he says -

“Prose is words in their best order; poetry is best words in best order.”

Think about this clever statement by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

“Poetry is so close to music, not just in cadence and sound but in silences. That is why, to me, I cannot talk about prose poems. I can talk about poetic prose”.

Here is again an opinion which I just came across while I was looking at some of these quotes, I came across a kind of a witty common place quotation. It said, “In marriage if the first chapter of marriage is poetry, the remaining chapters are prose.” “If the first chapter of marriage is poetry, the remaining chapters are prose”. What do you mean by this? Think about it, and we will continue this discussion in the next class.

Thank you.