

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 02

The Art of Fiction

Hello student, I'm here, Professor Smita Jha, and dealing with the history of novel, how to read novel with an interdisciplinary approach. Well, the present lecture is on 'Art of fiction', which is very important when we talk of interdisciplinary approach because in the previous lecture, I defined that what should be the approach while reading a novel, how to explore a novel, you know, from various perspective, because in humanities, we generally go for textual analysis when we go for research. So, today's title is Art of Fiction.

Works of fiction are those that tell made up stories as opposed to the many genres of non-fiction, biography, autobiography, commentary, data analysis, philosophy, history and others. Fiction is defined by its focus on narrative invented by the author. Most academics and literary critics further subdivided fiction into two categories i.e. Genre fiction and Literary fiction. Because, as I said, that we are in an age of science and technology, so various perspectives are there on literature. Genre of non-fiction, as I discussed, biography, autobiography, commentary, data analysis, philosophy, history and alike. When compared to genre fiction, literary fiction tends to follow non-conventional plot structures while containing embedded symbolism and allegory. We all know about, you know, the novel, a universal theme with a good plot, clear beginning, clear middle and the clear end.

But what about the various genres? As a general rule, literary fiction and literary fictional writers are often studied in English Departments at Universities and receive careful criticism in journals like the Paris Review, the New York Review of Books, the London Review of Books. Literary fiction can include novels, novellas and short history. That is to say, that these literary icons, they were very, you know, dedicated to the rules and classification of the literary writing or literature reading. Very close, you know, with certain rules and regulations. But then we should know something about the origin of fiction also. Films, computers games, novels have only come into existence to medieval

writers who used their imagination to create novels and this is a fact. New research revealed the surprising historical process behind fiction.

And here I would like to quote, you know, T.S. Eliot's comment on "Tradition and Individual Talent". Tradition is like a river, you know, continuous flow from tradition to the present age. i.e. the synthesis of the old and the new. So comic novel, comic reading of Mandrake, Baital, you know, Nagraj and nowadays students are working on that. That is the comic research. So yes, thanks to medieval writer. Today we are perfectly aware that crime fiction and other novels are based purely on imagination. Some of the true stories also. We know well that characters like Harry Potter are not real and that Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson never actually walked the streets of London.

Very correct! However, had these books been published in the Middle Ages, their readers would have thought that the stories about Harry, Holmes and Watson were real, simply because there were books about them. New research reveals how our ancestors came up with the idea to tell tall tales in the books. In the Middle Ages, books were perceived as exclusive and authoritative. People automatically assumed that whatever was written in a book had to be true and this has been confirmed by a great professor Lars Boje Mortensen of the Institute of History and Civilisation at the University of Southern Denmark. Most people only knew the Bible, which was believed to tell the truth about the world. Because of this, it came as a big surprise when books full of fabrications first started to appear in the 12th century. The preliminary research that Mortensen and his colleagues have carried out has been published in the book *Medieval Narratives Between History and Fiction*.

If we say, you know, *Morte d' Arthur* can be regarded as a prose writing, as a novel, *King Arthur and the Round Table*. So medieval age, that is very important, Monks regarded words of books as old truth. Historians and anthropologists assume that people have always told each other stories, including those that their listeners knew were pure fiction. But it was actually not until the high middle ages that writing fiction became common practice.

Up until the high middle ages in the 12th century, books were surrounded by grave seriousness. The average person only ever saw books in church where the priest read from the Bible. Bible was supposed to be a very high level book. Because of this, the written word was generally associated with the truth. The perception of books was no different among learned monks who studied books about science and philosophy in the large monasteries of the Middle Ages.

The monks presumed that the description of the parts of the planets and the human soul were ancient truth, truths like the words of the Bible. The books read by religious men had been passed on from generation to generation for centuries and this meant that they acquired a special authority. As time passed, the number of supplementary stories increased and, in fact, you know, novel, the stories started from the miracle, mystery, morality play in a way. I mean 16th century and they grew better and wilder as so often happens with good stories. During the course of the Middle Ages, the supplementary stories were rewritten so many times that people eventually figured out that they were just tall tales and pretense.

The most extreme examples are the historic accounts of the life of Alexander the Great. Those books contain elements where Alexander the Great is flying in a kind of aeroplane. He sails in a submarine of sorts and he meets a variety of mysterious beings. Those were popular books in the middle age. In that way, people gradually got used to the fact that books could also be a form of entertainment and that they were not necessarily telling the truth from cover to cover. Thus, the road was paved for the novels we know today; Multiple genres, interdisciplinary in nature. Well, as I mentioned, King Arthur and his stories were the first novel; The first straightforward work of fiction was written in 1170 by the Frenchman Chretien de Troyes.

The book, a story About King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, became immensely popular. Especially the genteel French aristocracy loved the imaginative tales which were written in French. Readers were accustomed to this, as books were previously written either in Old Greek or Latin, which only clergymen, that is to say, priests, were able to read. However, several hundred years passed before the fiction contract became a wholly integrated part of book culture in European countries. It was not until the 19th century that it became common practice to divide literature into fiction and non-fiction and perhaps some of the medieval blind faith in the credibility of the book still lingers today.

So, we need to know, what is Genre?

Genre is a style or category of art, music or literature. As an author, genre control what you write and how you write it. It describes the style and focus of the novel you write. Genre gives you a blueprint for different type of stories. There are general rules to follow. For example, manuscript length, character type, settings, themes, viewpoint choices and plots. Certain settings suit specific genres. These will vary in type, details, intensity and length of description. The tone employed by the author and the mood created for the reader must

also suit the genre. There are often sub-genre within genre. For example, a fantasy story with sinister, frightening elements would belong to the dark fantasy sub-genre. And these days we are working on, you know, mystery, fantasy, imagination.

Now, why does genre matter?

Genre are great because they fulfill readers' expectations. We buy certain books because we have enjoyed similar stories in the past. Reading these novels gives us a sense of belonging, of sitting down with an old friend and knowing we are on familiar ground. There is also a camaraderie between readers who follow the same genres. Writers can use this to their advantage because their boundaries are models on which to base a story. Genres reflect trends in society and they evolve when writers push the boundaries. Readers ultimately decide if the experiment has worked by buying these books and see, the crime fiction, sci-fi fictions are selling like hotcakes these days. The most important part of genre fiction, though, is that it fulfills our human need for good, old-fashioned storytelling. We, sometimes, need stories we can rely on to blunt the harsh realities of life.

Now, the 17 most popular genres in fiction, and we should know about it.

The first is romance. These stories are about a romantic relationship between two people. They are characterized by sensual tension, desire and idealism. The author keeps the two apart for most of the novel, but they do eventually end up together. There are many sub-genres including paranormal, historical, contemporary, category, fantasy and gothic. There are also many tropes in gender, you know, 101 romance tropes for writer.

Then action-adventure. Any story that puts the protagonist in a physical danger characterized by thrilling near misses. And courageous and daring feats belongs to this genre. It is fast-paced, the tension mounting as the clock ticks. There is always a climax that offers the reader some relief.

Science fiction which is very popular these days. This genre incorporates any story set in the future, the past or other dimension. The story features scientific ideas and advanced technological concepts. Writers must be prepared to spend time building new worlds and using genre-specific worlds. The setting should define the plot. There are many 'Science fiction' sub-genre and there are also many tropes in the genre, 101 sci-fi tropes for the writer.

Fantasy, another popular fiction for research. And these stories deal with kingdoms as opposed to sci-fi, which deals with Universes. Writers must spend plenty of time on world-

building. Myths, otherworldly magic-based concepts and ideas characterise these books. They frequently take cues from historical settings like the Dark Ages. There are also plenty of sub-genres here like other 101 tropes.

Speculative fiction. These stories are created in world unlike our real world in certain important ways and this genre usually overlaps one or more of the following like science fiction, fantasy fiction horror fiction, supernatural fiction, superhero fiction, utopian fiction, dystopian fiction, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction and alternate history. Thriller, Suspense- very, very popular! A character in jeopardy dominates these stories. This genre involves pursuit and escape. It is filled with cliffhanger and there are one or more dark characters that the protagonist must escape from, fight against or best in the story. The threats to the protagonist can be physical or psychological or both. A techno-thriller is a sub-genre.

Young adult. Well, these books are written, published and marked to adolescents and young adults. The Young Adults Library Services Association (YALSA) defines a young adult as someone between the ages of 12 and 18. But adults also read these books. These are generally coming of age stories and often cross into the fantasy and science fiction genre. New adult books feature college rather than school-aged characters and plotlines. It is the next age category up from young age. It explores the challenges and uncertainties of leaving home and living independently for the first time. Many new adult books focus on sex, blurring boundary between romance and erotica. Horror, paranormal, ghost and these are high-pitched scary stories involving pursuit and escape. The protagonist must overcome supernatural or demonic beings.

Occult is a sub-genre that always uses satanic type antagonist. There are also many tropes in the genre more or less 101 horror tropes for the writer.

Crime fiction or Mystery fiction. These are also known as whodunit. The new name whodunit. The central issue is a question that must be answered and identity revealed as crime solved. This novel is characterised by clues leading to rising tension as the answer to the mystery is approached. There are many sub-genres in this category.

Police procedurals are mysteries that involve a police officer or detective solving the crime. Well, this deals with the aspects of criminology. Historical fiction and such fictional stories take place against factual historical backdrops. Important historical figures are portrayed as fictional characters.

Westerns! well, Western fiction, these books are specifically set in an old American West. Plotlines include survival, romance, adventure with characters of time like, you know, for example, cowboys, frontiersmen, Indians, mountain men and miners.

Family saga and this is very popular. This genre is about, especially in Victorian age, yes, this genre is about ongoing stories of two or more generations of a family. Plots revolve around things like business, acquisition, properties, adventure, marriage, family curses. By their nature, these are primarily historical, often bringing the resolution in contemporary setting. There is usually a timeline involved in these books.

Women's fiction These plot lines are characterized by female's character who face challenges, difficulties, crisis that have a direct relationship to gender. Gender study is very much there in almost academia, all academia. This is inclusive of women's conflict with man, though not limited to that. It can include conflict with things such as the economy, family, society, art, politics and religion. Magic realism, much has been written on magic realism. Magical events that are part of ordinary life in this genre. The characters do not see them as abnormal or unusual. They are a natural part of the story. *Hundred Years of Solitude* is a classic example in this genre.

Literary fiction, this genre focuses on the human condition and it is more concerned with the inner lives of characters and themes than plot. Literary fiction is difficult to sell and continues to decline in popularity. So when compared to genre fiction, literary fiction tends to follow non-conventional plot structures while containing embedded symbolism and allegory. Works of fiction are those that tell made-up stories. As opposed to the many genres of non-fiction, biography, autobiography, commentary, philosophy, history and other, fiction is defined by its focus on narratives invented by the author. Most academics and literary critics further subdivided fiction into two categories and as I divided and I explained, what are the different genres, sub-genres? Fiction refers to a story that comes from a writer's imagination as opposed to one based strictly on the fact or the true story. So literary fiction, as I said earlier also, is a category that is often difficult to explain, often thought of serious 'fiction' and nearly exclusively novels. It's easier to identify literary fiction by what is not. i.e, it's fiction that doesn't fit in well-defined genre like thriller, science fiction, romance.

How we define literary fiction? We know we should look at the originality of the fiction and some popular type. The category of literary fiction is quite fluid and for the last few decades has easily overlapped with any number of genres. Even though its definition is a

broad target, literary fiction definitely has characteristics of its own, whereas, genre fiction from romance to dystopian or horror is plot driven. Literary fiction is character driven. Any action in the story impacts the main character or characters and understanding this impact is the whole point of telling the story. The overall tone of the book is introspective. Literary fiction then is always a study of the human condition and often an exploration of difficult social or political issues that control our lives. For this reason, it is generally considered more serious than 'genre fiction', i.e. literary fiction. Another way to recognize literary fiction is by its story structure. Unlike, say, thriller or science fiction, literary fiction doesn't follow a formula.

A story arc may or may not be present, which also means that a satisfying ending is no guarantee. The line between hero and the villain is often blurry, as is what they are trying to accomplish. And without a tidy plot to spell out every character's motive, intangible details, metaphors, symbolism or imagery, for example, play a larger role in telling their story. In many ways, the origin of literary fiction follows the origin of the novel and we can look at one of the earliest examples of a Western novel, Miguel de Cervantes, the ingenious gentleman *Don Quixote* of La Mancha (1605-1615) and see how a character, *Don Quixote*, know the action, is the focus of the tale. Over the next 300 years the novel emerges as a legitimately intellectual way for authors, readers and critics to deal with contemporary social issues. Novels are now responsible for influencing politics and their characters, becoming symbol within a larger social or psychological conversation. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) gives us, Ebenezer Scrooge, a name we use to describe someone who is deeply damaged by their own greed.

Modernism concern with society and its effects on us as individuals are a standard of literary fiction by the late 1800s. By the early 1900s, literary fiction embraces a stream of consciousness, taking us even deeper into the meditative human experience, William Faulkner famously opens *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), by putting readers in the middle of one character, Benjy's thoughts. Without context or even a chronological story, we are left to figure out the plot for ourself. After the horror of World War II, postmodern novels pushed the boundaries further.

While characters still question the morality of the day, they also challenge the idea that truth or objective reality even exist. Think of Captain Yossarian's struggle with the absurdity of free will in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* or how the women of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980) decide what will and will not define them as family. So

different types of literary fiction are character driven. Contemporary literary fiction deal with timely social issues and political movement.

Realistic literary fiction includes coming-of-age stories and biographical novels. Experimental literary fiction challenges a storytelling convention. Novels can be a mix of visual art, poetry, and stream-of-consciousness prose. David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) is essentially a comedic study of what entertains us but the structure went through hundreds of subplots and even more footnotes, all while never reaching a conclusion.

Philosophical literary fiction investigates life's big questions such as what makes us human? What is love? How significant are we? What, if anything, matter? And Dostoevsky tackles the idea of goodness in *The Idiot* (1869). Prince Miskin is described as a positively good and beautiful man who is exposed to some of the society's greediest, most deceitful characters with horrible consequences.

With this, I conclude my lecture here and I hope that I will meet you in the next lecture with certain more theories with this novel reading or interdisciplinary approach.

Thank you very much!