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**Lecture One: What Is Literature?**

**1.1 Introduction**

Literature is a term that is not fixed and defining it is quite difficult. Jim Meyer (1977) posits: “Understanding exactly what literature has always been a challenge; pinning down a definition has proven to be quite difficult” (p.1). The meaning of literature changes according to the literary doctrine we belong to.

**1.2 Definition of Literature**

Literature comes from the Latin word "litera" which means "acquainted with letters (alphabet letters)." A man of letters is a person who writes literature. He is considered an artist who writes and reads differently. He is a poet, a novelist, a playwright, or a critic. The word literature is a name given to the body of composed (written) creative works (belles letters) either in poetry, prose, or other types of writings which are modes of human expression. These works are of recognized artistic value and excellent styles. They may be arranged and classified according to different criteria like the language used by the author, their origins, a specific period, genre, and the subjects and themes treated by the author.

Many people and men of letters try to define literature from different points of view. Robert frost says: “good literature should disturb the readers’ mind” which means that a good piece of literature pushes the reader to ask questions and makes him reflect upon its meaning. His mind is annoyed and looks for more explanation about the meaning that the author is trying to convey and about the hidden messages implied within the text.

**1.3 Functions of Literature**

According to Wellek-Warren: A literary work of art is not a simple object but rather a highly complex organization of a stratified character with multiple meanings and relationships.” (p.12) It is not a real rather an ideal object; it exists in its reception. Therefore, Literature can be written and read to serve two main functions:

**1.3.1 Entertainment**

It is a means of having pleasure and fun. A book can be read by intellectuals and by ordinary people who look for relaxation. Homer, the famous Greek philosopher says that literature gives us entertainment or “it gives pleasure to the reader and the listener”. It creates a new world through its Fictionality since literary pieces are imaginative: creative and illusory i.e. not real. In addition to its mimesis and imitation of external and internal forms, reality can be found also.

Moreover, and through its Aesthetic quality, literature represents the human being and behavior in beautiful way, e.g. the comic, the sublime, the absurd, the satiric, and even the ugly. It also describes the human emotions of pity, fear, love, jealousy, envy desire, and anger in a pertinent way.

**1.3.2 Instruction**

It can be a means of information. Literature teaches us the good and healthy language structure. The best language structure and excellent styles are found in the literature. It also teaches us moralities (good manners and ethics). It is also a very rich recipient of a given culture. Another Greek philosopher, Hesiod gives his personal view on literature and says that it gives instruction and interprets ideas into words. For Wellek-Warren: “The Poem pleases and teaches or teaches through pleasing” thus, literature may be “ an instrument of edification” (p.13). It can be also a means of communication:

Literary language vs. scientific language (everyday language)

*Connotative* vs. *Denotative*

”Poetic language organizes and tightens the resources of everyday language and sometimes does even violence to them, in an effort to force us into … attention.” (Wellek, 1956, p. 10)

Roman Jacobson (1978): ”The addresser sends a message to the addressee. To be operative the message requires a context referred to a … code fully or at least partially common to the addresser and the addressee […] and contact – a physical channel or psychological connection - needed between the addresser and the addressee.” (p. 66) I.e. literature is a means of expression between the author and his readership and the text holds the so-called ”expressive function”.

**1.4 Forms of Literature**

Literary works and creations are shown in two forms: oral and written forms. Both of them may be imaginative or realistic and depict (portray) human experiences, feelings, and reflections

* **Oral or oralities** are generally popular cultural products transmitted orally from one generation to another by means of telling. It is generally referred to as the oral creation of preliterate people, before the creation of the written mode. It can be popular songs, tales, chronicles, and stories of a specific origin and culture. It is also called Folk Literature.
* **Written forms** are works composed and published by intellectuals for reading and they can be poems, plays, novels, short stories…etc. it is also called Elite Literature though this form refreshes itself from the folk literature.

**1.5 What Is Not Literature?**

Not all writings and published books and documents are considered as literary productions with artistic values because, they are published for other aims which are either purely informative like the concerns of journalism or purely instructive like technical books such as books of mathematic, physics or medicine….etc.