

Genres of Literature: Play, Poetry and Prose

By

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Introduction

Literature is a piece of art produced as a representation of life, interpretation of the culture, “the enemy of evil forces in society, the conservers of values and terror of bad government” (Nnolim 255). It can be spoken like proverbs, riddles, myths (which are used to show the way of the gods with men), legends (historical account of people who lived in the past) and incantations. Others can be sung like lullabies and war songs while rituals, festivals, initiations and masquerades are acted. Literature has successfully contributed to what Soyinka calls “Survival Patterns” of traditional culture in Africa (90). Riddles test one’s knowledge of wise sayings while jokes help to release tension through laughter, to make a point and to avoid direct confrontations. Proverbs are employed to instruct, advise, warn or guide. Literature mirrors society, conveys the history, teaches morals and preserves the culture. It is any work of art whereby the producer expresses his thought. For instance, African literary artists, according to Nnolim, demonstrate “through their works the beauty in our art, the meaning in our rituals, the logic in our traditional legal systems and the soundness in our healing ways” (10).

Functions of Literature

Literature educates

It provides amusement and entertainment

It exposes/criticizes the ills in society

It possesses and transfers historical records of memorable experiences from one generation to the other

It fosters cultural continuity by teaching the young material culture, belief, and traditions of the native land.

Genres of Literature

Literature is divided into three major categories (genres)

(1) Play (2) Poetry (3) Prose

Drama according to Aristotle is an imitation of an action. Imitation is part of life. People have the desire and tendency to imitate others, situations and events. It brings literature to life. Watching a story performed by actors and actresses adds a level of realism to the work despite the fact that we watch with, according to Samuel Coleridge, “**a willing suspension of disbelief**”. This infers that, though we know that the drama is not real yet we agree for the moment not to disbelieve the art. This justifies why we watch a murder scene but will not call the attention of the police or rescue the victim. Drama is meant to be watched and not read. It is interpretative. It interprets the playwrights’ imagination. Drama is active, it is associated with word, show or play. It is derived from a Greek word – ‘dran’ which means ‘action’ or ‘to do’. This could be achieved through speeches or gestures of the actors and actresses. It is often combined with music and dance. The drama in opera is mostly sung while musicals generally include both spoken dialogue and songs. It is usually written in acts and scenes and uses dialogue.

(2) Poetry

According to William Wordsworth, Poetry is ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility’. To Percy Shelly, as quoted in Ezeaku it is “the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds” (43). Poetry is as old as history. It is written in **verses** or **stanzas**. It makes use of figurative expressions which conveys different meanings from what is literary conveyed. It expresses “emotions, feelings, experiences, thought and ideas through language and is arranged in lines, stanzas or verses” (Onyeachulam 93). It may use end rhymes.

(3) Prose

Prose come from a Latin word ‘Prosa’ meaning straightforward. It has no formal metrical structure. It is any piece of writing built upon a structure of sentences. It is a narrative that tells a story by presenting the events in a logical or orderly manner without being limited to time or space. The story, according to Ogbazi, draws the readers into the imaginative world and at the same time engages them with the power of its invention. The literary artist, as a skilled craftsman ,will want his unique artistry to be appreciated. Unlike poetry or drama, it is written in paragraph and chapters. Prose can be a fiction or non-fiction.

Non-fiction is a true-life story/event. Examples of non-fictions are history books, biographies, autobiographies.

- (a) History books portray true life history of people’s lives, political or social events with correct contexts.
- (b) Biography is a life history of someone written by another person.
- (c) Autobiography is a life history of a person written by himself/herself.

Fiction is a work of art created from imagination. It is not presented as a fact. It is the opposite of non-fiction. The stories are fabricated and invented. The characters, events and places are not real. Fiction is derived from ‘ficto’ a Latin word which means a counterfeiting (Onyechulam 93). Fiction enlarges one’s understanding of life and deepens appreciation of life. A prose fiction can be a novel, short story or novella.

A novel is work of art that tells a story using a considerable length. It usually has many characters and themes. It is the longest form of prose fiction, like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*

A novella is shorter than a novel but longer than a short story. It may have about 60-120 pages, like Ifeoma Odinye’s *African China*

A short story is shorter than a novella. In most cases it has a single theme with a few characters. It can be about five to thirty pages, example “Saturday Night” by Ebele Okpala

Elements of Fiction

(1) Elements of fiction include title, plot, characters/characterization, setting, point of view, theme.

(1) Title: The title is supposed to attract the attention of the readers and sustain their interest. It may be a word, phrase or short sentence. The title should be direct, specific, concise (usually not more than seven words) and is expected to provide an insight into the work. Example are *Things Fall Apart*, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Behold the Dreamers* etc.

(2) Plot: This is the arrangement of events that make up the story. The plot portrays conflict, tension and action that will arouse the readers’ interest. It unfolds how one thing gives rise to another, what brings a conflict and

how it is resolved (Ezeaku 21) good plot should have a beginning, middle and end. The writer has the right to tell the story in a chronological order or begin in the middle of events (Media rez) whereby he/she makes use of flashbacks in order to depict the past events.

(3) Characters/Characterization

Characters are usually the imaginary persons used by the writer to form the population in the work of arts. Characters are the performers of the action. They do not exist in the real life. The characters may be animals like in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The writer's ability to create or develop the characters in a work of art is called **characterization**. The authors make the characters real, believable and credible. The characters are usually divided into two the majors and the minor characters. The major characters are referred to as the chief characters or protagonist who may be a hero (male) or heroine (female). The minor characters perform minor roles. The role of every character helps the readers to understand the story better. The characters may be appraised by what they do or say and what other characters say about them.

Setting

This is the place and time of the events a story takes place. It is the fictional world of the text. It conveys

- (i) Time – time of the day, day of the week, month of the year
- (ii) Place – environment – rural/urban, sea side, hut, palace/court, Nigeria, Europe, USA etc.

(4) Point of View

This is a position chosen by a writer to narrate his/her story. The author's angle he chooses to tell his story is the point of view. The author may decide to use the first person or the third person point of view.

- (i) The first-person point of view: The first-person pronoun ‘I’ is used. The writer reveals the event through the voice of the character who is normally used to tell the story. The protagonist tells the story as if the event happens to him. He/she is a greater participant of the event. The disadvantage is that the narrator’s observation may be altered (subjective) as a result of prejudice, emotional state, exposure, age or level of education. The first-person point of view makes the narrative believable as the readers are hearing from the person who experienced the event.
 - (ii) The third-person point of view: The third person pronoun ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’ are used to narrate the story. The author plays an omniscient (all knowing) or God-like role. This makes the readers believe that he knows everything about all the characters he creates, and the events that take place. This point of view is also known as **omniscient point of view**. Unlike the first-person point of view, the omniscient narrator is more objective in the presentation of events and characters. It may be worthy to note that the second-person point of view is not a common type of narrative technique.
- (5) **Subject Matter and Theme:** This is what the story is all about. This is also related to real life experience. Examples are love, disaster, fear, jealousy, ambition, religion, etc. The writer comes up with them through the exploration of these topics.

Theme

The theme is what the work says about the subject matter. The title, at times, may provide clues into the theme of a story. Some themes are stated directly while some are implied.

Diction

This is the use of language and style. It portrays the choice of language and words used by the writer and how the language is used. The style conveys the writers' choice of language which involves sentence structure, figurative expression, imagery, proverbs etc. These serve as spices that add flavor to the literary work.

Exercises

1. What is literature?
2. State five functions of literature
3. Three major genres of literature are _____, _____ and _____
4. _____ is an imitation of action.
5. Briefly explain the assertion by Samuel Coleridge that people watch drama “with a willing suspension of disbelief”.
6. _____ is written in acts and scenes while _____ is written in verses.
7. What is the difference between a fiction and non-fiction?
8. Give two examples of a non-fiction _____ and _____
9. What is the difference between a novel and a novella?
10. Explain the term short story
11. A good plot should have three major things, namely _____, _____ and _____
12. Define media rez?
13. What is characterization?
14. Who is a protagonist?
15. The first-person narrative technique uses the pronoun _____
16. The third-person point of view is also known as _____
17. Which point of view is more objective in the presentation of events and characters?
18. What is meant by subject matter?
19. What is poetry?
20. The use of language and style is known as _____

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