

: STRUCTURE :

- 3.0 Objectives**
- 3.1 Introduction**
- 3.2 What is Literature ?**
- 3.3 What is Society ?**
- 3.4 The Relationship of Literature and Society**
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up**
- 3.6 Key Words**
- 3.7 Books Suggested**
- 3.8 Check Your Progress**

Answers

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall,

- explore the concept of literature and society,
- show the examples of literature reflecting society,
- evaluate the relationship between literature and society,

In the end, you should be able to;

- understand the difference of non–literature and literature,
- understand the examples explained here,
- grasp the innate relationship of literature and society.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

It is very difficult to study anything unless you know what you are looking for. By ‘looking for’ I mean finding what is important in the thing you are studying. The question is the best way of finding that. The expression ‘literature’, since time immemorial has been employed by man for delight as well as a device that mirrors the realities of life.

‘Literature holds up a mirror to life’, we all know this as learners and scholars of literature; irrespective of the language of the same. This can be sufficed by tracing the history of literature which dates back to the beginning of human civilization. Any literature that is produced, it penetrates through the layers of lives; realistic and imaginative lives of the people. Literature has its base in and on the human beings; which eventually form a civilization, a society. Literature and Society are inseparable, as they sustain each other.

3.2 WHAT IS LITERATURE ?

In the most general sense, literature is anything which is written. To understand 'what is literature', we must know what is not a literature; like, to better understand the colour 'white', we must know the colour 'black'. In general, the examples of written works are brochures, pamphlets, newspapers, informative booklets, etc. In a more definitive sense, Literature is a body of written work which has intellectual and aesthetic value. The examples of these kinds of literatures are novels, short stories, drama, poetry; which can be again classified into two categories : fiction and non-fiction. The usage of language and its purpose are the two major differentiators of written works; which make them literature or non-literature. Non-literary writings are most of the times written for the purpose of providing information; and the language used in these writings is directional and ordinary.

Literature is written and read for the purpose of deriving aesthetic pleasure, hence the use of language is artistic; which establishes the form, images, concepts, meanings, and mood, that the author wants to convey to the readers. For the creation of literature, the writers borrow their presentation of story, theme, plot, characters, and dialogue; from the place, time, and space they live in. This is in turn influenced by the surrounding environment and the inhabitant people, which are broadly the components which form a society. In other words, the social approach to literature emphasizes not so much the personality or inner feelings of characters as the relation they have with each other. Let us now understand what society is.

3.3 WHAT IS SOCIETY ?

Society consists of surroundings and people. The basic component or a unit of society is human. The group of humans who largely share common geography, culture, political authority, religion, customs, beliefs; they interact and build relationship with each other; this leads to the formation of a society. The features of any society are contrastingly enough; likeness and differences, mutuality and conflict. But majorly, any group of people share interconnectedness, interdependence, and cooperation can be termed as a society.

Now, society is real and tangible; as we can see and relate to the people surrounding us, but literature is intangible because we can read and only feel the emotions conveyed by the writer of it. But still, literature and society share a very strong relationship; let us evaluate that now.

3.4 THE RELATIONSHIP OF LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

Literature mirrors life, hence literature mirrors society. The happenings, events, problems, solutions, happiness, sadness and a variety of emotions and feelings; as well as imagination of people, thus peoples' lives are depicted in the literature. The society influences literature, and literature also influences the society. Thus it's a two-way relationship between literature and society.

The influence of literature on society is felt in certain manners; which holds the proverb 'pen is mightier than the sword' to be true. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* written by Frederick Douglass directly influenced the White American society. It made the Whites aware of the injustice and inhuman treatment of Black slaves in the plantation system and brought the new awakening for the Black Americans. Similarly, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was also responsible for the movements in the Blacks' society for freedom from slavery. Whereas *My Experiments with Truth* by M. K. Gandhi teaches the society about the importance of truth, moral values and showcases high ideals for the healthy society to follow. Similarly, Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Sharatchandra's Parineeta* create and stimulate social reforms, by inspiring the removal of vices and wrong practices performed by the conventional and orthodox societies. Thereby, literature can be said to influence the society.

The practices of society have also influenced literature; though they are the works of fiction. *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope is an example for this scenario. It is a mock-heroic poem, based on an actual event narrated by Pope's friend John Caryll. The incident is of an aristocratic Petre cutting off a lock of Arabella's hair without permission, and the consequent argument creates a breach between the two families. In this poem Pope depicts the elegance and emptiness, vanity and vagueness, meanness and money-prowess, foppishness and frivolity of the high aristocratic lives of eighteenth century in its real and satirical form. On the other hand, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, is inspired from the real life incidence. Morrison came across an article, published in the newspaper; "A Slave-Mother Who killed her Child". Margaret Garner, a Black slave in 1856, in order to free her child from slavery, attempts to kill her own child; for if the child lives it will be forced into the barbaric institution of slavery. This incident moved Morrison to write a Pulitzer Prize Winner *Beloved*, which is dedicated to "Sixty Million and more" Africans who died as a result of the slave trade.

If we survey the track of literature from the beginning to the post-modern age, with all its transformation; we are brought into the direct contact and motive forces of the inner life of each generation. So it is said, "ordinary English history is the nation's biography and its literature is its biography". Literary texts have been said to be reflecting, "economics, family relationships, climate and landscapes, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars, and religion." These are the various features and characteristics of society. Literature and society thus share a relationship where they feed and nurture each other. As stated already in the literary sense the social approach to literature highlight not so much the individuality or inner feelings of characters as the relation they have with each other. As listed through various examples a social interpretation of literature sees these relations in terms of the traditions and customs of society. Directly or indirectly, much stress is laid on the social interpretation of the classes to which characters belong. For instance, it is important to see who is rich and who poor, who is rising in society and who is falling, and who earn their living from a trade, a profession or from family land. A social approach also looks on the institutions of society.

To repeat, Literature mirrors life, hence literature mirrors society. As a result, it is much easier to understand a point about literature or a literary form particularly if you are given example. For instance, novels are specially made worlds in words. In simple terms a novel exists in the way it does because an author has chosen to put it together in that particular manner. This means that novels are not real life. Like all works of art—poems, plays, pots or pieces of music – they have been constructed or crafted. Now, when we talk about the relationship between literature and society, the most obvious question is the social standing of the author, through the character he or she is projecting. If an author is interested in the relation between the different classes within society, he or she is likely to stress the social standing of characters depicted. It should be remembered that not every author is interested in the workings of society, and that those that are will be interested in different societies and will have different attitudes towards them. Dickens for instance, writes about town society, whereas George Eliot seems to be more interested in the society found in villages or small provincial towns. Dickens is more aware of the faults of society—its unfriendly nature, its pretence, the incompetence of its officials—but George Eliot, though by no means without criticism, appreciates tradition, the sense of belonging, and the way in which many classes tolerate each other.

A good question to ask about any book, a literary text is : what do I remember ? Sometimes you will find that what the characters said and did sticks in your mind, but you may also find that what you recall is a scene. You may at times recall scenes in a novel, or remember an impression of the atmosphere, mood or feel. ‘Setting’ is the perfect word. It covers the places in which characters are presented, the social context of the characters, their customs, beliefs and rules of behavior in their society. In other words the social setting of a novel is the prime focus to understand the text to the fullest.

Nobody can change the past. What's done is done. Those two statements express what some novelists’ project in their works as their main plot; such plots are based upon the structure and workings of society. From a reader's point of view, a plot is different from a story because it invites and answers the questions as to why one event follows another. On the other hand a story is just a sequence.

Thus, to conclude the titles of books speak volumes. For example if the title of a novel is *Untouchable*, the title clearly reveals its theme. Here, theme is different from the term significant. Theme is purely what the novel can be summed up as saying. This also displays to prove the fact that the author takes an interest in certain aspects of life through his work. Authors can give expression to the themes of novels by stressing certain words. Words used carefully can focus the meaning of a novel and take the reader to the heart of the author's concern. Moral words work in similar way. The point about a moral word is that it carries a judgment with it; that is to say, we can tell whether we should approve or disapprove simply by attending to the meaning of the word. Thus, in a novel setting makes a complete world and that world can be said to be the fundamental theme of the book.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt the difference between general text and literature, the relationship of literature and society. The texts have been stated which depict the influence of society on literature, as well as the influence of literature on society. Various aspects of ‘novel’ as a literary form are discussed for better understanding. As a reader look at the novels you are studying from the point of view of how the author arranges the events and the person he or she adopts for the narration. What effects do these have ?

3.6 KEY WORDS

Civilization : the process by which a society or place reaches an advanced stage of social development and organization.

Penetrate : to go into or through

Depict : illustrate

Tangible : that which can be touched

Aesthetic : appreciation of beauty

Aristocratic : of or belonging to high-born, well-born, elite life

Barbaric : cruel

Moral : ethical

Interpretation : understanding

Approach : move towards

Theme : subject matter

Significance : meaning

Symbols : signs

Story : simply a sequence

Plot : concerned with causes—with the ‘whys’ of events

Fundamental : central

Setting : background

Social standing : relation between the different classes within society

3.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED

Albrecht, Milton C. “The Relationship of Literature and Society”. Chicago Journals. 1954, p. 426.

Annas, Pamela J. & Robert C. Rosen. *Literature and Society : An Introduction to Fiction, PoetryDrama, Nonfiction*. MLA Update, 2015.

3.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS.

1. Give the examples showcasing general writing and forms of literature.
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2. When you interpret a literary text, what is utmost required as a reader ?
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3. What is the purpose of literature ?
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4. Reflect in your words on this statement “Interpretation is the business of finding out what the meaning, or meanings, of the book is.”
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5. In which texts literature reflects society ?
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6. Which literary texts inspire the societal reforms ?
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7. Which relationship exists between literature and society ?
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ANSWERS

1. The examples of general writings are brochures, pamphlets, newspapers, and informative booklets. The examples of forms of literature are novel, short story, drama, poetry.
2. While interpreting a text you will discover that you need to master a set of terms that describe certain literary effects. In addition, you will find that you need to master a wider vocabulary which deals with the thoughts, experiences and feelings with which literature is concerned.

3. The language of literature is artistic and the purpose of literature is to derive aesthetic pleasure.
4. The idea of interpretation often frightens students. The statement reveals that fact that interpretation is finding out the significance of a work, of saying what it is about, what it adds up to. The question, then that you should ask about any literary work is : what is its meaning or significance ? When you answer that question, you will be interpreting the work. Further, comes the stage to try a number of approaches to a comprehend a literary text.
5. *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison are the literary books which reflect society.
6. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* written by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *My Experiments with Truth* by M. K. Gandhi, Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and Sharatchandra's *Parineeta*, these literary texts inspire the reformations in society.
7. Literature and society exists in a two–way relationship, where literature influences society and society influences literature. They are connected to each other in a way that each feeds and nurtures the other. So it can be said that, “ordinary English history is the nation's biography and its literature is its biography”. Also, “economics, family relationships, climate and landscapes, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars, and religion”; gets reflected in literature.

