**What is Literature?**

Though it is hard to grasp the definitions of literature, in most cases, **literature** is referred to as the entirety of written expression, with the restriction that not every written document can be categorized as literature in the more exact sense of the word. The definitions, therefore, usually include additional adjectives such as **“aesthetic”** or **“artistic”** to distinguish literary works from texts of everyday use such as newspapers, legal documents, and scholarly writings.

Etymologically, literature is derived from the Latin litteraturae, “writings.” Literature has been commonly used since the eighteenth century, equivalently with the French belles lettres (“fine letters”), to designate fictional and imaginative writings—poetry, prose fiction, and drama. **In an expanded use**, it designates also any other writings (including philosophy, history, and even scientific works addressed to a general audience) that are especially distinguished in form, expression, and emotional power. Confusingly, however, “literature” is sometimes applied also, in a sense close to the Latin original, to all written works, whatever their kind or quality. This all-inclusive use is especially frequent with reference to the sum of works that deal with a particular subject matter.

In its application to imaginative writing, “literature” has an **evaluative** as well as **descriptive** function, so that its proper use has become a matter of contention. Modern critical movements, aiming to correct what are seen as historical injustices, stress the strong but covert role played by gender, race, and class in establishing what has, in various eras, been accounted as literature, or in forming the ostensibly timeless criteria of great and canonical literature, or in distinguishing between “high literature” and the literature addressed to a mass audience.

Underlying literary production is certainly the human wish to leave behind a trace of oneself through creative expression, which will exist detached from the individual and, therefore, outlast its creator. The earliest manifestations of this creative wish are prehistoric paintings in caves, which hold **“encoded”** information in the form of visual signs. This visual component inevitably remains closely connected to literature throughout its various historical and social manifestations.

Not only the **visual**—writing is always pictorial—but also the **acoustic** element, the spoken word, is an integral part of literature, for the alphabet translates spoken words into signs. Before writing developed as a system of signs, whether pictographs or alphabets, “texts” were passed on orally. This predecessor of literary expression, called **“oral poetry,”** consisted of texts stored in a bard’s or minstrel’s memory which could be recited upon demand. It is assumed that most of the early classical and Old English epics were produced in this tradition and only later preserved in written form. This oral component, which runs counter to the modern way of thinking about texts, has been revived in the twentieth century through the medium of radio and other sound carriers. Audio-literature and the lyrics of songs display the acoustic features of literary phenomena.

The visual in literary texts, as well as the oral dimension, has been pushed into the background in the course of history. While in the Middle Ages the visual component of writing was highly privileged in such forms as richly decorated handwritten manuscripts, the arrival of the modern age—along with the invention of the printing press— made the visual element disappear or reduced it to a few illustrations in the text.

It is only in **drama** that the union between the spoken word and visual expression survives in a traditional literary genre, although this feature is not always immediately noticeable. Drama, which is— traditionally and without hesitation—viewed as literature, combines the acoustic and the visual elements, which are usually classified as non-literary. Even more obviously than in drama, the symbiosis of word and image culminates in film. This young medium is particularly interesting for textual studies, since word and picture are recorded and, as in a book, can be looked up at any time. Methods of literary and textual criticism are, therefore, frequently applied to the cinema and acoustic media.

**Genres of Literature**

Genre is a term, French in origin that denotes types or classes of literature. The term **genre** usually refers to one of the three classical literary forms of epic, drama, or poetry. This categorization is slightly confusing as the epic occurs in verse, too, but is not classified as poetry. It is, in fact, a precursor of the modern novel (i.e., prose fiction) because of its structural features such as plot, character presentation, and narrative perspective. Although this old classification is still in use, the tendency today is to abandon the term “epic” and introduce “prose,” “fiction,” or “prose fiction” for the relatively young literary forms of the novel and the short story. Because the epic was widely replaced by the new prose form of the novel in the eighteenth century, recent classifications prefer the terms***fiction****,* ***drama****,* and***poetry****,* as designations of the three major literary genres. The following section will explain the basic characteristics of these literary genres. We will examine these types of texts with reference to concrete examples and introduce crucial textual terminology and methods of analysis helpful for understanding the respective genres.

1. **Fiction**

In an inclusive sense, **fiction** is any literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that actually happened. In a narrower sense, however, fiction denotes only narratives that are written in prose (the novel and short story), and sometimes is used simply as a synonym for the **novel**.

The term “**novel**” is now applied to a great variety of writings that have in common only the attribute of being extended works of ***fiction***written in prose. As an extended narrative, the novel is distinguished from the ***short story***and from the work of middle length called the ***novelette***; its magnitude permits a greater variety of characters, greater complication of plot (or plots), ampler development of setting, and more sustained exploration of character and motives than do the shorter, more concentrated modes.

The term “novel,” however, subsumes a number of subgenres such as the **picaresque novel,** which relates the experiences of a vagrant rogue (from the Spanish “picaro”) in his conflict with the norms of society. Structured as an episodic narrative, the picaresque novel tries to lay bare social injustice in a satirical way, as for example Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722), or Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749), Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) which all display specific traits of this form of prose fiction. The **Bildungsroman** (novel of education), generally referred to by its German name, describes the development of a protagonist from childhood to maturity, including such examples as George Eliot’s (1819–80) *Mill on the Floss* (1860), or more recently Doris Lessing’s (1919–) *cycle Children of Violence* (1952–69). Another important form is the **epistolary novel,** which uses letters as a means of first-person narration, as for example Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740–41) and *Clarissa* (1748–49). A further form is the **historical novel,** such as Sir Walter Scott’s (1771–1832) *Waverley* (1814), whose actions take place within a realistic historical context. Related to the historical novel is a more recent trend often labeled new journalism, which uses the genre of the novel to rework incidents based on real events, as exemplified by Truman Capote’s (1924–84) *In Cold Blood* (1966) or Norman Mailer’s (1923–) *Armies of the Night* (1968). The **satirical novel,** such as Jonathan Swift’s (1667–1745) *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) or Mark Twain’s (1835–1910) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), highlights weaknesses of society through the exaggeration of social conventions, whereas **utopian novels** or science fiction novels create alternative worlds as a means of criticizing real sociopolitical conditions, as in the classic *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949) by George Orwell (1903–50) or more recently Margaret Atwood’s (1939–) *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Very popular forms are the **gothic novel,** which includes such works as Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764), Bram Stoker’s (1847–1912) *Dracula* (1897). The principal aim of such novels was to evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery and a variety of horrors.

1. **Drama**

Drama may be defined as a mode of storytelling enacted by live performers before an audience. The Greek root of the word *drama* literally means "action happening before the eyes." In this sense, the drama differs from fiction in that the plot, characters, and setting must all be conveyed to the audience with the limitations of space and time inherent in this form. While a novel may stretch its plot across a nearly infinite length of time or pages and fill its story with as many characters as necessary, a play must simplify its structure to be enjoyed and understood within an audience's practical attention span and within the limited resources of a particular physical space. Because of these constraints placed upon the playwright, drama was prized as one of the highest forms of art by the Ancient Greeks.

From this classical heritage, drama has been an important form of popular entertainment, religious ritual, social commentary, and creative expression down to the present day. Even in our modern age, with the proliferation of technology and amusement, contemporary audiences still respond to the immediacy and intimacy of live performers engaged in action unfolding in front of them. While its form has changed over time, the basic elements of the drama have remained since the Greeks.

**Types of Drama**

Drama is a major literary Genre, frequently subdivided into the categories of Tragedy, Comedy, and Tragicomedy. Further subdivisions include Melodrama and Farce.

**Tragedy** is broadly applied to literary, and especially to dramatic, representations of serious actions which eventuate in a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist (the main character). Tragedy is fundamentally a serious play in which the tragic hero faces problems and obstacles but cannot hope to overcome them and ultimately he is defeated. **Comedy** is a type of drama that celebrates or satirizes the follies of characters. In the most common literary application, a comedy is a fictional work in which the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest and amuse us: the characters and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern, we are made to feel confident that no great disaster will occur, and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters. **Tragicomedy** is a play that generally incorporates both tragic and comic elements. It represents a serious action which threatens a tragic disaster to the protagonist, yet, by an abrupt reversal of circumstance, turns out happily. The name “tragicomedy” is sometimes also applied more loosely to plays with double plots, one serious and the other comic. **Melodrama** is a type of drama that highlights suspense and romantic sentiment, with characters who are usually either clearly good or bad. As its name implies, the form frequently uses a musical background to underscore or heighten the emotional tone of a scene. **Farce** is a type of comedy designed to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter in the parlance of the theatre. To do so it commonly employs highly exaggerated or caricatured types of characters, puts them into improbable and ludicrous situations, and often makes free use of sexual mix-ups, broad verbal humor, and physical bustle and horseplay.

**The Elements of Fiction and Drama**

Aristotle outlined the most basic elements that comprise any narrative, and any study of literature must begin with his list. The most important elements are:

**Plot**

Plot is the plan, design, scheme or pattern of events in a play, poem or work of fiction; and, further, the organization of incident and character in such a way as to induce curiosity and suspense in the spectator or reader. An ideal plot encompasses the following sequential levels: exposition-complication-resolution.

A typical plot consists of a tripartite (three-part) action structure: rising action, climax, and falling action. The **rising action** of a work consists of the main character’s attempts to overcome whatever obstacles stand in his or her way. This struggle usually results in the greatest dramatic moment of the story, the **climax**. After this climax follows the story’s **falling action**, also called the denouement. The engine that drives this entire plot structure is **conflict**. Conflict may be internal (a man against himself) or external (a man against another man, society, nature, etc.) Stories may contain several different conflicts of internal or external natures. The main purpose of such conflict is to create a sense of **suspense** in the reader to foster continued interest in the narrative. This structure may also be referred to as the obstacle-anxiety-relief cycle.

In many cases, flashbackand foreshadowing introduce information concerning the past or future into the narrative. **Flashback** is a change in the temporal sequence of the story so that it moves back to show events that took place earlier than those already shown. Occasionally the flashback will involve a return to a scene that the audience has already witnessed. This type of flashback may be repeated a number of times, each time acquiring added significance as the plot progresses. **Foreshadowing**, on the other hand, is information presented in an earlier part of the story to make us accept as probable an event that takes place later on in the narrative.

**Setting**

Setting is the where (place) and when (time) of a narrative or a play, and by extension, the social and political context of the action. The role that setting plays in a story and its overall significance in forming an understanding of the work varies greatly. Some stories are particular to a time and place, while others could be set against almost any backdrop.

**Character**

Character is a person depicted in a Narrative or Drama. Traditional fiction usually includes a physical description of a character’s appearance, but many modern and postmodern novels dispense with the physical description and focus on the state of mind or motivation of the character.

A basic distinction between types of characters is that between “flat” and “round.” **Flat** characters tend to be minor figures, who remain unchanged throughout the story. **Round** characters—those seen in a more rounded fashion— usually change in the course of the story. A comparable distinction exists between **Stock Character** (A character type who serves a particular function in the literary genre in which he or she appears) and those that are **three-dimensional** (complex and unique, with fully developed fictional lives. This makes them seem like real people.)

**Theme**

The main or central idea expressed in a work of fiction, drama, and poetry may be called its **theme**. Correctly understood, all other elements of narrative contribute to the making of a theme. Every choice that a writer makes -- the events of the plot, the descriptions of the characters, the selection of the setting -- is geared toward conveying with greatest precision his or her intended message to the reader. Unlike life in the real world, nothing is accidental in a fictional universe. Even seemingly random events were imagined and written by an intelligent being (the writer) with the intention of provoking a reaction in the reader. In this respect, properly understanding the theme of a work involves accounting for all the choices that an author has made.

**Point of view**

**Point of view** is the angle or the perspective from which the action in a story is viewed or the narrator’s relation to the fictional world of the story and to the minds of the characters in it. Common points of view include:

1. **First Person Point of View**

In a first-person narrative, the narrator speaks as “I,” and is to a greater or lesser degree a participant in the story, or else is the protagonist of the story. The narrator would be inside the story and would tell the readers what he or she, but nobody else, thinks and feels. This mode limits the matter of the narrative to what the first-person narrator knows, experiences, infers, or finds out by talking to other characters.

1. **Third Person Point of View (The Omniscient)**

In a third-person narrative, the narrator is someone outside the story proper who refers to all the characters in the story by name, or as “he,” “she,” “they.” Here, the narrator could have an access to the minds of all the characters in the story. This is a common term for the many and varied works of fiction written in accord with the *convention* that the narrator knows everything that needs to be known about the agents, actions, and events, and has privileged access to the characters’ thoughts, feelings, and motives; also that the narrator is free to move at will in time and place, to shift from character to character, and to report (or conceal) their speech, doings, and states of consciousness.

1. **Third Person Point of View (The Limited Omniscient)**

In this point of view, the narrator is also outside the story. The narrator tells the story in the third person, but stays within the confines of what is perceived, thought, remembered, and felt by a single character (or at most by very few characters) within the story.

1. **The Objective (Dramatic) Point of View**

The narrator might choose to reveal none of the minds of the characters. From outside the story, he would report simply what the characters say and do. This point of view is familiar in dramatic works. In order to counter the difficulty of revealing the characters’ minds, dramatists devised some techniques as *the confidant*, *soliloquy*, and *aside*. A **confidant** is a character who is sympathetic with the main character and who “draws him out.” Therefore, through a conversation between these two characters, readers or audience would know how the mind of the main character is working. **Soliloquy** (thinking loudly or speaking to oneself) is a speech delivered by a character alone on the stage. **Aside**, a device peculiar to drama, is another way a character can reveal his true feelings and thoughts. The character turns aside and addresses the audience in a “stage whisper.” He pretends to whisper so that the other characters will not hear him, but actually speaks loud enough to be heard throughout the audience.