

UNIT – 2

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EMPIRICAL AND LITERARY STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

STRUCTURE :

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2.2.1 Why Study history of English literature?

2.3. Characteristics of Empirical Study of the History of English literature

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall

- Understand importance of the study of history of English literature
- Discuss the difference between empirical and literary study of history of English literature After completing the unit, you should be able to
- Enlist benefits of studying history
- Identify the characteristics of empirical and literary study of the history of English literature
- Identify the difference between empirical and literary study of the history of English literature

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The study of history provides insights from the past. History includes all the aspects of life such as religion, culture, education, politics, society, arts, literature, so on and so forth. Each culture has particular ways of preserving its heritage. For example, largely the Western culture has documented its history in the written documents whereas the Eastern culture like India has preserved its past through oral literatures and manuscripts. While studying the history of literature, we are studying the cultural memory of a particular nation and its people. When we study the history of English literature, we come across various books. Some books focus on the archaeological evidence such as handwritten scripts of the authors, their monumental things, places they had been etc., whereas other books give a brief account of writers and their works during different periods of history. The first kind of history is called the ‘empirical study’ of history and the second kind of study of history is called the ‘literary study’. In this unit, we will discuss in detail the difference between the empirical and literary study of the history of English literature.

2.2 WHY DO WE STUDY HISTORY?

When someone studies history, he/she systematically examines different aspects of the past. It is about critically analysing past events for the betterment of the present and future. However, why do we have to study something that has gone by? The study of history is as important as a person’s memory. Imagine, you landed some money to your friend, and then you forget it! What will happen? You will lose the money if your friend does not return it. Or suppose, accidentally you fell into a pit yesterday in the market, today you are going again through that path and you forget yesterday’s incident. What will happen? Thus, to remember what is useful and what is harmful, we need to use memory. Among all the species, only the humans could cultivate dynamic memory. However, human memory is still very limited. When we want to remember something useful for the mass of people, we need to find out other means of remembering. Therefore, we write books, build monuments, sing songs of legends and tell stories of their glories.

2.2.1 Why Do We Study History Of English Literature?

Many things cannot be documented by the systematic means of history. Therefore, we need to look at other ways of remembering the past. For example, an excellent study of the literature of a particular period can very well tell us about the people of that time with their beliefs, customs, virtues, vices, ideology, social structures, etc.

The study of the history of English literature allows us to understand the culture and English society over a period. There are various reasons why the study of the history of English literature is significant. Firstly, we can see the development of English language during various phases of history and contribution of different authors to the development of grammar and vocabulary. Secondly, it allows us to understand literary, philosophical and ideological movements prevalent in the past. Thirdly, it gives us a comprehensive picture of different art forms and people tastes for the same. Lastly, the study of literary forms such as poems, stories, novels, plays and essays make us understand how English culture has developed into what it is today.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 1

1. What is history?

2. Why do we study history?

3. What are two reasons of studying history of English literature?

2.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

History is a story of the truth of the past. How do we know that whatever is written in the history books is the truth? Well, the simple answer is: there is empirical evidence that supports the factual truth of past events. Empirical evidence means evidence that can be seen, touched and measured. Whatever data (information) is available to the historian is analyzed and interpreted to verify the truth. Let us take an example; we find references to Globe Theatre of Shakespearean age, which is about

400 years from now. Was it there? How do we know? An empirical study of such data will take you to the location. When you visit the Globe Theatre, you would like to match the details given in the history books with what you observe. When the details are comparable, we can believe that the information is correct.

But what if you do not find the Globe Theatre? Then as an empirical historian, one should study the remains of the theatre, both physical and non-physical. For example, one can study books written before 300 years ago to check out whether there was any theatre like that. Then one can study books written before 200 years and then 100 years. Likewise, one can come to know precisely to what time the theatre was functional. One can also study the records maintained by the theatre such as details of the actors, dramatists, directors, helpers, their salaries, expenditures of the overall theatre etc. One can also meet present-day successors of the people who were associated with the Globe Theatre and know from them. For, they might have preserved the story of the theatre in their oral memory. Besides, one can study the books written by the archaeologists, folklorists, literary historians, etc. The function of an empirical study of history is to find out measurable proofs that claim certain things about the past. Thus, based on the above example, we deduce the following characteristics of an empirical study of the history of English literature:

1. Empirical study of history of English literature studies scientific and historical evidences of books, authors and events of the past.
2. It is highly objective in nature.
3. It includes more than one source of evidences.
4. The evidences should give almost same conclusion to other historians too.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – 2

- **Find out whether the following statements are true or false:**
 1. Empirical study of history is a systematic inquiry of the past.
 2. One evidence is enough for the study.
 3. Empirical study of history of English literature seeks factual truth of the past.
 4. Archeological study is not part of the empirical study.
 5. The result of an empirical study of English literature is almost same for the other historians using the same method.

2.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF LITERARY STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

The literary study of the history of English literature focuses on the literary tastes of English society — for example, the lives of the poets, authors and playwrights of particular periods. In a literary study, the historian studies different periods in history — for example, Elizabethan Age, Restoration Age, The Puritan Age, etc. Moreover, what kind of literary genres were popular in what age? Who were the leading poets and writers? What were the major themes and styles they engaged with? Why were some literary trends more dominant than others? These are some of the questions that a literary historian explores.

For example, when we study David Daiches' *A Critical History of English Literature*, we find out a chronology of ages of English literature, discussion on the impact of socio-political aspects of the creative writers. To support his argument, David Daiches includes examples of poems, excerpts of passages, and publication details of the books. In all, we find that such books focus more on 1) information – what was written in terms of prose, poetry, drama etc, 2) context – socio-political scenario and 3) style – how literature was written e.g., genres, themes, language, styles, symbols, motifs, trends, etc. A literary study of English literature mostly includes books as sources of evidence. The conclusions derived from the fictional and non-fictional books are more interpretations than scientific statements. Therefore, each literary historian has a different viewpoint about the same author, event or trend of the history of English literature. Thus, based on the above discussion, we deduce the following characteristics of the literary study of the history of English literature:

1. Literary study of history of English literature gives description of the general literary tastes of the English society.
2. The focus of such a study is to generalize various literary periods, movements and impacts.
3. It includes fictional and non-fictional books as the sources of study.
4. The outcome of such a study is often interpretation of the literary events of past.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – 3

- **Find out whether the following statements are true or false:**

1. Literary study of history is a descriptive account of the past.
2. The focus of literary study of English literature does not provide periods of history.
3. Literary elements are given importance.

4. Everything is scientific in a literary study of history of English literature.
5. It is based on lab test of the evidences.

2.5 EMPIRICAL HISTORY AND LITERARY HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

As you have studied both kinds of history of English literature, we are very well aware of the key differences.

Difference	Empirical History	Literary History
Aim	To find out the factual truth of the history of English literature (e.g., Was there a Globe theatre?)	To find out chronological development of literary aspects of history English literature (How Globe theatre contributed to the development of English drama?)
Approach	Highly scientific (e.g., the study of the manuscripts of Shakespeare)	Highly narrative (e.g., the study of themes of plays of Shakespeare)
Procedure	It uses systematic procedure, which is based on several empirical sources (e.g., documents of Shakespeare's birth, education, income etc.).	It uses descriptive procedure, which is based on the books: fictional and non-fictional (e.g., books on Shakespeare's dramatic techniques).
Focus	To answer specific questions (e.g., Did Shakespeare actually write The Tempest?)	To answer general questions (e.g., Who were the major playwrights of Elizabethan Era)
Tools	Measurable tools such as archeological evidences, books, photographs (e.g., Shakespeare's writing desk, his clothes, his folios, etc.)	Words, poems, stories, plays, novels, history books (Hamlet, Macbeth, The Merchant of Venice, The Shakespeare Survey, A History of English Literature etc.)
Outcome	The end result is testable and verifiable. (e.g. the same result of the study of Shakespeare)	The end result is subject to multiple interpretations (e.g., different interpretations of the study of Shakespeare).

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 4

1. How does the aim of empirical study differ from the literary study of English literature?

2. In what way both the procedures vary?

3. What other examples which focus on between empirical history and literary history?

4. Why does the end result differ in both the studies?

5. Find out and write down names of five books of History of English literature with their author and publication details.

2.6. KEY WORDS

- Empirical Study:** based on, concerned with, or verifiable by observation or experience rather than theory or pure logic.
- Evidence:** the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid
- Monument:** a statue, building, or other structure erected to commemorate a notable person or event.

Legend:	an extremely famous or notorious person, especially in a particular field
Ideology:	a system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy.
Remains:	the parts left over after other parts have been removed, used, or destroyed.
Playwright:	Dramatist
Objective:	Without any subjective prejudice
Archeological study:	the study of human history and prehistory through the excavation of sites and the analysis of physical remains
Deduce:	arrive at (a fact or a conclusion) by reasoning; draw as a logical conclusion

2.7. SUMMARY

Thus, the significant difference between the empirical and literary study of the history of English is in the goal and method the respective studies. We should remember that both kinds of studies are essential for the students of English literature. In fact, a good history of English literature will give you some empirical evidence too. Mostly, the study of the history of English literature will enable you to understand English poems, plays, stories, novels, essays etc., in a far better manner because history provides the contexts in which different genres are written.

2.8. LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt

- The importance of the study of history of English literature
- Characteristics of empirical and literary study of history of English literature
- Difference between empirical and literary study of history of English literature

2.9. BOOKS SUGGESTED

- 1) David Daiches. *A Critical History of English Literature*. Allied Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2005
- 2) Long, William J. *English Literature*. Atlantic Edition, 2015.

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1. History is a record of what happened in the past either in the written format or in other formats such as oral narrative and monuments.

2. The study of history is critical because it gives us the wisdom of the past so that we can make our future better. If we know the history, we do not repeat our mistakes of the past.
3. By studying the history of English literature, we come to know how the English language developed periodically. Secondly, the study of poems, stories, novels, plays and essays make us understand how English culture has developed into what it is today.

Check Your Progress 2

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. False
5. True

Check Your Progress 3

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. False
5. False

Check Your Progress 4

1. The principal aim of an empirical study of the history of English literature is to find out truth from the historical truth. Whereas the aim of the literary study of the history of English literature is to present a chronological and descriptive development literary aspects of history English literature. Thus, the empirical study focuses more on concrete aspect of history whereas literary study provides abstract aspects of the history of English literature.
2. The fundamental difference between the methods of both the studies is that in the empirical study, the historian observes, analyzes, tests and draws conclusions. In the literary study of the history of English literature, is studying other books (fictional and non-fictional) to write a new book. There is no room for any fiction in the empirical study of the history of English literature.
3. An empirical study of the history of English literature focuses on answering specific questions such as how many languages did Milton know? Where did he study them? Who were his teachers? What syllabus did he study? On the other hand, literary study of the history of English literature focuses on answering general questions such as what were the major themes of Metaphysical Poetry? What kind of language did Restoration Playwrights use?

4. The results of both studies differ because of their different aims and procedures. For example, the empirical study of the history of English literature tries to give scientific proof of what existed in the history of English literature. Whereas the literary study of the history of English literature tries to give a lengthy description of the significant phases of the development of English literature. Therefore, in the first case the result is testable and verifiable, and in the latter, the result is subject to multiple interpretations.
5. There are other books of history of English literature:
 1. History of English Literature by Edward Alber
 2. A History of English Literature by Robert Huntington Fletcher
 3. A History of English Literature by Michael Joseph Alexander
 4. History of English Literature by Legouis and Cazamian
 5. The Pelican Guide to English Literature, edited by Boris Ford