Analysing Literary Texts

**Major Genres in Textual Studies**

Setting fixed criteria for the categorization of literary works has always been problematic as the suggested criteria sometimes overlap and clear lines can’t be drawn. One of the most common genre-classification is the triad Fiction/ Poetry / Drama (though Film has been recently added as a fourth textual manifestation).

The present lesson seeks to account for the basic components of these three forms of literary expression, with reference to the conventional approaches for their analysis.

**1. Prose Fiction Literary Texts**

**Introduction**

It is a well-documented fact that the earliest means through which literary traditions were conveyed was poetry in its crudest form (i.e. songs). Though Poetry has persisted and evolved to the present day as a refined form of literature, most literature published today is in the form of prose, which encompasses philosophical, historical and mathematical treatises, novels, novellas, short stories, essays of all kinds and modern journalism.

The present lesson is an attempt to provide students with a detailed outline on what are the different constituting elements of Prose-fiction texts, and how to account for them for an objective analysis.

**Analysing Prose-Fiction Texts**

One misconception about literary analysis in general is that readers are allowed to take a personal position vis-a-vis the work at hand, and respond to it subjectively. As a matter of fact, Literary analysis is a more detached and objective endeavour, and the work to be analysed should unbiasedly be approached as an artistic creation comprising many synergistic elements (plot/characters/setting/narrative perspective/themes and style) that only the author could manipulate so that a specific effect is produced.

When adopting this detached and objective attitude, readers are expected to consider the interwinding of the aforementioned elements, the effect they have on each other as well on the unity of the whole work, and more conspicuously, how all these elements function to concord with the message or philosophy sought by the text.

**Elements of Prose-Fiction**

**1. The Plot**: Narratives, in a general way, are composed of a sequence of events or incidents. This (often) consistent collaboration of various thematic elements results in an alteration of the original situation as presented at the outset of the literary work.

Whether the plot obeys to a certain chronological order or not depends entirely on the perspective of the author (usually this is something that is dictated by the classical/modernist orientation of the author). Yet, this feature not as important in criticism as the compliance of the plot with what is termed “the artistic unity”: a well-conceived plot is always characterized by unity, which implies that irrelevant events/elements, false leads, misleading or unnecessary information, or unjustified turns have no room in a good prose-fiction work.

The Artistic Unity also suggests that the different literary elements which make up the entire narrative work in harmony, and that the choices authors make while compiling these elements is only dictated by their will to harmonize the form/content dichotomy.

The plot is technically driven by a Conflict. Whether External (between many characters or one character and the environment) or internal (within the same character) in nature, conflicts set out the plot in motion, as they introduce a clash of actions or ideas the whole plot will accordingly evolve according to.

**Plot Conventions**

An ideal traditional plot line encompasses the following five sequential levels: exposition, conflict, complication, climax, resolution (denouement).

a. The exposition or initial situation: introduces the narrative by describing the background information on the characters, setting, actions …etc. The static state of the initial situation is disturbed by the conflict which leads to the complication.

**b. The conflict (previously explained)**

**c. The complicating actions**: a series of events which develop on further circumstances related to the main conflict. Complicating actions evoke a specific dramatic question for the readers to seek an answer to. This is what produces suspense and eventually leads to a climax.

d**. The climax:** It is the tipping point of the action, the crisis, or its turning point, leading to a falling action which eventually unfolds into a resolution of the complication (denouement),

**e. The falling action**: though it still maintains the tension of the climax, the falling action set of events lead to the resolution and constitute a closure to the narrative.

In addition to prose, other traditional fiction (including drama, and film narratives) employ this basic plot structure, which is also called linear plot since its different elements follow a chronological order.

**2. The Characters:** Traditionally, formalist approaches to literature used to focus on plots and narrative structures in their analyses. However, most recent approaches, (especially those informed by the psychoanalytical theory) view characters as the most interesting element of analysis.

Depending on the approach adopted for the analysis, characters in a text can be viewed as types or individuals. They can be categorized into many types (major/minor, round/flat, Dynamic/static). Characters are either revealed in a direct way through their actions or by another character, or in an indirect way as readers are invited to infer what these characters are like from their thoughts or speeches.

**3. The narrative Perspective**: it is the angle from which a narrative is told, or the way in which characters and events are presented.

Three basic kinds of narrative perspectives can be introduced:

• Omniscient Third person point of view: the case in which actions and events are mediated through an exterior, yet all-knowing, God-like perspective. This highly subjective point of view should be distinguished from the Objective third person narrative perspective.

• First-person Narration where the narrative is presented through characters directly involved in the actions, and who refers to themselves in the first person. This first person can adopt either the point of view of a central character or (less often) of a minor figure.

Employing such a type of narration allows a more authentic representation of the subjective experiences of the narrator.

• Objective or Figural Narrative Perspective in which events are presented with no additional commentary as the plot is revealed exclusively through the actions of the characters in the text.

It should be noted, however, that this distinction is ever hardly found in its “pure” form, since literary texts are hybrid in nature, and modes of narration may shift from one to another. If, for example, emphasis in narration shifts from the exterior to the inner world of a character (or characters), then the narrative technique is here referred to as “stream-of-consciousness technique”. Similar combinations are “the free indirect discourse” narration, interior monologues, free association technique, and many other modes and techniques of narration which are introduced in the modernist and post-modernist literary texts in overt ways.

**4. The Setting**: roughly speaking, the setting is the environment (whether natural or manufactured) in which the story takes place.

One mistake most learners make when analysing the setting, is to account for it as a self-contained and independent entity, ignoring its role in creating meaning and supporting actions, narrative perspective and the overall artistic unity of the story. It is therefore important to approach setting as interdependent elements whose full meaning is revealed in the context of the other features and overall content of the text.

**5. The Theme**: it is the central and controlling idea of the story, the central insight around which the whole story is unified.

**6. Symbol**s: they are concrete occurrences representing abstract ideas and concepts. Symbols are of two types: cultural and contextual, and the ability to recognize and accurately interpret them is indispensable to the analysis of any literary work.

**7. Style**: studying the style of literary texts comprises the authors’ choice of words and sentences, and the way these are put together to constitute the work in its final format. Styles are not necessarily constant, neither inevitably changing: some writers may choose to adopt the same style throughout their carrier, others vary numerous styles within a single work (the case of polyphonic narratives).

According to sentence types, style could be brief or expansive, the type of diction can also divide style into formal, neutral and informal. Determining the different rhetorical qualities and tone is also indispensable in describing the style of prose fiction works.

Conclusion

Like any objective investigation, prose fiction analysis is driven by a set of question one must take into account. These questions should be concerned about the consistency of each of the aforementioned elements, their conformity to the conventional approaches to literary studies, and how they function for the overall unity of the work. But importantly, the objective analysis should always be qualified by an attempt to rationalize the answer to each of the above questions, and to find a plausible objective justification to it.

2. Poetic Literary Texts

England has a long history of poetry stretching from the 7th century to the present day. Over this period, English- speaking poets have produced some of the most memorable literary works, and the set of themes vehicled through this poetry have evolved though time to yield some of the most debated philosophies in the history of human ideas.

It is commonly known that in the case of English literature (just as it is the case of other old European cultures), the earliest surviving examples of English poetry were likely passed on orally in the form of Epics and songs. This is mainly due to the fact that people did not have the means to do otherwise. The very few written works did not survive the tribal assaults and raids of the Germanic and the Vikings’ attacks. Thus, giving an exact date to the earliest English poems remains difficult and often controversial. However, the earliest “surviving” manuscripts written in Latin, Brythonic (a predecessor language of Welsh) and Old Irish date back to the 6th century. The earliest surviving poetry written in Anglo-Saxon, the most direct predecessor of modern English, may have been composed as early as the seventh century.

**Defining Poetry**

According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary, poetry is an “elevated expression of elevated thought or feeling in metrical or rhythmical form”(ref) . Differently put, it is a piece of literature written in meter or verse. Poetry is the judged as the most appropriate form of literary expression to convey feelings and emotions, and this is thanks to its inherent preference for the use (and oftentimes the overuse) of a variety of rhetorical devices and techniques such as imagery, metaphors, similes and others.

The predominance of the aesthetic devices and aspects of language is precisely what distinguishes poetry from prose. An equally interesting description provided by William Wordsworth is his account of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, recollected in tranquillity” (ref) . Poetry is also known for being the most condensed and concentrated form of literature, saying most in the fewest number of words. In other words, it could be defined as a kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language.

**Some Forms of English Poetry (presented in their chronological order)**

**1. Alliterative Poetry**: It is commonly known that the most predominant structuring device which unifies the lines in a poem is the rhyme (end rhyme). However, in the old conception of English poetry, alliteration was the sound device characterising pomes the most. Many examples of alliterative poetry are equally found in the oldest manuscripts of many Germanic languages.

**2. Ballads**: A ballad is one of the simplest forms of verse. It is typically a British and Irish popular poetry, often a narrative story, meant to be sung during public meetings and market gatherings. Ballads were very popular in the medieval period, when Literature in general was brough down to the level of commoners, until the nineteenth century. From the eighteenth century onward, it extended to the lyrical ballads, and in the twentieth century’s jargon, it took on the meaning of a “slow form of popular love song”.

**3. Sonnets**: The sonnet is plainly described as the most regular type of English poetry. The term itself "sonnet" derives from both the Occitan word “sonet” and the Italian word “sonetto”, which mean "little song".

It is during the Renaissance that the convention associated with the genre came to signify a specific structure and following a strict rhyme scheme. One of the best-known examples of sonnets is the Shakespearean Sonnet, which consists of 14 lines, each line contains ten syllables (five iambic meters). The rhyme scheme in a Shakespearean sonnet is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG (three quatrains and a couplet).

**4. The Blank Verse**: The blank verse (or the unrhymed iambic verse) is one of the most widely adopted metrical pattern in English poetry, partly because it is more flexible than some metrical forms, and also because it is close to the natural sound effusion and beat of the English language.

Poems written in blank verse are divided into “verse paragraphs” (comprising varying numbers of syllables and lines), and are to be distinguished from a conventional Stanza, which is usually designed according to fixed lengths, regular metrical patterns and a given rhyme scheme.

**5. The Free Verse**: As its name suggests, it is the type of poetry which is primarily designed according to the paces and tempos of speech rather than according to a regular metrical scheme. The format this type of poetry adopts is based on the conventional elements of speech (namely sounds, words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs) rather than on the poetic metrical agreements. Therefore, Free verse reduces much of the artificiality, complexity, and elitisms of poetic expression. It became current and widely approved in the early 20th century.

**Prosody in English Poetry**

Prosody is the general word describing the study of poetic sounds and rhythms, common alternative words are metrics, versification, and mechanics of verse...etc. Most readers when reading poetry aloud, develop appropriate speed and expressiveness of delivery. It is this musicality produced by the beat which makes the speaking and hearing of poetry dramatic.

In considering prosody, we should recognize that poets, being specially “attuned to language”, blend words and ideas together so that the sound becomes “an echo of the sense” (pope, ref). The consequence of this idea is that prosodic techniques cannot be separated from the poem’s content. For this reason, the study of prosody aims to determine how poets control their words so that the sound of the poem complements its expression of emotions and ideas.

To understand and discuss prosody, one needs to be able to explain the various sounds of both speech and poetry (vowel sounds, diphthongs, consonants, ...)

**Poetic Rhythm**

Rhythm, in poetry refers to the rise and fall of syllables, their pitch, intensity and density. It is much more important in Poetry than it is in Prose, because it is used an additional device through which poets invite their audience to pay attention to some emotionally charged words more than to others. The more emphasis in put on a syllable the heavier the stress is, and vice versa.

English poetry employs for basic rhythms of varying stressed (ˉ) and unstressed (ˇ) syllables. The meters are iambs, trochees, anapaests and dactyls. Each unit of rhythm is called a "foot" of poetry.

Any group of lines forming a unit is a stanza: Stanza of 3 lines is a tercet, 4 lines is a quatrain, and a stanza of two lines is a couplet.

Some of the most famous English meters are: IAMBIC ( ˇ ˉ ) , TROCHAIC ( ˉ ˇ ), ANAPESTIC ( ˇ ˇ ˉ ), and DACTYLIC ( ˉ ˇ ˇ ).

Each line of a poem contains a certain number of feet of iambs, trochees, dactyls or anapaests.

As to the number of meters in each line: 1 foot = monometer, 2 feet = a dimeter, 3= trimeter, 4 = tetrameter, 5= pentameter , 6=hexameter , 7=heptameter, and 8= octameter .

**The Rhyme**

Roughly introduced, the Rhyme is the matching of sounds. And it is created by vowels.

The Rhyme Scheme is decided by assigning an alphabetical letter to each end sound. Lines ending with the same sound, have the same rhyme, thus, get the same letter.

**Literary Dramatic Texts**

As a specific mode of fiction , Drama is different from the two previously introduced literary forms of expression (i.e. Prose Fiction and poetry) in that it is enacted (though there are some types of drama which are meant to be read). Dramatic arts, the rules which govern their performance on stage or even the very construction of dramatic texts, are conventionally designed according to “some collaborative modes of production and a collective form of reception” (Weidmann, 2009). From the classical Athenian Sophocles, up to the contemporary works of Beckett and Pinter, western drama has evolved to cover different movements and philosophical orientations, and engendered some of the finest masterpieces of world literature.

**Defining Drama**

The word “Drama”, is originally a Greek word meaning “to do”. It follows that Drama (in its artistic sense) is always associated with such concepts as “performance”, “action”, “actors” and “stage”.

Though -technically- drama is an independent third mode of literary expression (besides prose and poetry), It shares with them the language properties, as it is either expressed in prose or verse. However, it is different in that it is usually in a dialogue form.

A dramatic text contains many elements which are equally found in fiction, such as plot, characters, themes ..etc. This structure, which is suggested by the playwright himself, constitutes the primary text. However, when taken to the stage to be performed by actors and guided by a stage director, it (the primary text) evolves into what is called a secondary text, which gives life to the characters (dramatis personae), stage direction and to scene descriptions.

**Dramatic Genres**

The oldest examples of dramatic genres can be retraced to Aristotle’s Poetics (335 BC). Though he primarily made the distinction between the two major genres, several other subgenres have been suggested ever since.

The two main Genres are the Tragedy and Comedy. Accordingly, the two masks associated with theatre symbolize of the ancient Greek Muses representing each Genre: Thalia (the laughing face, the Muse of comedy), and Melpomene (the weeping face, Muse of tragedy).

**1. The Tragedy**

Aristotle (335 B.C.) defines the tragedy as:

The imitation in dramatic form of an action that is serious and complete, with incidents arousing pity and fear wherewith it effects a catharsis of such emotions. The language used is pleasurable and throughout appropriate to the situation in which it is used" (ref).

What characterizes the tragedy above all is that the plot revolves around a noble personage (the tragic hero) ("better than ourselves," according to Aristotle), who is of a high stature and greatness, and the actions they perform are noble actions. The fall of the tragic hero has to arouse in the audience (or readers) the emotions of pity or fear.

Nevertheless, this greatness doesn’t mean “perfection”, because, one of the characteristics of the tragic hero is his tragic flaw (such as hubris, which is often excessive pride or passion), and also hamartia (some errors) which lead to his downfall.

Additionally, some other central features of the Aristotelian archetype include:

2. Free choice: The hero's downfall her/his own fault, the result of his own free choice, not of pure accident or some overriding malevolent fate (the paranormal element is usually discarded from the perfect drama conception).

3. The punishment usually exceeds the crime: though the tragic hero is inevitably imperilled, his misfortune is not wholly deserved, as he remains despite his tragic flaw, admirable.

4. The tragic fall is not pure loss: though it may result in the hero's death, before it, there is an increase of awareness, some gain in self-knowledge or, as Aristotle puts it, some "anagnorisis” (discovery).

5. Catharsis and emotional release: Though it arouses earnest emotion (pity and fear, according to Aristotle), tragedy, when well performed, does not leave its audience in a state of depression. Rather, the main feeling which must be experienced in the tragedy is the purgation and purification of the audience’s strong emotions.

Tragedies are of numerous kinds, to mention some, there is the Senecan Tragedy (five-acts stage play which is recited rather than performed), the Revenge Tragedy (which very popular during the Renaissance era and revolves around murder and revenge), The Domestic Tragedy (about middle-class characters and mainly targeting the feeling of empathy instead of fear), and the Modern Tragedy (the loose modern conventions are employed instead of the classical ones).

**2. The Comedy**

Comedies are essentially characterized by their depiction of human nature: while tragedies show greatness and grandeur in the tragic hero (who possesses overpowering individuality), comedies shed light on the weakness and human limitation. Laughter and the “comic element” express the acknowledgement of irrationality and some absurdity in humans.

A comedy is primarily social in nature; the protagonist is always in a group and represents “commonness”. If the tragedy is usually named after the tragic hero, the comic protagonist tends to be “a type” and the play is often named after the type (The Misanthrope, The Alchemist, The Brute).

In the comedy, the plot is not necessarily designed according to plausibility (cause-effect progression), and the organic unity is not a requirement. Most events happen haphazardly according to coincidences and improbable happenings.

The purpose of comedy is not just to amuse and entertain the audience, but it also helps to illuminate human nature and weaknesses by subtly reassuring the audience that even a disaster is something we can laugh about.

Comedies are of many kinds: Romantic comedies, Satires (which criticize social and political practices), comedies of manners (which ridicule the artificial and sophisticated behavior of the higher social class), farces (about exaggerated and caricatured characters, plots or behaviors), and melodramas (reinforcing a romantic or sensational plot with musical elements).

**Dramatic Conventions**

In drama, a playwright tries to present life as it is lived in the real world. However, it is not possible to present real life on stage, that’s why Drama is also considered as a presentation of an “illusion of reality”. But these “unrealistic devices” become conventions once viewers and reader accept them.

Dramatic conventions “necessary or convenient devices, widely accepted by the public, for solving problems imposed by a particular artistic medium in representing reality”. In plays, for example, many characters talk to themselves, which is unlikely to happen in real life (unless the character in question has a psychological or mental condition), but it is a convention found in many plays. Another example is the convention of dialogues in verse (it is a classical convention), but in modern times the convention in most plays the dialogue presented in prose. Another good example of dramatic convention is in play production where the convention is that a room has three walls instead of four and the action of a play in which the events take place in various places is presented on a single stage.

There are also conventions in terms of style, recurrent types of character, turns of plot, forms of versification, kinds of diction and style. It is not compulsory for every work to conform to preexisting conventions but what matters is how effectively an individual writer makes use of them.

**Dramatic conventions include**:

a. The Prologue: which is the introductory part of the play. It could be an opening scene, a speech or an address. In most cases, it introduces the action and makes a statement on what the audience should expect in the play. In many plays the prologue foreshadows the events in the play and sometimes gives its background.

b. The Epilogue: This is the direct opposite of the prologue. It is presented at the end of the play. It sums up the action of the play and in some cases, makes a statement (an advice or a lesson to be learnt) on the action or events presented in the play.

c. The Interlude: An interlude in a play is a short piece of entertainment that is presented between the acts or major scenes in a play. This convention was introduced during the Renaissance Period and it included some shows and short presentations.

d. The Soliloquy: this is a speech made by a character when he is alone. The audience hears it but the other characters are not expected to hear it. It is very common in Renaissance plays also. Shakespeare in particular made use of soliloquies in many of his plays.

Soliloquies are used as a device to reveal the thoughts or the feelings of specific characters in reaction to certain events or situations. Customarily, it is a means of giving expression to a complex state of mind and feeling, and in most cases the speaker is seen struggling with problems of utmost consequence.

Here, the character thinks aloud as he talks to himself. He pretends that the audience is not there. Soliloquy also offers the dramatist a means of providing a point of view on the action of the play. Apart from serving as a means for revealing characters, it is used to make significant commentaries on events of the play

**Special Forms of Drama**

a. The Opera: operas are special forms of dramatic art strongly intertwined with western classical music. the opera underwent enormous changes in the past four centuries, and the most worth noticing form is the one created by the German 19th century composer Richard Wagner who entirely renewed the operatic format, and emphasized the equal importance of music and Greek drama, calling "music dramas".

b. The Pantomime : They are plays conceived in the tradition of fables and folk tales, they shed light on a moral dilemma (in which the good always wins) and culminate into a lesson to be learned. Pantomime rely usually on stock characters seen in masque (commedia del arte), these characters include the villain, the clown, the servant, the lover… etc. They are very entertaining and popular as they are within the reach of all people.

**Conclusion**

If theater is viewed simply as a branch of literature or only as a form of narrative, then large segments of theater history are inevitably slighted. Some periods or cultures have emphasized dramatic literature (plays) but others have stressed aspects of theatrical production. Some cultures see the theater's value as a means of storytelling; others see it as religion, spectacle, or entertainment.