

# English Literature 1

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## Prose & Drama

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## 1. Introduction: Thinking about (Prose) Literature

### 1.1. What is prose?

Prose can be defined, in very general terms, as a type of narrative, an account of events. The term 'event' is used here in a very broad sense, meant to include situations and emotions. Our daily lives are full of narratives, ranging from news reports, history books and scientific articles to memories or gossip; from certain kinds of poetry (e.g. epic poetry), films, comic books and plays to mime and some forms of dance. Prose can be distinguished from these other types of narratives in several ways.

First of all, prose is a verbal narrative, either written or spoken. As such it differs from, for example, dance and mime, which are visual narratives, or from films and comic books, which combine visual and verbal elements. Prose can make use of visual traits too (e.g. illustrations in novels, gestures and facial expressions in the oral narration of a story), but its verbal component is always predominant.

The kind of prose we will be concerned with in this course is literary prose as opposed to non-literary prose such as news reports and scientific articles. The term 'literary' has been the subject of much debate.

### 1.2. What makes a text literary?

This is very hard to pinpoint, as are many things in the study of literature. It is not for nothing that, in English, the academic discipline is called "Literary Studies" and not a more literal equivalent of the German Literaturwissenschaft. What is literary depends in part on the historical period.

2nd September 1666, Lord's Day. Jane called us up about three in the morning, to tell us of a great fire they saw in the city. ... So I made myself ready presently, and walked to the Tower; and there got up upon one of the high places, Sir J. Robinson's little son going up with me; and there I did see the houses at that end of the bridge all on fire, and an infinite great fire on this and the other side the end of the bridge

Samuel Pepys, *Diary* (published 1970–1983)

Pepys' diary is now commonly included in anthologies of English literature, in part because it offers a rich first-hand account of many important events such as the Great Fire of London (1666). Today, we would not commonly include a diary in the category of the literary, except possibly if it was written by a poet, dramatist or novelist.

Various answers have been given to the question: what constitutes literariness? It has, for example, been called a socially constructed convention, and has been equated with a number of formal characteristics inherent in a text. Recent theories even claim that 'literariness' simply does not exist, that there are no special characteristics which distinguish literary texts from other texts. Although the debate is an interesting one, it is beyond the scope of this syllabus to engage in it. In this course, we will assume that a text is literary if a community of readers considers it a verbal work of art.

Several characteristics set literary prose apart from the two other major literary genres, drama and poetry. Unlike poetry, prose is not restricted by rhyme or metre (features which have lost their importance in contemporary poetry too), it is usually less disruptive of the rules of syntax and the conventions of punctuation, and tends to use language which is less ornate, which more closely resembles everyday language use (cf. the Latin origin of the term: *proversa oratorio*, 'straightforward discourse').

What distinguishes prose from drama is that in the former events are for the most part *described* by a narrator, whereas in the latter they are *shown*, acted out by actors. There are, of course, instances of 'showing' in prose fiction too, such as stretches of dialogue, as well as instances of narration in drama. The performance aspect is also much more important in drama than in prose, although prose too can be performed (e.g. story-telling).

Literary prose can be further divided into fictional (imaginative) and non-fictional prose. Prose forms belonging to the former category are the novel, the novella and the short story (the first being the longest form, the last the shortest). Within the category of the novel, we can distinguish various sub-genres, such as<sup>1</sup>

- the *Bildungsroman*, which portrays the development of the protagonist's mind and character (e.g. Dickens' *David Copperfield*)
- the historical novel, which takes its setting and some of its characters and events from history, and elaborately develops the historical aspect (e.g. Scott's *Waverley*)
- the regional novel, which emphasizes the setting, speech, and customs of a particular locality (e.g. Hardy's *Tess of the Durbervilles*)
- the gothic novel, which explores the dark, mysterious and irrational side of nature and human nature, using mysterious and super-natural elements, often violent or grotesque actions and sinister settings (e.g. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*)

Examples of literary non-fiction are autobiography (an account of a man or woman's life written by him- or herself) and biography (an account of someone's life written by someone else). Depending on

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<sup>1</sup> The list is taken from Demoor, p.15. See Works Cited at the end of the syllabus.

how one defines 'literariness' (e.g. as a concept that only involves form, or as one that has to do with both form and content), the category of literary non-fiction can be extended to include certain historical or philosophical works as well.

As was the case with the distinctions made earlier, the dividing line between fictional and non-fictional (both literary and non-literary) prose is hazy. Many forms of fiction, such as autobiographical fiction, historical novels or sociological novels, contain a clear non-fictional basis, a basis that is present to a lesser or greater degree in all fiction. Conversely, characteristic examples of non-fiction such as history books or news reports may prove to be not in keeping with reality. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (twelfth century), for instance, purports to be a chronicle but is in fact largely fictional.

### 1.3. Why do we read literature?<sup>2</sup>

The basic structure of many literary texts is that of a quest, a search for an object. But that object more often than not turns out not to be the main point of the quest. Rather, the quest is about self-discovery, a coming to grips with the quester's own sense of identity (often the hero of a quest is a young person). Consider the example of the Harry Potter novels:

- the core of the series consists of Harry's struggle against Lord Voldemort—the ultimate object of that underlying quest is the destruction of Voldemort
- there are often important quest elements in the individual novels, perhaps most clearly in the *Deathly Hallows*, where the object is to find and destroy Voldemort's remaining horcruxes;
- yet a crucial dimension of the quest overall is Harry's journey of self-discovery: as an orphan, it is particularly challenging for him to determine who he is—there are no parents to both learn from and rebel against. Or so it seems, because thanks to the fantasy dimensions, in a way there are.

A literary protagonist (= more neutral term than hero or heroine) always obtains that better understanding of who they really are in interaction with others, with a wider section of the social universe. In Harry Potter, that is to a large part the school, Hogwarts: the community of fellow pupils and teachers who stand in for parents and relatives.

Often, there is a prominent act of communion in a literary work, for instance a sharing of a meal; it may also be a failed act of communion—a meal that does not bind people together. See e.g. J.D. Salinger's "Franny."

Literary texts are not purely focused on an individual's journey of self-discovery. They are also importantly concerned with social identity, identity as a group, and a crucial way in which such a

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<sup>2</sup> Some of what follows is based on Foster.

social identity has been given shape in literary texts is through the creation of myths, or their invocation (= later references to earlier myths).

#### **1.4. How have literary texts been studied in the past?**

##### **Philology**

Although literature is probably as old as humankind itself, at least in an oral form, its study – as literature – is a recent phenomenon. Initially, it was the classics (works of poetry and drama in Latin and Greek) that formed the object of academic study. The study of literatures in so-called vernacular languages such as English only came into being in the course of the nineteenth century. At UGent, Germanic Philology and Romance Philology were first offered in 1890. As the name of those courses suggests, the focus of study was very much the history of the language, even when literary texts were examined. Philology, as a branch of study, was born in the Renaissance, and concerned itself strongly with establishing the original version of a written (classical) document, including literary texts, through the careful examination of language use (amongst other things). Later philological approaches to the study of literature continue to pay a great deal of attention to the meaning of the text, which it takes as a fact that can be established by determining the author's original intention.

More recent approaches to studying literature have questioned whether an author's intention can ever be unambiguously determined and have even questioned whether an author's intention with a literary text coincides with the meaning of that text. After all, we may well intend to communicate A when we write something down, but if (several) readers understand us to mean B, is not B the meaning of our text, in spite of our intention? Is not our unconscious (the emotional desires deep within us) an important factor in our acts of (literary) communication? Can we ourselves fully know what it is that we are saying? Is what we say only dependent on our (conscious, rational) intention? What is more, the meaning of a text may to some extent change over time, in this sense that when readers respond to elements in a text, they do so from within their own socio-historical context. It is not possible, and perhaps not even desirable, for a twenty-first-century reader to respond to Shakespeare's plays in completely the same way that an audience did around the year 1600, when those works were first staged. To give just one such example, the representation of Jewish and black characters in Shakespeare shows clear signs of the anti-Semitic and colonialist mindset that was entirely typical of his time: contemporary audiences would not even have noticed this, but it is difficult for an audience today to ignore the anti-Semitism and colonialism – those have become a part of the meaning of some of Shakespeare's plays in a way that was certainly not intended by Shakespeare, nor could that meaning have been visible in his life-time the way it is visible to us now.

##### **Liberal Humanism**

When, in the 1940s to 60s, the philological study of (older) literary texts began to give way to the study of more recent literature, high-minded evaluations of an author's sensibility were often preferred over critical analysis. In this period, the basis was laid for a so-called "liberal-humanist"

approach to literature, which continues to be practised by many academic critics and is also widespread in the general press (book reviews in newspapers). Liberal-humanist critics believe that literature has an exemplary value which can help readers find their true identity by offering recognizable characters, situations, and observations. Great literature is therefore regarded as timeless in its appeal: it contains eternal truths that good readers will discover no matter when and where they live.

In this course, we do not wholly disagree with this approach to literature, as the references to the Harry Potter series, which does speak to readers across the globe, suggest. Authors like Shakespeare have likewise proved capable of speaking to people born in a very different day and age. Yet, that is not necessarily to say that the novels of J.K. Rowling or the plays and poems of William Shakespeare contain eternal truths—it does not mean that they propose a thesis that is valid everywhere and will always be true, as was illustrated with the example of the anti-Semitism and racism in some of Shakespeare's plays, which we mentioned while questioning whether an author's intention should serve as the primary touchstone for a text's meaning.

Rather, what the teachers on this course believe, along with many colleagues teaching literature today in many parts of the world, is that literature worth studying asks interesting questions—that it makes readers think about the world and about themselves.

### **Socio-Historical Context**

It deserves to be underlined that we believe literary texts are anchored in a particular time-frame: a cultural and socio-historical context. Shakespeare's plays, to stick with that example, raise interesting questions about the nature of power, say, or about our relation to our ancestors, yet they do so in a specific historical context that is worth examining. This context helps determine what the answers are that characters in Shakespeare's plays come up with—answers that may be less valid for us today, living as we do in a very different context. By the same token, Rowling's novels, even if they are set in a parallel universe, entered through a virtual platform at King's Cross station, bear distinct marks of the current way of thinking about such matters as multiculturalism, or gender roles, in Western societies.

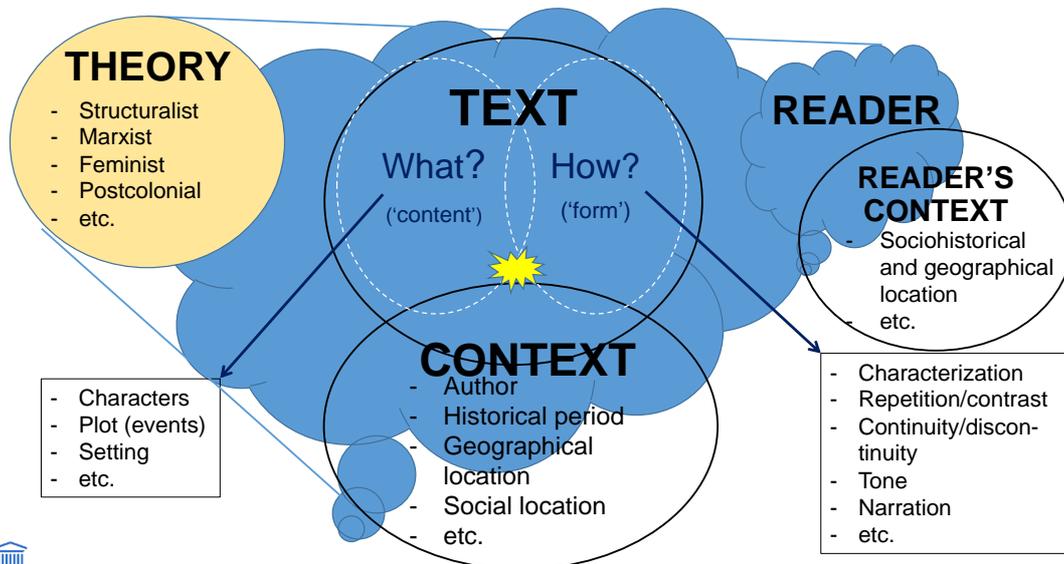
So our approach to the analysis of literary texts is conscious of the socio-historical context within which the literary works were written. It is also, inevitably, we would say, marked by our own socio-historical context and by the theoretical approaches to literature and culture that we are most familiar with. What we find striking in a text is in part determined by what we ourselves are preoccupied with—hence, for instance, the recent rise of studies of literary texts that examine them in relation to climate change and to the natural environment more generally. Other theoretical approaches that are current include Marxism, feminism, New Historicism, postcolonial theory, transatlantic studies, gender studies, queer theory, ethical criticism. See also the short overview of the range of approaches to literary texts that have been available over the past few decades in the Appendix.

## **Structuralism**

One approach to the analysis of prose fiction (novels and short stories) that has been highly influential has been the structuralist one, which forms the basis for a sub-discipline of literary studies that is called "narratology" and which we largely work with in this introductory course, though we supplement it with attention to such things as the sociohistorical context. In its most general sense, "structuralism" denotes a way of looking at the world as a network of relations (as opposed to a collection of independent states or items). A structure is the sum total of its elements and the relations between them. A structuralist perspective, then, implies that nothing is meaningful on its own. Meaning can only be derived from within a network of relations.

This implies an important breaking away from the liberal-humanist stance. Liberal-humanist values such as personal autonomy and free will are incompatible with an (anthropologically) structuralist point of view that regards conventions, rules, and assumptions as the true shaping forces of human life. Ultimately, the human subject (for instance, the author of a novel) is dethroned from its central position and turned into a mere intersection of forces that are constantly interacting independently of any decision that a subject might make.

In this course, we will look at how meaning originates at the intersection of content / form / context. Since the start of the study of literature about a hundred years ago, one or more of these three tripod-legs have received stronger emphasis. We will pay attention to all of them on a basic level. In later years, you will explore each of them in much more depth and detail. Our approach is represented in the following diagram, which focuses on prose:



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Diagram designed by Dr. Debora Van Durme, edited by Prof. Gert Buelens

In the first lecture, we have applied this schematic overview to a quick reading of a so-called “short short story” by Dave Eggers: “Those Certain Young People.” We have seen that a great many elements may be derived from even a very short piece of fiction like this – that a whole world can be sketched in with rapid brush-strokes. What we have done is undertake a literary analysis of this story, examining the aspects indicated in the diagram.