

Literature and the General Parameters of the Literary Value of a Work

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ABSTRACT

Literature is a term used to describe written and sometimes spoken material that is artistic, appealing, suggestive, universal and thought provoking. It must be judged through its contents coloured with imagination and poetic forms. It must also have some deeper purpose, contemporaneousness and public welfare. In short, literature is an artistic expression of thoughts, feelings and emotions of the author.

Etymologically, the term 'literature' has been derived from the Latin word "literatura / litteratura" which means 'writing formed with letters.' In simple words, literature is the combination of fact and fiction. It may be totally factual or fictional or the combination of the both. 'Factual' means real, actual and true while 'fictional' means imaginative.

The literary value is multi-faceted, unfathomable and immense encompassing various dimensions such as aesthetic, emotional, cultural and intellectual aspects. It also involves how the work explores universality, employs linguistic and structural effectiveness and contributes to various literary standards, cultural contexts and intellectual perspectives. The ways of evaluating a piece of literature may be varied depending on the nature, quality and quantity of the creation concerned, but some of the general parameters of the literary value of a work are as follows:

1. Artistic expression
2. Appealing power
3. Suggestivity
4. Universality along with timelessness or permanence
5. Thought provoking expression
6. Contents coloured with imagination and poetic forms
7. A tinge of deep purpose, contemporaneousness and public welfare.

Key Words : Literature, parameters, appealing power, Suggestivity, universality, contemporaneousness and public welfare etc.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a term used to describe written and sometimes spoken material that is artistic, appealing, suggestive, universal and thought provoking. It must be judged through its contents coloured with imagination and poetic forms. It must also have some deeper purpose, contemporaneousness and public welfare. In short, literature is an artistic expression of thoughts, feelings and emotions of the author.

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(i) J. H. Newman writes,

"Literature stands related to man as science stands to nature." 1

(ii) Oscar Wilde also says,

"Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose." 2

The General Parameters of the Literary Value of a Work

The literary value is multi-faceted, unfathomable and immense encompassing various dimensions such as aesthetic, emotional, cultural and intellectual aspects. In simple words, it refers to whether a piece of literature has any merit or not. A piece of literature is considered valuable or of great merit if it imparts its readers something highly valuable and carries an enduring impact on its readers and society. As a whole, the literary value means the quality, merit and value of a work based on its enduring artistry, originality, thematic depth, the loftiness of thoughts, a wide range of characters and vivid expressions of ideas to realize novelty and uniqueness. It also involves how the work explores universality, employs linguistic and structural effectiveness and contributes to various literary standards, cultural contexts and intellectual perspectives.

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1. Artistic expression occurs in the ways in which writers convey their emotions, thoughts and ideas in different art forms. In simple terms, a literary piece becomes artistic when the author makes uses of selected diction, the rules of prosody, figures of speech and other literary devices in order to adorn his creation. A fine example of artistic expression may be quoted from P. B. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" -

"O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,

Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead

Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow , and black, and pale, and hectic red,
 Pestilence-stricken multitudes : O' thou,
 Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed." 3

2. Appealing power refers to the ability to arouse human emotions such as hope, happiness, love, grief, hatred and anger etc. in order to offer insight into human experience. In other words, a piece of literature becomes appealing when it appeals to our emotions rather than to our intellect. Some of the fine examples of appealing power are as follows:

(i) "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind ?"— P. B. Shelley 4

(ii) "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;" - John Keats 5

3. Suggestivity or suggestiveness means the ability of a text to be open to numerous interpretations with its meaning being suggested rather than clearly defined. It also permits readers to create their own meanings based on their subjective perspectives and experiences leading to various discussions. In easy words, a writing is suggestive when the author indicates or conveys some deeper and wider implication in an ordinary language or simple words. An excellent example of suggestivity may be found in John Milton's "Paradise Lost" Book - I when Satan utters,

"What though the field be lost ?

All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,

And study of revenge, immortal hate,

And courage never to submit or yield :

And what is else not to be overcome ?" 6

4. Universality refers to quality of a piece of literature that enables it to transcend or go beyond the limits of time, place and situation. In fact, a writing becomes universal or bears universality along with timelessness or permanence when some of the author's utterances become easily and unquestionably acceptable to all beyond time and space. Such kind of literary utterances never die. They are never out-dated. In this respect, most of Sir Francis Bacon's quotes are universal. Some of them are as follows:

(i) "Revenge is a kind of wild justice,..." - (Of Revenge) 7

(ii) "Crafty men condemn studies; simple men admire; and wise men use them." - (Of Studies) 8

(iii) "Men in Great Place are thrice servants; servants of the Sovereign or State, servants of fame and servants of business." - (Of Great Place) 9

(iv) "Unmarried men are best friends, best masters, best servants, but not always best subjects." - (Of Marriage and Single Life) 10

5. Thought provoking means something that creates thought after thought. It makes people think about something new or about it in a new way. It also causes readers to ponder seriously again and again over the concerned matter. Some instances of thought provoking expressions are as follows:

(i) "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." - ("The Tragedy of Hamlet" by William Shakespeare) 11

(ii) "The Child is the father of Man." - ("My Heart Leaps up" by William Wordsworth) 12

(iii) "Happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain." - ("The Mayor of the Caster Bridge" by Thomas Hardy) 13

6. Contents coloured with imagination and poetic forms comprises all the writings endowed with high flights of imagination and various poetic forms. Imagination denotes a vivid elucidation or creative power which describes clear, strong, active and daring mental images. It also brings strikingly realistic and real like images to the mind. No doubt, imagination is the canvass upon which authors paint their vivid images, emotions, stories and scenarios in our minds transcending the real or actual boundaries. A peak of high imagination may be well achieved when William Wordsworth says in his sonnet "The World Is Too Much with Us,"

"This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;

The winds that will be howling at all hours,

And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;"¹⁴

7. A tinge of deep purpose, contemporaneousness and public welfare may also be observed as the deciding factors of the value of a literary work. A true literature cannot be even imagined if it has no purpose or target to amend humans and their society where necessary. Contemporaneousness means existing, happening or originating during the same time in which the concerned literature has been written. In fact, it is contemporaneousness that imparts long lasting effects to a literary work. Moreover, literature should always be written with a view to the public welfare and betterment. To assert the view, the following lines of Thomas Gray from "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" may be quoted here:

"The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,

And all that beauty, all that wealth e'ver gave,

Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.

The paths of glory lead but to the grave." ¹⁵

Thus, to sum up, we may say that a piece of literature has many measurements to be evaluated in different forms, ways and styles. In fact, it is literature that plays a vital role in our day-to-day life. It serves as a mirror to human society. In short, it is a treasure-house to the world.

NOTES & REFERENCES

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