

What is Literature?

Literature is a study that concerns a whole range of human life and activities. Thus, literature concerns you and me. It should be made clear from the onset that there is no real consensus or one all embracing definition of the term literature. You should also know that some of the definitions of literature given by scholars are largely according to their wealth of life experience within their locations. Let's concern the following definitions:

1. Literature is 'feelings' and 'thoughts' in black and white.

2. Literature is the use of language to evoke a personal response in the reader or listener.

2. Literature is a world of fantasy, horror, feelings, visions . . . put into words.

4. Literature means . . . to meet a lot of people, to know other different points of view, ideas, thoughts, minds . . . to know ourselves better.

5. Literature is the imaginative work that gives us : recreation, recognition, revelation and redemption.

6. Literature is a permanent expression in words of some thoughts or feelings in ideas about life and the world.

7. Literature springs from our inborn love of telling a story, of arranging words in pleasing patterns, of expressing in words some special aspects of our human experience.

All the above definitions describe literature from different perspectives. Still, there are certain things that are common to them. They all recognise the fact that:

i. Literature is imaginative

ii. Literature expresses thoughts and feelings

iii. Literature deals with life experiences

iv. Literature uses words in a powerful, effective and yet captivating manner

vi. Literature promotes recreation and revelation of hidden facts.

Literature is thus a permanent expression in words of some thought or feeling or idea about life and the world. Literature may be good, bad or indifferent; but good literature will have some, if not all, of the following qualities:

1. Psychological truth or holding the mirror up to nature.
2. Originality.
3. Craftsmanship.
4. A consciousness of moral values.

Generally, literature represents writing in prose or verse especially writing having excellence of form or expression and expression ideas of promontory universal interest.

Why study literature?

Literature refers to various meanings. It may be looked at in general as a branch of human activity different from science or economics. We may use literature as something associated with a particular nation such as Arabic literature, Indian literature, African literature, and so on. It can also refer to a

certain literary movement or to a historical period such as Victorian Literature, Romantic Literature, Medieval Literature, etc. Furthermore, it may point to the whole product of a specific subject such as the literature of psychology, medicine, etc. By literature here is meant imaginative literature, which includes genres such as poetry, novels, drama, and short stories.

Literature constitutes basic component in the syllabus of schools and universities. Why then should literature be considered to be important by educationists, syllabus-designers and teachers? the answer is that literature has certain qualities, which are of valid value for human beings. Literature is, indeed, valuable for its language. Novelists, dramatists, short story writers, and poets in particular, tend to apply language in its purest and richest form. The learner of the foreign language, in studying literature, is drawn to the most appropriate use of diction. Literature helps to preserve the precision and therefore the validity of language. Works of good literature especially at the earlier stage help in deepening and increasing learner's understanding, for their attention. Activated by interest and suspense, would be concentrated on the actions and face of the characters since the reader of happenings of literary work, his attention is thus focused upon the works, which build up the meanings expressed in the work.

Literature is to be enjoyed. Enjoyment implies pleasure and delight. Unlike other sources of enjoyment, such as sports, cinema and parties, literature provides enjoyment and relaxation accompanied with the stimulation of the faculties of the mind.

Good literature is a source for learning about culture. Reading the works of distinguished literary men such as Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, D.H. Lawrence, Shelley, to take only few examples, we can have a good deal of information concerning the habits, customs, social attitudes, beliefs and ways of life peculiar to the periods in which those writers lived. A poem by Wordsworth or Yeats, though compact and condensed, adds to the reader's knowledge, for it reflects the poet's philosophy or his literary trend.

Works of literature assist in widening readers' experiences. The reader is, no doubt, acquainting himself with different views, notions and philosophies; consequently, he or she can have a new outlook into life. Connected with this is that literature sheds light on human nature.

Readers of literature are always anxious to know how the protagonists will face difficult situations, how the end will be and how they will attain their aspiration. The reader might even find himself part and parcel of literary work, i.e. a character among the characters. Therefore the man who shuts the book at the last page will be a different man from the one who opened it, though he may be quite unconscious of the change.