

B.A. 1ST YEAR – SEMESTER I

PAPER I – UNDERSTANDING PROSE FICTION IN ENGLISH

Unit I – The Elements of Prose Fiction

An Introduction to Literature and Literary Elements:

Literature is a part of our culture and our life. Most people have their own ideas of what this literature is, but it is difficult to define the term. Yet it is generally easy to recognise literature when we come across it. It is a written form of communication based on the premise that not all texts are created equal. Some are given more value than the other. It changes from one person to another.

In English, we use the word ‘literature’ in at least two different ways:

- i. Very often, it simply means anything that is written: e.g. time-tables, catalogues, textbooks, travel brochures, advertisements, pamphlets, notices, newspaper articles etc. However, these things do not last long in our memory. That means these things do not have the appeal for the other day, next year, next generation, etc.
- ii. But when we talk about serious literature or imaginative literature such as ‘English Literature’ or the literature of other languages, we use the word in a different, and perhaps more serious, sense. It has the inherent beauty of its own and has the quality of permanence. Any piece of serious literature, therefore, can be read and enjoyed even after hundreds or thousands of years of its composition. For example, Homer’s epics – *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Novels by Charles Dickens, etc.

Accordingly, R.J. Reese defines literature as “writing which expresses and communicates thoughts, feelings and attitudes of mankind towards life and has the value of permanence”.

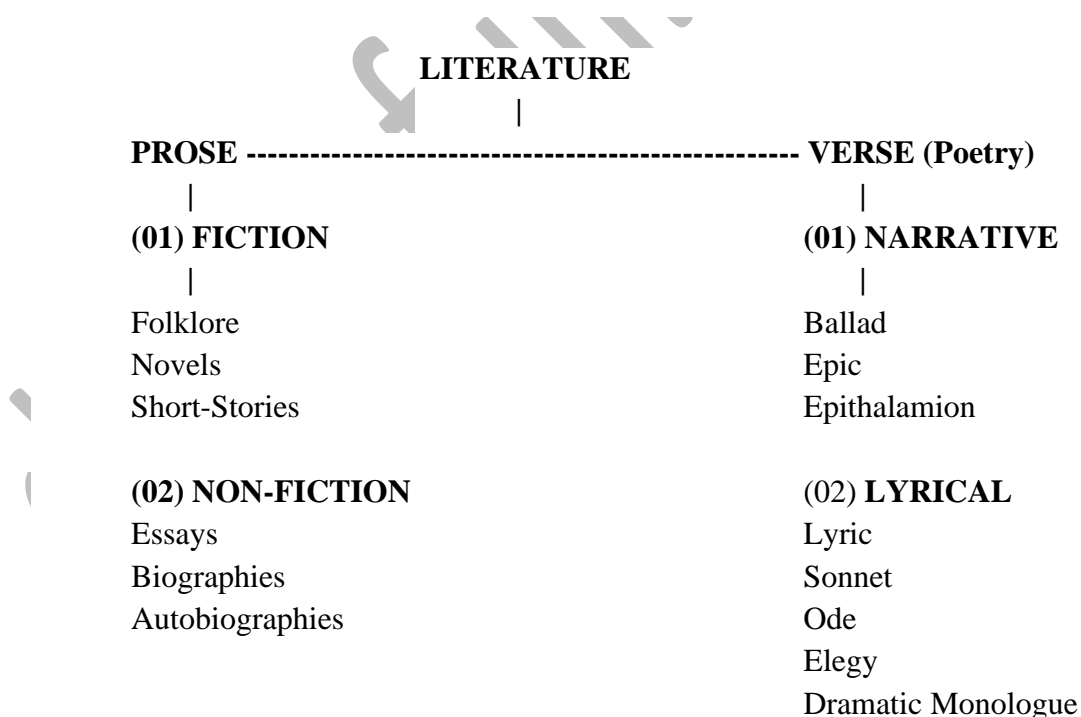
Thus, **Literature** is an excellent writing in prose or verse with permanent worth. It is the body of writing of a specific country, language, period and people. Such literature,

sometimes, is also known as ‘creative literature’, ‘serious literature’ or ‘imaginative literature’.

Forms and Types of Literature

Literature is written in various forms and style known as genres of literature. By form, it is the composition of words either in prose or verse. Basically, literature is found in these two forms. But there are two more categories of style by which a composition is recognized as literature. They are fiction and non-fiction. Following major forms of written texts are generally recognized as serious literature. These include poetry, short-stories, novels, essays, biographies, autobiographies, drama, etc. Each one has its own subcategory with a different form, shape, and style.

The most common types of literary genres include prose and verse. These are further categorized in fiction and non-fiction followed by other types of literature. The following chart of genre classification may shed some light on this concept. Have a look.



Prose literature may fall under one of these two categories: Fiction and Nonfiction. Thus, literature can be either a work of fiction or a work of nonfiction.

❖ Elements of Fiction

When we ask ourselves what it is that we like about a piece of literature we usually remember the literary elements. These elements are – **1. Character, 2. Theme, 3. Plot, 4. Setting, 5. Conflict, 6. Tone, and 7. Point of View.** Students are encouraged to appreciate literature critically in view of these elements. That will help them to live through the literature, experience its pleasure, learn something from it, and allow them to search for meaning of words through *reading, listening, speaking, and writing* (RLSW) of fiction.

1. Character

A character is presumably an imagined person who inhabits a story. Characterization and plot work well together in memorable stories. There are two meanings for the word character:

- ⇒ The person in a work of fiction.
- ⇒ The characteristics of a person.

➔ Persons in a work of fiction - Antagonist and Protagonist

- One character is clearly central to a story with all major events having some connection to this character;
- She/he is the PROTAGONIST.
- The character in opposition to the main character (protagonist) is called the ANTAGONIST.

➔ The Characteristics of a Person

In order for a story to seem real to the reader, its characters must seem real. Characterization is the information the author gives the reader about the characters themselves. The author may reveal a character in several ways:

- a) his/her physical appearance
- b) what he/she says, thinks, feels and dreams
- c) what he/she does or does not do

- d) what others say about him/her and how others react to him/her

Characters in a work of fiction are, however, convincing if they are: consistent, motivated and life-like (resemble real people)

→ Types of Literary Characters

Two types of characters are found in literature – (1) Flat (static), and (2) Round (dynamic). He/she can either be a protagonist (hero/heroine) or an antagonist (villain) or both (antihero).

- (1) **Flat (static) characters** such as the princess or the prince in folk tales are not well developed. These are actually the stereotypes, that is, they have one or two characteristics that never change and are often over-emphasized. They can be easily characterized in one or two sentences. Such characters do not change within the story. For example, the princess is usually beautiful, kind, and generous, and the prince is usually handsome, noble, and brave.
- (2) **Round (dynamic) characters** are, however, more interesting. They are complex and many sided, and they develop within the story. They change (for better or worse) by the end of the story. Authors use various methods to develop the natures of these round characters such as
 - i. **Direct Method:** Authors might use a direct method, and literally tell us about the characters. Through their narration they describe the appearance of the characters, where the characters live, and other important information about the characters' lives.
 - ii. **Indirect Method:** Authors also might use indirect methods that require readers to infer information about the characters. These methods include –
 - (a) showing the actions of the characters,
 - (b) revealing the speech of the characters through their dialogue,
 - (c) developing the thoughts of the characters, and
 - (d) disclosing the thoughts of others about the characters.

Most of the information about the characters is implied rather than stated directly. We can identify the characteristics features of the person from his personality described in the work of fiction. A protagonist normally has the usual attributes of a traditional hero/heroine such as goodness, bravery, skill, idealism, sense of purpose, etc. In most cases, he/she is a person of influence and usually is from the upper strata of society – by position, rank and finances. On the other hand, an antagonist is wicked, full of wiles and treachery. An antihero, however, is an ordinary, inglorious twentieth century citizen usually drawn as someone who is “not brave, but who is puzzled, mocking, frustrated and isolated”. He conspicuously lacks in one or more of the usual attributes of a traditional hero or heroine. For example: The protagonist – Leopold Bloom – from the critically acclaimed classic novel – *Ulysses* - by James Joyce.

2. Theme

The theme of a fable is its moral. The theme of a parable is its teaching. The theme of a piece of fiction is its view about life and how people behave in different circumstances. Mere topics such as “friendship” and “love” do not make theme of the fiction. Instead, the theme of a story presents the author’s viewpoint about the topic, such as “Friendship helps people through times of adversity”, etc.

In fiction, the theme is not intended to teach or preach. In fact, it is not presented directly at all. You extract it from the characters, action and setting that make up the story. In other words, you must figure out the theme yourself.

It is not that easy to find and understand the theme of a story or a novel for a nonprofessional. For the students of English as a Second Language, it becomes doubly difficult. But the research indicate that students can indeed identify theme of a fiction, especially if they are guided through the learning experience.

Their labour of identifying the theme may ease out and the task may become easier if the students follow the principles designed by **Perrine** (1983). These principles are as stated below:

- ✓ Theme is the central and unifying concept of a story.

- ✓ Theme must be expressible as a statement with a subject and a predicate.
- ✓ Theme must be stated as a generalization about life.
- ✓ In stating theme we do not use the names of the characters or refer to precise places or events.
- ✓ One should avoid any statement that reduces the theme to a familiar saying or trite expression.

Accordingly, we can infer the theme of a short story or a novel if we focused on the following points:

- ⇒ the character's actions can reveal the theme,
- ⇒ the character's thoughts can reveal the them,
- ⇒ the way the story ends, especially who and what is rewarded or punished, can reveal the theme, and or
- ⇒ the author sometimes can directly tell the reader through the story text.

The writer's task is to communicate on a common ground with the reader. Although the particulars of your experience may be different from the details of the story, the general underlying truths behind the story may be just the connection that both you and the writer are seeking.

➤ **Here are some ways to uncover the theme in a story:**

- Check out the title. Sometimes it tells you a lot about the theme.
- Notice repeating patterns and symbols. Sometimes these may lead you to the theme.
- What allusions are made throughout the story?
- What are the details and particulars in the story? What greater meaning may they have?

For example: Read the following narrative by an unknown author:

DETERMINATION

In 1883, a creative engineer named John Roebling was inspired by an idea to build a spectacular bridge connecting New York with the Long Island. However bridge building experts throughout the world thought that this was an impossible feat and told Roebling to forget the idea. It just could not be done. It was not practical. It had never been done before.

Roebling could not ignore the vision he had in his mind of this bridge. He thought about it all the time and he knew deep in his heart that it could be done. He just had to share the dream with someone else. After much discussion and persuasion he managed to convince his son Washington, an up and coming engineer, that the bridge in fact could be built.

Working together for the first time, the father and son developed concepts of how it could be accomplished and how the obstacles could be overcome. With great excitement and inspiration, and the headiness of a wild challenge before them, they hired their crew and began to build their dream bridge.

The project started well, but when it was only a few months underway a tragic accident on the site took the life of John Roebling. Washington was injured and left with a certain amount of brain damage, which resulted in him not being able to walk or talk or even move.

"We told them so."

"Crazy men and their crazy dreams."

"It's foolish to chase wild visions."

Everyone had a negative comment to make and felt that the project should be scrapped since the Roebblings were the only ones who knew how the bridge could be built. In spite of his handicap Washington was never discouraged and still had a burning desire to complete the bridge and his mind was still as sharp as ever.

He tried to inspire and pass on his enthusiasm to some of his friends, but they were too daunted by the task. As he lay on his bed in his hospital room, with the sunlight streaming through the

windows, a gentle breeze blew the flimsy white curtains apart and he was able to see the sky and the tops of the trees outside for just a moment.

It seemed that there was a message for him not to give up. Suddenly an idea hit him. All he could do was move one finger and he decided to make the best use of it. By moving this, he slowly developed a code of communication with his wife.

He touched his wife's arm with that finger, indicating to her that he wanted her to call the engineers again. Then he used the same method of tapping her arm to tell the engineers what to do. It seemed foolish but the project was under way again.

For 13 years Washington tapped out his instructions with his finger on his wife's arm, until the bridge was finally completed. Today the spectacular Brooklyn Bridge stands in all its glory as a tribute to the triumph of one man's indomitable spirit and his determination not to be defeated by circumstances. It is also a tribute to the engineers and their team work, and to their faith in a man who was considered mad by half the world. It stands too as a tangible monument to the love and devotion of his wife who for 13 long years patiently decoded the messages of her husband and told the engineers what to do.

Perhaps this is one of the best examples of a never-say-die attitude that overcomes a terrible physical handicap and achieves an impossible goal.

Theme of this narrative is

Even the most distant dream can be realized with determination and persistence.

Remember that a theme we determine from a story never completely explains the story. It simply is one of the elements that makes up the whole narrative as exemplified

above. Also, a theme need not be a moral or a message; it may be what the happenings add up to, what the story is about.

3. Plot

A plot in a fiction is its *sequence of events*, the "why" for the things that happen in the story. The plot draws the reader into the characters' lives and helps the reader understand the choices that the characters make.

The plot of the story develops the action. A good plot lets readers share the action, feel the conflict, recognize the climax, and respond to a satisfactory ending. The developments of events in a short-story or a novel usually follows a chronological order, although flashbacks might be used by the authors to fill in a character's background or reveal information about its previous time or experience. Excitement in the story occurs when the main character experiences a struggle or overcomes a conflict. When conflict is added to the sequence of events, the result is the literary element of 'plot'.

A plot's structure is the way in which the story elements are arranged. Writers vary structure depending on the needs of the story. For example, in a mystery, the author will withhold plot exposition until later in the story.

➔ What Goes into a Plot?

Narrative tradition calls for developing stories with particular pieces -plot elements - in place.

1. **Exposition** is the information needed to understand a story.
2. **Complication** is the catalyst that begins the major conflict.
3. **Climax** is the turning point in the story that occurs when characters try to resolve the complication.
4. **Resolution** is the set of events that bring the story to a close.

It's not always a straight line from the beginning to the end of story. Sometimes, there is a shifting of time and this is the way we learn what happened and why; it keeps us interested in the story. But good stories always have all the plot elements in them.

4. Point of View

Remember, someone is always between the reader and the action of the story. That someone is telling the story from his or her own point of view. This angle of vision, the point of view from which the people, events and details of a story are viewed, is important to consider when reading a story.

❖ **Types of Point of View:**

➤ **Objective Point of View**

With the objective point of view, the writer tells what happens without stating more than can be inferred from the story's action and dialogue. The narrator never discloses anything about what the characters think or feel, remaining a detached observer.

➤ **Third Person Point of View**

Here the narrator does not participate in the action of the story as one of the characters, but lets us know exactly how the characters feel. We learn about the characters through this outside voice.

➤ **First Person Point of View**

In the first person point of view, the narrator does participate in the action of the story. When reading stories in the first person, we need to realize that what the narrator is recounting might not be the objective truth. We should question the trustworthiness of the accounting.

➤ **Omniscient and Limited Omniscient Points of View**

A narrator who knows everything about all the characters is all knowing, or omniscient.

A narrator whose knowledge is limited to one character, either major or minor, has a limited omniscient point of view.

5. Setting

Writers describe the world they know. Sights, sounds, colors and textures are all vividly painted in words as an artist paints images on canvas. A writer imagines a story to be happening in a place that is rooted in his or her mind. The location of a story's actions, along with the time in which it occurs, is the setting.

Thus, 'setting' of a short story or a novel is the geographic location and the time – past, present, or future. The story of the fiction takes place in that place and during that time. However, setting can vary, from the historical depiction or an early Roman town to the carefully detailed world of a futuristic planet.

If the story takes place in the world as we know it, the events narrated in the fiction is consistent with what actually occurred during that period. If the location is a real place, it is presented accurately. For example, authors of historical fiction make the background for their stories as authentic as possible. Readers, therefore, are able to vicariously accompany the characters as they see, feel, and hear their environment. Authors of fantasy also develop believable settings by describing them in such detail that readers can visualize the world.

In addition to depicting a complete historical background, setting provides an instantly recognizable background, create a mood and develop conflict in the fiction. It can enhance students' understanding of other cultures and worlds easily.

Setting is created by language. How many or how few details we learn is up to the author. Many authors leave a lot of these details up to the reader's imagination.

Some or all of these aspects of setting should be considered when examining a story:

- a) **place** - geographical location. Where is the action of the story taking place?
- b) **time** - When is the story taking place? (Historical period, time of day, year, etc.)
- c) **weather conditions** - Is it rainy, sunny, stormy, etc?

- d) **social conditions** - What is the daily life of the characters like? Does the story contain local colour (writing that focuses on the speech, dress, mannerisms, customs, etc. of a particular place)?
- e) **mood or atmosphere** - What feeling is created at the beginning of the story? Is it bright and cheerful or dark and frightening?

6. Conflict

Conflict is the essence of fiction. It creates plot. The conflicts we encounter can usually be identified as one of four kinds.

⇒ Human versus Human

Conflict that pits one person against another.

⇒ Human versus Nature

This involves a run-in with the forces of nature. On the one hand, it expresses the insignificance of a single human life in the cosmic scheme of things. On the other hand, it tests the limits of a person's strength and will to live.

⇒ Human versus Society

The values and customs by which everyone else lives are being challenged. The character may come to an untimely end as a result of his or her own convictions. The character may, on the other hand, bring others around to a sympathetic point of view, or it may be decided that society was right after all.

⇒ Human versus Self

Internal conflict. Not all conflict involves other people. Sometimes people are their own worst enemies. An internal conflict is a good test of a character's values. Does he/she give in to temptation or rise above it? Does he/she demand the most from him/herself or settle for something less? Does he/she even bother to struggle? The internal conflicts of a character and how they are resolved are good clues to the character's inner strength.

Often, more than one kind of conflict is taking place at the same time. In every case, however, the existence of conflict enhances the reader's understanding of a character and creates the suspense and interest that make you want to continue reading.

7. Tone

In literature, tone is the emotional colouring or the emotional meaning of the work and provides an extremely important contribution to the full meaning. In spoken language, it is indicated by the inflection of the speaker's voice. The emotional meaning of a statement may vary widely according to the tone of voice with which it is uttered; the tone may be ecstatic, incredulous, despairing, resigned, etc.

✪ Forms of Fiction

Fiction is the most popular form of literature in the modern literate world. Basically, it appears in two forms – (1) *Fantastic Fiction (Unrealistic Fiction)*, (2) *Realistic Fiction*. Forms of Fantastic Fiction are *Folktales, Fable, Parable, Fantasy, Myths, Legends*. *Short-story* and *Novel* are the types of Realistic Fiction.