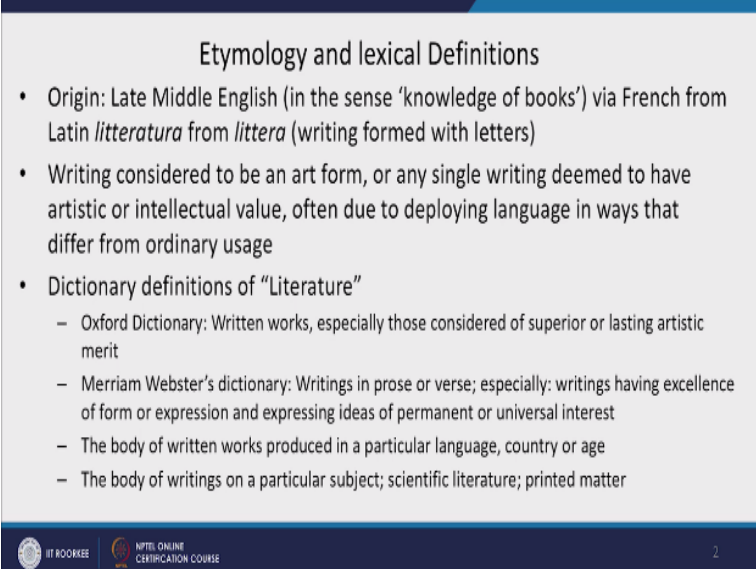


Literature, Culture and Media
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Lecture - 02
Defining Literature

Dear Participants, welcome to the second module of our introductory week. In this week we would begin by establishing the parameters within which we would define literature, culture and media for further discussions and elaborations. Today, in this module, I would take up Literature and try to understand what are the basic definitions; how these definitions have changed over time and what are the ongoing debates in the current scenario.

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Etymology and lexical Definitions

- Origin: Late Middle English (in the sense 'knowledge of books') via French from Latin *litteratura* from *littera* (writing formed with letters)
- Writing considered to be an art form, or any single writing deemed to have artistic or intellectual value, often due to deploying language in ways that differ from ordinary usage
- Dictionary definitions of "Literature"
 - Oxford Dictionary: Written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit
 - Merriam Webster's dictionary: Writings in prose or verse; especially: writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest
 - The body of written works produced in a particular language, country or age
 - The body of writings on a particular subject; scientific literature; printed matter

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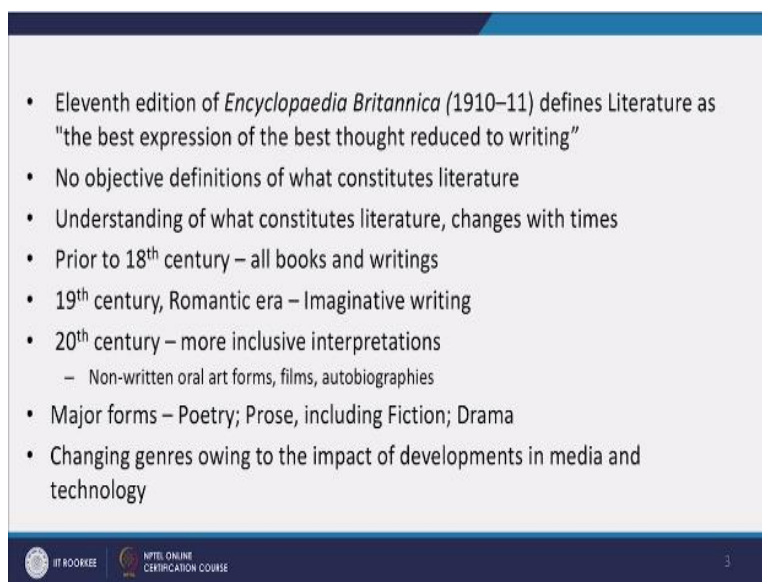
If we look at the Etymology and lexical definitions of the word Literature, we find that it has its origin in Late Middle English via French from Latin *litteratura* from *littera* which meant writing formed with letters. Initially, as the root suggests it was used in the sense of knowledge of books. Generally speaking, literature is considered to be an art form or any single writing which is supposed to have intrinsic, artistic as well as intellectual value which often uses languages in ways which are different from day to day and ordinary usage of language.

Dictionaries have also attempted to define the term in their own ways. Oxford dictionary suggests that it is a collection of written works especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic

merit. Merriam Webster's dictionary suggest that it denotes writing in prose or verse; especially writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent universal and perennial interest.

We can also say that this term can be used for a body of written works which is produced in a particular language in a particular country in a particular age. It can also be a body of writing written on a particular subject may also be linked with the production of scientific literature and in a broad manner printed matter on any subject.

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- Eleventh edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910–11) defines Literature as "the best expression of the best thought reduced to writing"
- No objective definitions of what constitutes literature
- Understanding of what constitutes literature, changes with times
- Prior to 18th century – all books and writings
- 19th century, Romantic era – Imaginative writing
- 20th century – more inclusive interpretations
 - Non-written oral art forms, films, autobiographies
- Major forms – Poetry; Prose, including Fiction; Drama
- Changing genres owing to the impact of developments in media and technology

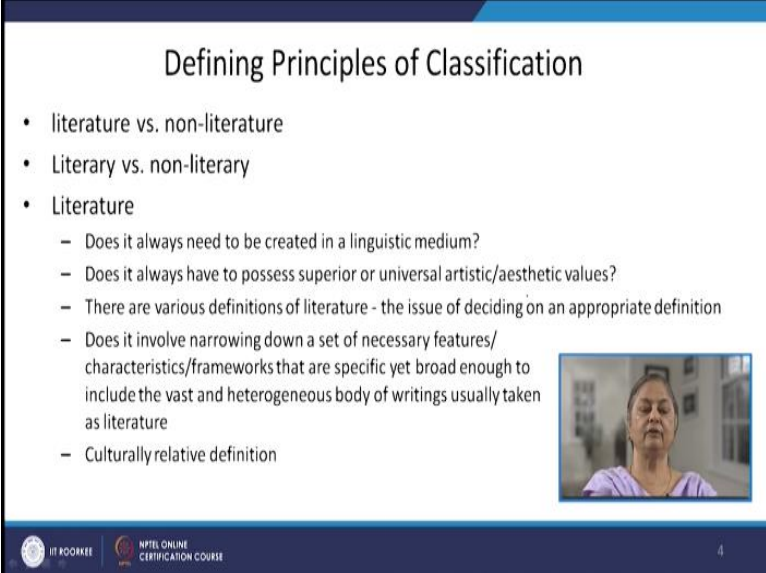
The 11th edition of Encyclopedia Britannica has defined literature as “the best expression of the best thought reduced to writing.” However, this passionate attempt at defining literature does not help us to objectively look at what ultimately constitutes literature. At the same time our understanding of what constitutes literature has changed over time. Prior to the 18th century we find that all types of books and writings were included under this umbrella heading.

During the 19th century particularly during the Romantic era we find that the association of literature with particular types of imaginative writings started. During the 20th century we find that the interpretations have become more and more inclusive, so now we have started to incorporate not only the written text but also the non-written oral art forms. A study of films can

also be taken up and at the same time not creative types of writings, for example autobiographies can also be included in our definition of literature.

Major forms of literature or major genres of literature are poetry, drama and prose which also includes fiction writing, novels, short stories etcetera. However, we find that with the passage of time and with the advancements in media and technology the shape of literary genres is also transforming. So in the course of our lectures we would discuss how the definitions of literature changes with the passage of time and how the different the genres of literature are also taking a new shape continually.

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The slide is titled "Defining Principles of Classification" and contains a list of bullet points. A small video inset in the bottom right corner shows a woman speaking. The slide footer includes the IIT Kharagpur logo and the text "NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE".

- literature vs. non-literature
- Literary vs. non-literary
- Literature
 - Does it always need to be created in a linguistic medium?
 - Does it always have to possess superior or universal artistic/aesthetic values?
 - There are various definitions of literature - the issue of deciding on an appropriate definition
 - Does it involve narrowing down a set of necessary features/ characteristics/frameworks that are specific yet broad enough to include the vast and heterogeneous body of writings usually taken as literature
 - Culturally relative definition

When we try to classify certain principles related with literature. We normally look at the differences between literature and non-literature. We also look at what constitutes the literariness within a particular type of writing. Literature also raises certain questions; for example, does it need to be written in a linguistic medium only? Does it always have to possess superior value or universal artistic or aesthetic understanding of emotions and values?

There may be various definitions literature and the issue of deciding what constitutes a literature and also what is responsible for creating literariness in a piece of writing remain to be highly subjective. Does it involve narrowing down a set of necessary features and characteristics etc

that are specific and yet at the same time broad enough to include the vast and heterogeneous body of writing usually taken as literature.

So we find that most of the definitions are culturally constructed and they keep on changing as newer understandings about what is relevant in our world change.

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• The three main ways of approaching a definition of literature are:

Relativism: There are no value distinctions in literature; anything may be called good literature

Subjectivism: All theories of literary value are subjective, literary evaluation is highly independent and personal

Agnosticism: This approach follows from subjectivism, though it argues that though there may be real distinctions in literary value, our subjective value systems prevent us from knowing anything about the real values.

(https://resource.acu.edu.au/siryan/Academy/Foundation/What_is_Literature.htm)

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Conventionally it was believed that there are three main ways of approaching a definition of literature and they are Relativism, Subjectivism and Agnosticism. Relativism suggest that there are no value distinctions in literature. And anything may be called a piece of good literature depending on our own understanding. It is also in a way related with Subjectivism which suggest that all theory of literary value are subjective.

And therefore literary evaluation is highly personal and independent of any outside context. Agnosticism also stands from the subjectivism though it argues that there may be real distinctions in literary value still it claims that our subjective value systems prevent us from knowing anything about what constitutes a real value in a literary text.

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Procedural Definitions of Literature

- Stephen Davies in *Definitions of Art*, suggests that proceduralism provides the best definition of art and literature, as opposed to functionalists. Though the doctrine itself is not very clear, as any sequence of actions can be taken as a procedure. Proceduralists define a way of reading/interpreting a text and designate this method as literary.
- However, critics and readers can interpret in a variety of ways according to different procedures or aims; as well as in terms of multiple interpretations of a work
- Charles Altieri: it's a contemporary and popular way of defining literature. He rejects serial structuralism of Barthes and Derrida in favor of procedural definitions of literature.





If we look at the contemporary discussions about how to define and understand literature our attention is brought towards what is known as a procedural definition of literature. It was basically suggested by Stephen Davies in *Definitions of Art*, where he has suggested that proceduralism provides the best definition of art as well as literature, as opposed to any functionalist's definition. Though the doctrine itself has certain fussiness and is not very clear as any type of sequences of actions can be taken up as a procedure by a particular critic.

Still, Proceduralists define a way of reading a text or interpreting a text and designate this method as being a literary method. However, it can also be said that critics and readers can interpret a literary text in a variety of ways according to different procedures or aims. So there would be a multiplicity of approaches. Even if they do not take into account the possibility of multiple interpretations of a particular piece of writing.

However, we find that there are many critics who agree that the procedural way of understanding definitions of literature is a pragmatic way. A prominent critic Charles Altieri as suggested that it is a popular way of defining literature and he has rejected serial structuralism of Barthes as well as Derrida in favor of procedural definitions of literature.

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- Procedural definitions do not resolve the problem of classification. Don't explain the sense in which *Tom Jones* or *Pride or Prejudice* is Literature, but an article on asteroids is not. The defined procedures can be applied to both the novel (literary text) and the article (non-literary).
- Refers to a way of treating texts rather than a body of writings. According to Altieri, when we regard a text as literary, "one of the things we learn to do when we read is alter certain authorial intentions, and at times to impose features like coherence on texts which they may not clearly possess" (1978: 69). Secondly, we isolate some general significance in a set of particular texts
- Stecker: "The procedural definition of literature rests on a false presupposition; there is no single procedure of reading and interpreting that characterizes the literary" (1996)

However, Procedural definitions of literature do not resolve the problem of classifications. They also do not explain why a particular piece happens to be literature and another piece of writing does not come in the same category. How is it that we can say that either *Tom Jones* or *Pride or Prejudice* constitute a literary canon but an article on asteroid for example does not. The defined procedures can be applied to both a literary text as well to a non-literary text.

A particular procedure which has been defined and taken up to understand and evaluate a literary text can also be applied to a non-literary text. It also refers to a way of treating text rather than a body of writings. Altieri suggest that when we regard a text as literary, one of the things we learn to do when we read is to alter certain authorial intentions, and at times to impose features for example, like coherence on texts which they may not possess very clearly.

Secondly according to him we isolate certain general significance in a set of particular texts. However, it has often been criticized by various other critics. Stecker can be quoted here who suggest that the procedural definition of literature rests on a false presupposition as there is no single procedure of reading and interpreting that characterizes the literary.

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Linguistic Definitions

- According to linguistic definitions of literature, literature is different from other kinds of writing because it uses language in special and distinctive ways
- Tempting to assume that a work is literary if it uses language to create a work of fiction, since a lot of literature is fictional
- But literature cannot be equated with fiction (interpretation independent of the genre, rather creativity, something which is not necessarily factual) alone
- Being fiction is not a necessary precondition for being literature



Another way of understanding the definition of literature is related with the linguistics approach towards it. According to the linguistic definitions of literature, literature is different from other kinds of writing because it uses language in a special and in a very distinctive way. It is tempting to suggest that a work is literary if it uses language only to create a work of fiction, since a lot of literature is fictional. But literature cannot be equated with fiction.

And here in this context we are not using the word 'Fiction' as it is used to denote a particular genre. This interpretation is independent of this association with a genre rather it indicates creativity and something which is not necessarily factual. So literature cannot be equated with fiction and being fiction is not necessarily a precondition for being literature.

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- Fiction is not necessarily literature as it pervades everyday life
- Do we take advertising, homemade fictions, pulp novels, comic books, jokes as literature because they are fiction
- Some of these can be considered literature (popular literature, 'low' (!) form of literature), but not all
- Yet works like Plutarch's *Lives*, Lucretius's *The Nature of Things*, Mailer's *Armies of the Night*, Capote's *In Cold Blood* are regarded as literature even though they are non-fiction
- Paradigmatic form of literature are fiction. Constitutes the heart of literature
- Yet fiction/non-fiction binary doesn't constitute the principle for defining what is literature and what is not




We can also take up certain other examples. As fiction is not necessarily literature as it pervades our life. We can look at examples of advertisements, homemade fictions, pulp novels, jokes or comic books etcetera because they are also a fragment of fiction. Even though they do not constitute any literary understanding. Some of these can be considered as being a part of the popular literature.


When we use the term popular literature we also have to refer to the binaries of high and low literary forms which would be taken up during the course of our discussions in one of the later modules. But not all these types of fictional writings can be incorporated even in what has been classically considered as a low form of literature or as a popular literature.

At the same time, we find that a strangely works like Plutarch's *Lives*, Mailer's *Armies of the Night* or Capote's *In Cold Blood* are regarded as literature even though they are not fiction. It can be said that paradigmatic forms of literature are fiction and they constitute the core of literature. Yet the binary of fiction and non-fiction does not constitute the principle for defining what is literature and what is not.

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- Another idea is that, to be considered literature, the author must write in a special way for his writing to be considered literature
 - What is this special way?
 - Literary works use a highly connotative language—replete with metaphors, irony, ambiguity, figures of speech (David Daiches)
 - These characteristics are usually associated with literature; therefore they can specify how one should write to produce literature
- According to this notion, the Russian formalists define literature by defining what constitutes 'literary' language
 - Roman Jakobson: literature is a kind of writing which represents an 'organized violence committed on ordinary speech'
 - Deviates from ordinary speech; transforms and intensifies everyday speech




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Other attempts to define literature are related with the way in which a writer can use language. And it may be said that the author must write in a special way for his writing to be considered literature. But what exactly is the special way? We can say that literature uses a highly connotative language. And these discussions pioneered by David Daiches are still fresh in our mind.

So we can say that the language may be replete with metaphors, irony, ambiguity, figures of a speech and other ways of creating a connotative meaning as contrasted with the denotative meaning of non-literary prose. These characteristics are normally associated with the literature and therefore they can specify how one should write to produce what can be understood as literature. According to this notion, the Russian formalists define literature by defining what constitutes 'literary' language.

The major critic who we can refer here is Roman Jakobson, who has said that literature is a kind of writing which represents an organized violence committed on ordinary speech. According to him, the literary language deviates from ordinary speech, transforms as well as intensifies the everyday speech.

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- Literature refers to a specific use or organization of language; or what can be called 'literariness'
- Refers to a collection of devices like rhythm, sound patterns, syntax, meter, imagery, narrative techniques and the set of literary elements (figures of speech)
- These devices were seen as interconnected elements of functions within a total system
- What is common to all these devices is their 'defamiliarizing' or 'estranging' property
- Linguists designate 'literariness' as the discrepancy between the signifiers and the signifieds
- Thus literary language is different from other discourses, it 'estranges', 'deforms' and 'intensifies' ordinary speech



It can be said that if literature refers to a specific use of language or refs on a specific organization of language it might produce a certain literariness in it. It may refer to a collection of devices like rhythm, sound patterns, syntax, meter other types of narrative techniques and sets of literary elements. These devices can also be seen as interconnected elements of functions within a total system.

What is common in all these devices is there estranging property, the property of defamiliarizing the familiar. Linguists designate literariness as the discrepancy between the signifiers and the signifieds. Thus literary language according to them is different from other discourses as it estranges, deforms and intensifies the ordinary speech.

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- Formalists believe that ordinary language produces 'automatic' responses
- "Literature, by forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language, refreshes these habitual responses and, renders objects more 'perceptible' (Terry Eagleton)
- Formalists believe that literature has its own laws, rules, structures and devices which need to be studied in themselves
- 'Form' over 'content'
- Problems in defining 'literariness'
- Norms and deviations in language shift over time, as they are rooted in social and historical specificity
- An estranging piece of language does not remain estranging always and everywhere; it is estranging against a set normative linguistic pattern






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Formalists also believe that ordinary language produces automatic responses and we can quote Terry Eagleton here who suggest that literature, by forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language, refreshes these habitual responses and, renders objects more perceptible. Formalists believe that literature has its own laws, its own rules, structures and devices which have to be studied in themselves independently and for them Forms more important than the content.

So Form takes precedence over the content as far as the Formalists are concerned. Still there are certain problems in defining the literariness of a piece of writing. Norms of language change over a passage of time. As languages also rooted in social and historical specificity what is a norm today can turn to be a deviation tomorrow. An estranging piece of language does not remain estranging always and everywhere and it can be considered as estranging against a set normative linguistic pattern.

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- Eg. Shakespeare's prose is estranging today -- against the norms of contemporary language; yet it was the norm in the period that it was written
- Thus, if the norms change, then the writing may not be seen as literary anymore
- The Formalists were aware of this conundrum and that is why they were not defining 'literature'; they were trying to define 'literariness' per se which is found in 'literary' texts, but simultaneously also in writings which are not considered 'literature'
- Defining literature in terms of how it is written is also problematic because literary styles often engender counter styles. Some literary works use highly descriptive/metaphorical verse/prose; some may reject them





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An interesting example maybe quoted of Shakespeare's prose which is estranging today. Even though at the time when he was writing it was perhaps the norm. Thus, we can say that if the norm of language changes then the writing may not be seen as literary any more in a different time zone. The Formalists are aware of this difficulty this conundrum and that is why they never attempted to define literature rather they try to define what constitutes literariness per se which can be found in a literary text.

But simultaneously also in writings which are not considered literature. So defining literature in terms of how it is written it also problematic because literary style of an engender counter styles. Some literary works may use highly metaphorical style, highly symbolic prose and at the same time others may us a non-symbolic works or a Mundane type of a prose and can still be considered as a part of literature.

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Other Problems

- The same is true for all kinds of 'literary' devices/styles
- Literature cannot be defined in terms of literary styles featuring complimentary properties as it would mean that everything is literature in one way or the other
- At the same time, literary devices/styles abound in ordinary speech; it may be associated with a piece of literary writing, but it is hardly unique to literary language
- This 'approach attempts to define literature in terms of its perceptible properties', i.e., in terms of characteristic surface features – however Terry Eagleton does not find it 'very promising'



At the same time there are certain other difficulties also. Literature cannot be defined in terms of literary styles featuring complimentary properties as it would mean that everything is literature in one way or the other. At the same time, we also see the reflections or what we understand to be literary devices or the styles in our day-to-day speech patterns. These devices maybe associated with a piece of literary writing but at the same time they are not unique to literary writing.

So this approach which attempts to define literature in terms of its perceptible properties, in terms of characteristic surface features is not very promising as Terry Eagleton has also claimed.

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Literature as an Institution

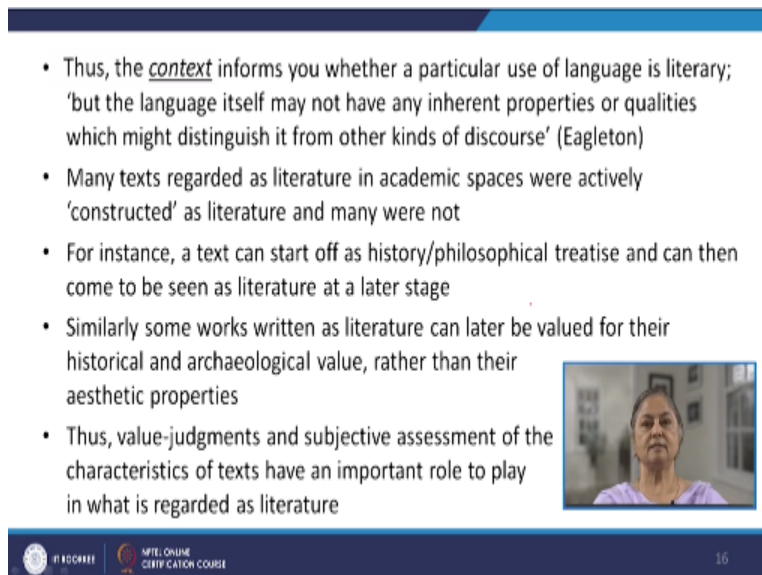
- Another recent approach to literature: Literature as an informal institution or practice
- The importance of context surrounding the utterance, production and dissemination of language in characterizing whether the language is 'literary' or 'non-literary'
- Language can inherently possess 'literary' characteristics—the presence of literary devices in ordinary speech
- Thus, we characterize something as literary if it is part of a text which calls itself 'novel' or 'poetry' and is institutionalized as such; ie, it is widely recognized and read as a text/ specimen of a literary genre, within the canon of literary works—part of university syllabus etc



Another recent approach towards definitions of literature is to consider it as an informal institution or practice. It looks at significance of context which surrounds utterances, production and dissemination of language in characterizing whether the language is literary or non-literary. It suggests that language can inherently possess literary characteristics that is the presence of literary devices in ordinary speech.

Thus, we characterize something as literary if it is part of a text, which calls itself novel or poetry for example if we look at a text which is widely recognized as a piece of literature or it is a part of literary canon, for example it is a part of the university syllabus then we would understand it as being a part of literature as it is associated with a particular institution.

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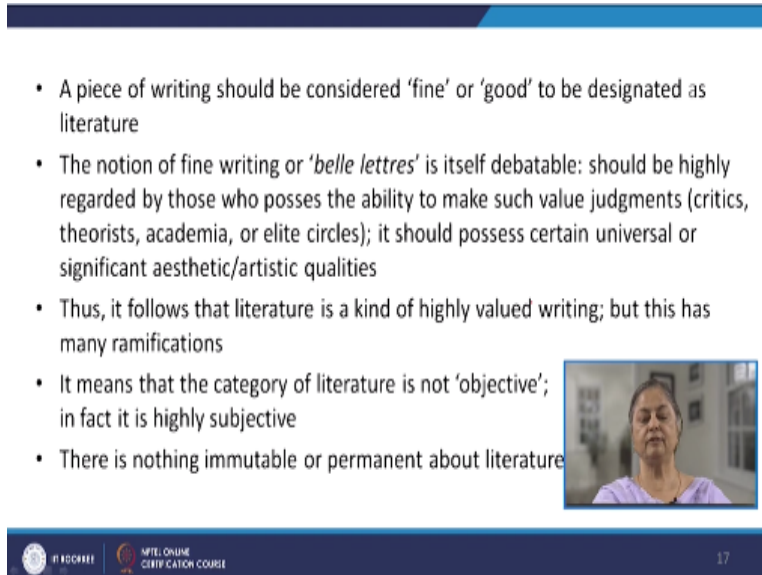
- Thus, the context informs you whether a particular use of language is literary; 'but the language itself may not have any inherent properties or qualities which might distinguish it from other kinds of discourse' (Eagleton)
- Many texts regarded as literature in academic spaces were actively 'constructed' as literature and many were not
- For instance, a text can start off as history/philosophical treatise and can then come to be seen as literature at a later stage
- Similarly some works written as literature can later be valued for their historical and archaeological value, rather than their aesthetic properties
- Thus, value-judgments and subjective assessment of the characteristics of texts have an important role to play in what is regarded as literature

Thus, the context informs us whether a particular use of language is literary or not. But the language itself may not have the inherent properties or qualities which might distinguish it from other type of discourses. Many texts might have been regarded as literature in academic spaces might not have been constructed as literature actively. For instance, a text can start off as a historical treatise or as a philosophical book and can then come to be regarded as literature at a later stage.

Similarly, some works can be written as literature at a particular time but later on maybe valued for their archeological or historical or ethnographic value rather than looking at their artistic and

intrinsically literary properties. Thus, the value judgments change. The subjective assessment of the characteristics of texts also change and else they have important role to play in what is regarded as literature we find that these definitions do not have any fixity.

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- A piece of writing should be considered 'fine' or 'good' to be designated as literature
- The notion of fine writing or '*belle lettres*' is itself debatable: should be highly regarded by those who possess the ability to make such value judgments (critics, theorists, academia, or elite circles); it should possess certain universal or significant aesthetic/artistic qualities
- Thus, it follows that literature is a kind of highly valued writing; but this has many ramifications
- It means that the category of literature is not 'objective'; in fact it is highly subjective
- There is nothing immutable or permanent about literature


The slide features a blue header and footer. The footer contains the logos of MTE (Maharaja Tej Bahadur Memorial Education Trust) and MTE ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE, along with the number 17. A small video inset in the bottom right corner shows a woman with dark hair, wearing a purple top, speaking.

A piece of writing may be considered fine or good to be designated as literature. The notion of fine writing in itself is debatable. One can say that the notion of fine writing or belle letters is defined by those people who are expected to possess the ability to make such type of value judgments. For example, critics, theorists, academicians etcetera. And at the same time this piece of literature should possess certain universal or significant aesthetic or artistic qualities.

Thus, it would follow that literature is a kind of highly valued writing; but there are certain ramifications also. It also means that the fact that they assign a text a literary place or nomenclature is not objective. In fact, it remains to be subjective. And because the subjective element is predominant in defining a work as literary or non-literary there is nothing permanent about our understanding of what constitutes literature.

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- Anything can be seen as literary, and a piece of writing can cease to be literature at any point if the parameters of value-judgments change
 - Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851)
- It also raises important questions about how these value-judgments are made and which judgments about the quality of writing are legitimate/valid and which judgments should be deemed irrelevant
- That the academia as an institution can legitimately decide which writing is literature, brings back the debate that literary canons are formed through exclusionary practices. These practices are often based on dominant cultural/social and national/political motivations rather than purely aesthetic ones
 - The high vs low binary; popular vs. literary binary
 - Exclusions from literary canon based on class, gender, race etc.



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Anything can be seen as literary, and a piece of writing can cease to be literature at any point in history if the parameters of value-judgments change. And some very interesting examples can be cited. For example, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* when it was published in 1847 and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* when it was published in 1851 did not have a positive response from the critics and readers.

But in today's times they are considered to be height of literary subjectivities. So raises important questions about how these value-judgments are made and which judgments about the quality of writing are legitimate and which judgments should be considered as illegitimate or irrelevant. It can also be said that the academia as an institution can legitimately decide which writing constitutes literature; but it brings us back go discussion say about who constitute the idea of a literary canon.

We would see how literary canons are formed through exclusionary practices. And these practices are often based on dominant socio-cultural as well as political and national motivations rather than purely aesthetic ones. We would also look into the debates of the high and low binaries popular versus literary binaries and we would see how these exclusionary practices from literary canon are based on differentiating against class, gender and race etc.

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- Following this, the belief that the study of literature is the study of a stable, coherent and well-defined entity is itself suspect because the category of literature depends on 'subjective' judgments which are then institutionalized
- Some fiction is literature and some(advertising jingles, pulp fiction) is not
- Some literature is fictional and some is not
- Some literature is highly descriptive, while some highly-wrought writing is not literature
- What makes a certain piece of literature depends on its institutionalization as literature based on mutable standards and parameters of judgment



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So if ever understanding of literature depends on subjective judgments which may or may not be institutionalized then the study of literature may not be considered as a stable coherent and well-defined entity. At a same time, there are certain other strange situations. Some fiction maybe considered as literature and some may not be considered as literature. How do we look at the advertising, jingles for example or the pulp fiction?

For example; some literature is fictional and some is not. Some literature is highly descriptive while some highly-wrought writing is not literature. So what makes a certain piece a literature depends on its institutionalization. As literature, is based on mutable standards and parameters of judgment.

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- Literature as a set of works with immutable and everlasting value and a set of specific shared inherent properties does not exist
 - Opinions about value and what constitutes valuable change over times; a work of writing can be treated as philosophy in one era and literature in another. Aristotle's *Poetics* is now read as literature; while it wasn't written as literature in its time
 - The grounds for judging what is valuable and what is not change over time. For instance; a piece of writing can belong to a category that is generally regarded highly valuable; but a certain specimen of it may be considered inferior; but it will still be regarded as literature. But such a piece of writing will not form the 'literary canon'
 - Literary canon includes only those pieces of writing which are deemed as representative works of an era; those which carry highly valued aesthetic/artistic properties
 - Literary canon: 'The unquestioned 'great tradition' of the 'national literature', has to be recognized as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time' (Eagleton)




As a set of works with immutable and everlasting value and a set of specific shared inherent properties literature as such may not exist. The opinions about value and what constitutes valuable change over the passage of time; a work of writing is treated as a philosophical writing in one era and will be treated as a piece of literature in a different era. For example, Aristotle's *Poetics* is now read as literature whereas at the time when it was written and compiled it was not considered as literature at all.



The grounds on the basis which we take our decision about what is valuable and what is not also change over time. A piece of writing can belong to a particular category that may be generally regarded as highly valuable. But in certain specimen of it may be considered inferior and therefore may not be a part of literature and later on may be excluded from the literary canon.

So literary canon by normal definition includes only those pieces of writing which are deemed as representative work of an era; those which carry unquestionably high value judgment in terms of aesthetic and artistic properties. But the understanding of literary canon as the unquestioned great tradition of the national literature, has to be recognized as a construct as Terry Eagleton suggested. It is fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a given time.

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- No literary work or tradition can be considered as valuable *in itself*
- *Value* is a highly transitive and causative term
- What is valued by a certain group of people at a certain point of time may be modified; thus socio-cultural and historical specificity produces the parameters of value
- The use of particular criteria in the light of particular purposes
- Thus, given enough transformations in the society, it is possible to arrive at a future in which Classical writing like Iliad and Odyssey are no longer seen meaningful or valuable
- In such a scenario the classical Greek epics or tragedies may not be deemed more significant than contemporary pulp fiction





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So no literary work or tradition can be considered as valuable in itself. Value is and remains to be a highly causative as well as a highly transitive term. What is valued by a certain group of people at a certain point of time maybe modified and therefore we can say that the parameters of value are not universal; they do not transcend the limitation of time and space. Rather we can say that they are based on socio-cultural and historical specificity.



Thus, given enough transformations in the society we can say that there may be a future in which classical writings like *Iliad* and *Odyssey* they no longer be seen as meaningful or valuable.

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Literature as Institution: Intention

- Another approach within this framework is based on Intention:
 - Defining Literature in terms of Authorial Intention
 - "A text is identified as a literary work by recognizing the author's intention that the text is produced and meant to be read within a framework of conventions defining the practice... of literature" (Lamarque and Olsen 1994)
 - The basic intention here is the expectation that the reader will adopt a certain position towards the piece of writing: the expectation of "literary, aesthetic value"
 - For Lamarque and Olsen, literary aesthetic value has two constituents:
 1. The "creative-imaginative" element
 2. The "mimetic" component of literary aesthetic value

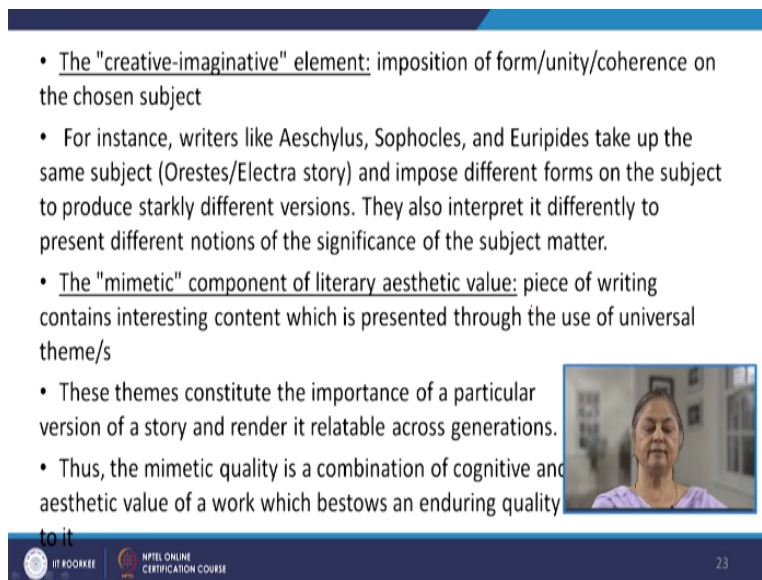




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Another approach in this framework is based on the intention of the author. And this approach attempts to define literature in terms of Authorial Intention. It is pertinent to quote here Lamarque and Olsen who suggest that, a text is identified as a literary work by recognizing the authors intention that the text is produced and meant to be read within a framework of conventions defining the practice of literature.

So the basic intention here is that the expectation that the reader will adopts a certain position towards the piece of writing and this definition ultimately finalizes the expectation of literary and aesthetic value. For Lamarque and Olsen, literary aesthetic value has two constituents and they define these constituents as the creative-imaginative element and secondly the mimetic component of literary aesthetic value.

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- The "creative-imaginative" element: imposition of form/unity/coherence on the chosen subject
- For instance, writers like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides take up the same subject (Orestes/Electra story) and impose different forms on the subject to produce starkly different versions. They also interpret it differently to present different notions of the significance of the subject matter.
- The "mimetic" component of literary aesthetic value: piece of writing contains interesting content which is presented through the use of universal theme/s
- These themes constitute the importance of a particular version of a story and render it relatable across generations.
- Thus, the mimetic quality is a combination of cognitive and aesthetic value of a work which bestows an enduring quality to it

The creative-imaginative element is based on the imposition of a form or a unity or a coherence on a chosen subject. For example, different writers may take up the same subject. We can take example of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides who have taken up the Electra story and they have imposed different forms on the subject to produce starkly different versions. They also interpreted differently to present different notions of the significances of the subject matter.

The mimetic component of literary aesthetic value is related with the piece of writing which contains interesting content which is presented through the use of universal themes. These

themes constitute the importance of a particular version of a story and render it relatable across generations. And thus, the mimetic quality may be considered as a combination of cognitive and aesthetic value of a work which bestows an enduring quality on a piece of writing.

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- Works are designated as works of literature by identifying the authorial intention to create a 'literary, aesthetic value' and the intention to create in readers an expectation of such a value
- It is, however, untrue that only works created with such a conscious intention are identified as literature



Works are designated as works of literature by identifying the authorial intention to create a literary as well as aesthetic value and the intention to create in readers an expectation of such a value. It is however, debatable whether only works created with such a conscious intention are identified as literature. Similarly, we can look at literature as imaginative writing.

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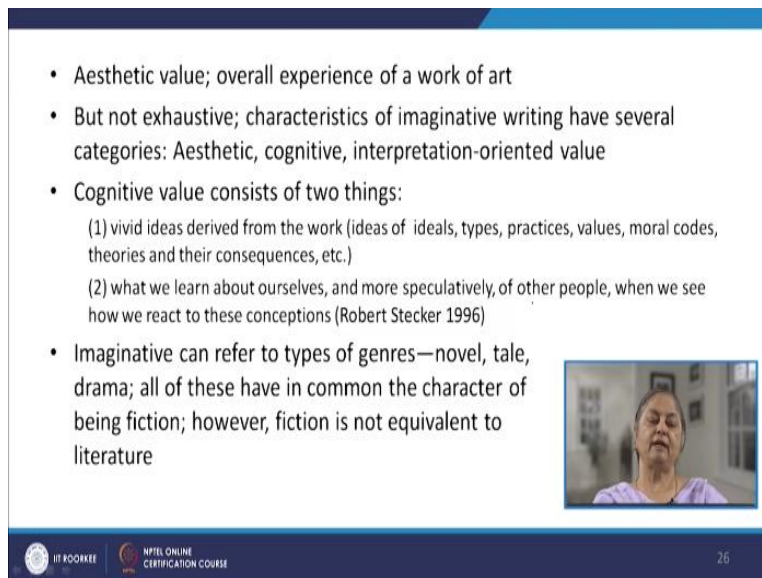
Literature as Imaginative Writing

- Notion of Literature in the 19th century: body of writings that were considered as 'art' came to be regarded as 'imaginative writing' (Rene Wellek 1983)
- There is significant consensus that the conception of literature as 'imaginative writing' has shaped the present canon of literary works, though several critics believe that such a conception ought to be rejected
- To understand this type of classification; it is important to unpack the notion of 'imaginative'
 - not what a writer must do to create a work of literature
 - Refers to a plethora of values for which literature is appreciated and highly regarded



It was a notion of literature in the 19th century, and bodies of writing which will be considered as art came to be regarded as imaginative writing. Now to understand this type of a classification it is important to unpack the notion of imagination. It is not what a writer must do to create a work of literature rather it refers to a plethora of values for which literature is appreciated and highly regarded.

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- Aesthetic value; overall experience of a work of art
- But not exhaustive; characteristics of imaginative writing have several categories: Aesthetic, cognitive, interpretation-oriented value
- Cognitive value consists of two things:
 - (1) vivid ideas derived from the work (ideas of ideals, types, practices, values, moral codes, theories and their consequences, etc.)
 - (2) what we learn about ourselves, and more speculatively, of other people, when we see how we react to these conceptions (Robert Stecker 1996)
- Imaginative can refer to types of genres—novel, tale, drama; all of these have in common the character of being fiction; however, fiction is not equivalent to literature


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Aesthetic value is the overall experience of a work of art, but is not exhaustive. And characteristics of imaginative writings have several categories. We can look at the aesthetic, cognitive and interpretation-oriented values. The cognitive value consists of two things, firstly it is vivid ideas derived from the works and secondly what we learn about ourselves, more speculatively of other people when we see how we react to these conceptions.

So imaginative can also refer to different types of genres. However, we find that even though what is common in these genres is the character of being fiction. However, fiction is never equivalent to literature in all situations.

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- Examples of pre-modern literature—Shakespeare, Marvell, Webster, Milton; essays of Bacon, sermons of Donne, Bunyan’s spiritual autobiography—thus fiction and non-fiction binary cannot be representative of what constitutes the category of ‘imaginative’
- 19th century literature includes Lamb, Macaulay and Mill; but not Marx, Bentham, Darwin and Spenser—Thus the category of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ is not very illuminating
- In late 16th and early 17th century, ‘novel’ was used for both factual and fictional occurrences; news reports were often not considered factual
- Thus, present day clear distinctions between fiction and non-fiction were permeable categories in earlier times




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The illustration of what can be put into the literary canon and what is excluded out of it also suggests that the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction had been permeable categories in earlier times. And we can illustrate it with giving the example of the 19th century literature which is included the writings of Lamb as well as Macaulay and Mill. But the writings of Marx Bentham, Darwin and Spenser have been excluded from the definitions of 19th century literature.

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- Literature includes a lot of ‘factual’ writing
- But it also excludes a lot of fictional writing
- Case of Superman and Spiderman comics; Mills and Boons novels—may be regarded as literature, but they aren’t ‘Literature’ in the way Rushdie and Naipaul are
- Also, if literature is simply ‘creative’ or ‘imaginative’ writing; does it mean that philosophy, history and sociology are unimaginative and uncreative? (Eagleton)



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So literature includes a lot of factual writing and it also excludes a lot of it. And we can look at the case of Superman and Spiderman comics and Mills and Boons novels. Do we regard them as literature and do we put them in the same category? For example, as the works of Rushdie and

Naipual. Also, if literature is simply creative or imaginative, does it mean that philosophy, history and sociology for that matter are unimaginative and uncreative?

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Interpretation-centered Value of Literature

- Literature is valued because it invites interpretation, to figure out what the author is doing; what he means; what's the authorial intention in creating a text
- Also, unlike other forms of writing, literature invites the readers to give meaning to a work, permits us to form our own conceptions, derive multiple meanings; even if they are contradictory
- Turns reading into an active process; readers aren't passive recipients; they are reading creatively and imaginatively. They are creating anew: contribute to the aesthetic and cognitive value of a work—keep it relevant and relatable
 - For instance; our Shakespeare is very different from the Shakespeare of his contemporaries or the Shakespeare of 19th century




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So we come back to an Interpretation-centered Value of Literature. Literature is valued because it invites interpretation. It invites readers to give meaning to a work. Readers are able to look at what is the authorial intention in creating a text but they move a step ahead and they have the capability to derive multiple meanings. Thus, reading in the context of literature is an active process because readers are never passive recipients; they read a text in a creative and imaginative manner and they understand the text with the background of their own times.

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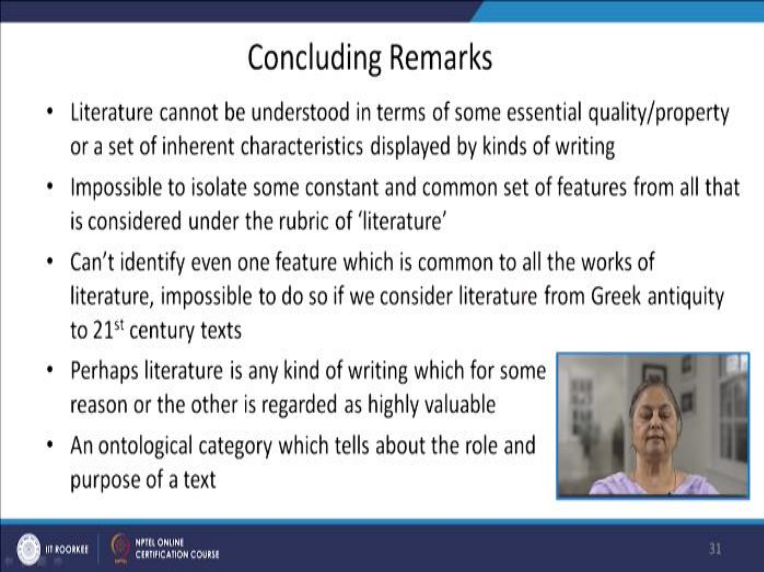
- Different historical eras read differently, thus different eras create different interpretations
- In fact, each reader imbues a text with their own values; the meanings, values and attitudes of one's own times filter into our reading/interpretation of works
- All literary works are 'rewritten', both consciously and unconsciously, by the societies in which they are read -- every reading of a work of literature is both a re-reading and re-writing
- Every work and its evaluation changes with every group of people who read it
- Therefore, what counts as literature or what it means is always a highly unstable subject



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Different historical eras read a text differently and at the same time each reader also imbues a text with their own values. So all literary texts are re-written continuously, consciously as well as unconsciously by the societies in which they are read by the readers who are reading them. So therefore, what counts as literature or what it means is always a highly subjective and therefore a highly unstable subject.

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Concluding Remarks

- Literature cannot be understood in terms of some essential quality/property or a set of inherent characteristics displayed by kinds of writing
- Impossible to isolate some constant and common set of features from all that is considered under the rubric of 'literature'
- Can't identify even one feature which is common to all the works of literature, impossible to do so if we consider literature from Greek antiquity to 21st century texts
- Perhaps literature is any kind of writing which for some reason or the other is regarded as highly valuable
- An ontological category which tells about the role and purpose of a text

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We can say that literature cannot be understood in terms of some essential quality or property. Or possessing is set of inherent characteristics which is displayed only in particular types of writings. It is also impossible to isolate some constant and common set of features from all that is considered under the rubric of literature. Perhaps literature is any kind of writing which for some reason or other is regarded as highly valuable. It is an ontological category which tells us about the role and purpose of a text.

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- Even a claim like literature implies 'non-pragmatic' use of language is not very helpful—other linguistic forms like jokes do the same
- No 'essence' of literature— 'Any bit of writing may be read 'non-pragmatically', if that is what reading a text as literature means, just as any writing may be read 'poetically' (Eagleton)
- Not about the fixed nature of what is literature : Its relations with other texts and contexts
- We can think of literature 'as a number of ways in which people *relate themselves* to writing' (Eagleton). What kind of human practices are centered around it; to what ends is it utilized




Even a claim like literature implies non-pragmatic use of language is not very helpful because there are always other lingual parallel linguistic forms. At the same time, we find that there is no fundamental quintessential of literature. And any type of writing may be read non-pragmatically as Eagleton has pointed out. It is also not about the fixed nature of what constitute is literature rather we have to look at a particular text in its relations with other texts and contexts to understand what constitutes literature.

And what constitutes value in a piece of writing which is considered as a piece of literature. We can think of literature as a number of ways in which people relate themselves to writing. What kind of human practices have been centered around a particular piece of writing and to what end is it utilized?

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- Dorothy Hall in her essay “ The Function of Literature” talks of the problem of social organization and of our attendant emotional and mental turmoil*
- The contemporary perspective is to view literature as having a social function : to find a way to a better future
- Cites Van Wyck Brooks to reinforce her point, who has suggested that many writers in the past have performed this function, and thus the belief in literature persists, even though it may seem to be a simple and unifying scheme for a vast and amorphous phenomenon

*(<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4608846>)



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It brings us back to the function of literature and I would conclude my discussion by quoting Dorothy Hall who in her essay, “The Function of Literature” just talks of the problem of social organization in our today’s life and its associated turmoil in our emotional and mental lives. She remarks that a contemporary perspective is to view literature as having social necessarily function that is to enable us to find a way to a better future.

Even though it may seem to be a simple and a unifying scheme for a vast amorphous phenomenon, still she thinks that this particular idea makes literature still relevant. She cites Van Wyck Brooks to reinforce her points, who has suggested that many writers in the past have performed this function, and because of it; the believe in literature persists, that it would enable us to find a way to a better future; to understand ourselves as better human beings. Thank you.