University of Mostafa Benboulaid Batna2 ***Level****:* 1st Year LMD Department of English

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***Module:*** Literature ***Lecture***: Introduction to Literature.



# First Term:

**Literature: definitions, genres and characteristics**

**Introduction**

Art is as import in human life as science, architecture, medicine...etc and besides to painting, music, fashion design and other sections, literature is considered a food for thought teaches one life lessons, wisdom, and transforms ideas and ideologies. It provokes one’s imaginative potential in the sense that the reader relies on mental skills such as imagination, memory, and thinking so as to decipher the connotative significances between the lines. In this kind of art the receiver sees and hears while he never does indeed when the piece of writing is skilfully elaborated.

Historically, people used literature to transform messages, preaches to right path, record history, reflect their own opinion, express their emotions, denote personal experience, and settle imaginative world exists only in their mind. So, literature is a mirror reflects what is going on in society mainly through novels, short stories, poetry, drama, and theatre plays. Those categories are literary genres of literature.

Originally, the term is derived from the Latin word “***Littera”*** which means **letter** and ‘***Litteratus’*** accordingly refers to a well cultured man.

1. **Definition of Literature:**

Authors, theologies, philosophers, and writers variously define literature according to their own backgrounds. Florence Dee Boodakian says: “literature goes beyond life it is art it is an imaginative creation that can tell truths gracefully subtly through narrative, poetry and the movement of characters on a stage”. Ezra Pound intensifies this idea and adds:*"Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree"*.

Oxford Dictionary of English defines literature *as “pieces of writing that are valued as works of art, especially novels, plays and poems.”* Andsimilarly Cambridge states that it is the *“written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting merit.”* Hence, academically, not any written piece is literature but the only that distinguished oral or written pieces as **Aesthetic, (artistic)** **Creative, and Imaginative**.

**2. Evolution of Literature (types/forms)**

**2.1 Pictorial literature:** initially, during the Stone Age people designed certain pictures in rocks and mountains to deliver lessons and ideas. Those pictures become later seen as a primitive kind of literature because they could be creative.

**2.2 Oral literature**: it is a form of literature originally meant to be spoken or sung, often to a musical accompaniment. It is also known as **verbal/Folk literature** improvised by an **Orator/poet/speaker** among his clan in form of poetry, old idioms, and narratives and such aesthetic form was inherited from one to another generation specially among Africans. It is the product of illiterate, or semi- literate, societies and is composed spontaneously as the poet or narrator tells the story. In such societies, the stories were handed down from narrator to narrator, but each poet embellished the plot with his own personal details. It is characterised as: **Verbal and Performance:** oral artists performed the plot according to their own individual way, by embellishing details or omitting certain facts accompanied with actions, on a specific occasion. **The Audience:** in oral literature an audience is physically present and is allowed to participate actively according to the conventions of the time. **Dynamic:** It changes according to society and to accommodate new challenges. In early oral literature, themes focused on honesty, heroism and bravery. More modern forms deal with other forms of conflict, such as divorce, dislocated families and abuse.

**2.3 Written Literature**: it is form of expression through writing that has been gradually developed to be divided into: prose (novels and short stories) drama (theatre plays) and poetry. Its genres are characterized of being fictional (imaginative) and nonfictional (realistic).

**2.4 Audio visual literature:** it is about the literary works performed today using technology such as movies based on novels, historical documentaries, visualised poems...etc.

**3. Functions of Literature:** thinkers established mainly Five theories under which literature functions:

**3.1 Aesthetic Theory (artistic)**: it was first raised in the 18th c by Emanuel Kant who advocated the autonomy of art for the sake of its beauty and essence only with no relation with teaching, describing $social life, entertainment, preaching, conveying messages...etc. Benjamin Constant shortly announced that **‘art for art’s sake**’ and many thinkers agreed with such as Goethe, Baudelaire, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge who thought art has no specific purpose only its beauty. Within this theory **Oscar Wild** intensifies that Art should not be concerned with morality, ethics, and well behaviour but with **entertainment** and provide a pleasure. In his ***the picture of Dorian Gray,*** He said: ‘*there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book*. *Books are either well written or badly written’.*

**3.2 Didactic Theory:** the advocators of this theory propose that art has informative and instructive functions towards society rather than entertainment. Besides, the argumentative competency is an essential function of intellectuals who have to be skilful enough to convince the audience/reader with their ideas. For example, John Bunyan in his *Pilgrimage’s Progress* is preaching his readers many moral lessons out of the books characters as pilgrims marching together in their journey and trying to overcome obstacles by sticking on faith in God.

**3**.**3** **Expressive Theory**: its concern is with one’s inner feelings, emotions, sensations, and all what is inward, felt, abstract, related to the heart. One of its main prominent leaders is Wordsworth who thinks that art is an expression of internal world and defines poetry as: “*the spontaneous overflow of power feelings*”. Lord Byron once said: ‘*if I do not write to empty my mind, I go mad’.*

**3.4.** **Mimetic Theory (Imitative**): it has been first mentioned by Aristotle in his *Poetics* when he acknowledges that literature’s main function is to imitate something in this world (person, action, event, feeling...). For example, a tragic play is an art and at the same time an artistic representation of true life experience. Thus, literature would be **new representation/re-creation of the world by a good artist**. In that way, art, according to Aristotle, does not only record facts and imitate events but creates a new imaginative and interpretative image of the life. And such role provides with knowledge, wisdom and deep insight. An evil character in the stage evokes our mind that one similar character exists in life and even the story could better describe his personality better.

3.5. **Effective Theory:** the focus within this theory is on the effect created by literature on the recipient (reader, audience...) whose emotions get evoked or possibly changed by this art. The aim here is to create permanent emotional state of influence leads one to act and understand the world around. A novel through characters, events, plot can better warn people from drugs dangers than religious man’s preaching.