**Lecture One: What Is Literature?**

* 1. **Introduction**

The term "literature" is fluid and elusive, making its precise definition a challenging endeavor. As Jim Meyer (1977) aptly states, "Understanding exactly what literature has always been a challenge; pinning down a definition has proven to be quite difficult" (p.1). The very nature of literature is subject to interpretation and varies depending on the literary perspectives or doctrines to which we adhere

* 1. **Definition of Literature**

The term "literature" derives from the Latin word "litera," which signifies being acquainted with the letters of the alphabet. A person engaged in literary pursuits, commonly known as a man of letters, is considered an artist who possesses a unique approach to writing and reading. This encompasses poets, novelists, playwrights, and critics. The word "literature" serves as a collective designation for a body of creatively composed written works, often referred to as belles letters. These works span various forms, including poetry, prose, and other expressive modes, showcasing recognized artistic value and exemplary styles. They can be categorized and classified based on diverse criteria, such as the author's language, origin, specific era, genre, and the subjects and themes addressed.

Numerous individuals, particularly men of letters, have endeavored to define literature from distinct perspectives. Robert Frost expresses that "good literature should disturb the readers' mind," implying that a noteworthy literary piece stimulates introspection and prompts readers to question and delve deeper into its meaning. It provokes a sense of curiosity within the reader, compelling them to seek further explanations and uncover the hidden messages embedded within the text.

**1.3 Functions of Literature**

As Wellek-Warren highlights, a literary work of art is not a simple object but rather a complex organization with multiple meanings and relationships. It is not a tangible entity, but rather exists in its reception. Therefore, literature serves two main functions:

**1.3.1 Entertainment**

Literature provides a source of pleasure and enjoyment. It caters to both intellectuals and ordinary individuals seeking relaxation. As Homer, the renowned Greek philosopher, affirms, literature offers entertainment by creating a new world through its fictionality. Literary pieces are imaginative, creative, and illusory, offering a departure from reality. However, amidst the imaginative realm, literature also reflects aspects of external and internal reality through its mimetic and imitative qualities. Furthermore, literature showcases the human condition and behavior in various forms such as comedy, sublimity, absurdity, satire, and even ugliness. It aptly depicts human emotions like pity, fear, love, jealousy, desire, and anger, capturing their essence in a poignant manner.

**1.3.2 Instruction**

Literature serves as a means of imparting knowledge and information. It teaches us the intricacies of language structure, presenting exemplary linguistic forms and styles. It also imparts moral values, fostering good manners and ethics. Literature acts as a rich repository of cultural insights, encapsulating the essence of a given society. Hesiod, another Greek philosopher, emphasizes that literature offers instruction and interprets ideas through words. As Wellek-Warren asserts, poetry pleases and teaches, functioning as “an instrument of edification” (p.13). Moreover, literature serves as a means of communication, facilitating the exchange of ideas and emotions between the author and the reader

In summary, literature fulfills the dual role of entertaining and instructing. It provides an avenue for pleasure and relaxation while simultaneously serving as a reservoir of knowledge, language refinement, and moral guidance. Through its imaginative nature and expressive power, literature captures the essence of the human experience, engaging readers on multiple levels. Roman Jakobson (1978) argues that in the communication process, the addresser (the author) sends a message to the addressee (the reader). For the message to have an impact, it relies on a shared context, which involves a fully or partially common code between the addresser and the addressee. Additionally, contact, whether through a physical channel or a psychological connection, is essential for effective communication between the two parties (p. 66).

In the context of literature, this communication process is manifested through the text, which serves as a means of expression between the author and the readership. The text, therefore, holds what Jakobson refers to as the "expressive function." It acts as a medium through which the author conveys their thoughts, emotions, and ideas to the readers, establishing a connection and engaging them in the literary experience. The shared understanding of the code and the contact between the author and the readership play crucial roles in facilitating this expressive function within literature.

* 1. **Forms of Literature**

Literary works and creations can indeed be expressed in both oral and written forms. These forms of expression allow for the portrayal of human experiences, feelings, and reflections, whether they are imaginative or rooted in reality.

* **Oral Forms**: Oral literature refers to cultural expressions that are transmitted orally across generations through storytelling. It encompasses popular songs, tales, chronicles, and stories originating from specific cultures. Oral forms of literature, also known as folk literature, emerged before the advent of written modes and have a rich tradition of communal storytelling.
* **Written Forms**: Written literature consists of works composed and published by intellectuals for reading. It encompasses various genres such as poems, plays, novels, and short stories. This form, also known as elite literature, distinguishes itself from oral forms and is often associated with intellectual and artistic endeavors.
  1. **What Is Not Literature?**

It is important to note that not all writings, published books, and documents are considered literary productions with artistic value. Some texts serve different purposes, such as:

• **Purely Informative**: Certain writings, like journalistic works, are primarily aimed at providing information rather than artistic expression. These texts serve to disseminate news, facts, and reports.

• **Purely Instructive**: Technical books, such as those in the fields of mathematics, physics, medicine, and other specialized disciplines, are created with the sole purpose of imparting knowledge and instruction rather than focusing on artistic qualities. In a nut shell, while literature encompasses a wide range of imaginative and expressive works, not all writings fall under its artistic purview. Some texts serve informational or instructional purposes, catering to specific domains outside the realm of artistic expression.