

Handout: Literature and Representation**1. ‘Literature’ in English Usage: A Rough Historical Survey of Different Notions**

17/18 th century	Learned Publications, Scholarly Publications
From mid-18th century	All Printed Publications (of a Nation)
Since the 19 th century	The great and important works in a particular language (literary value = well written); the term ‘literature’ covers works of fiction and imagination, but also high intellectual achievements or stylistic elegance and innovation – it includes poetry, prose, essays, historical works, philosophical writings, letters, diaries, etc.
Since the later 19 th century	(imaginative) literature: fictional works (novels, plays, poems)
20 th century	<i>Narrow notion</i> of literature: novels, poetry, drama (+some prose writings) of high literary quality vs. <i>wide notion</i> of literature: narrow notion + popular literature, film, pop songs, comics, etc.

Newer meanings do not always completely displace older meanings! We can talk of ‘meteorological literature’ i.e. scientific publications about the study of weather ... [cf. also German: “Fachliteratur”, “Sekundärliteratur”].

NB. Shakespeare’s works only became part of ‘literature’ around the 19th century.

Concepts used for materials we consider to be ‘literature’ include

- Poetry or Poesie (subdivided into epic, dramatic and many shorter genres, incl. the sonnet, the ode, the elegy, etc.)
- Belles lettres (essays, memoirs, lighter, elegant writing ...)
- Histories (true or not ...)

Our introductory module covers the following materials, moving from a narrower towards a wider conception of ‘literature’:

- poems, drama and narrative fiction (winter term), as well as
- film, non-fictional narrative, graphic novel (summer term).

2. Cultural Contexts and Literary Representations

The materials referenced by both the 'wider' and the 'narrower' notion of literature share one feature: they are *representations* of people, situations, events, places, actions, conversations, thoughts, feelings, ideas, questions and problems.

Consequently, when we analyse 'literature', we are always analysing specific *representations* of these things (i.e. of people, situations, events, places, actions, conversations, thoughts, feelings, ideas, questions and problems). We analyse specific representations of these things, and never the things themselves!

- ⇒ We cannot analyse literature in order to find out what life was really like for this or that group of people in a certain time and place in history.
BUT: We can ask how the lives of these people are represented in a piece of literature, and how text-specifics and generic and aesthetic conventions inform or modify this representation.
- ⇒ We cannot analyse literature in order to find out what the intentions of the authors were.
BUT: We can describe the formal specifics which we find in the material, and we can analyse their effect(s), their consistency, etc.
- ⇒ We cannot simply compare a literary work to the 'reality of its time,' or of 'today'.
BUT: We can work towards comparing literary (fictional) representations with other (non-fictional) representations, provided we have a range of diverse materials and have the equipment to analyse these different types of materials.

We analyse (literary) representations as **culturally produced** and **culturally productive**: Representations are not only informed by their specific socio-historical environment, they in turn contribute to the specific formation of this socio-historical environment.

3. Consequences for Critical Practice: Towards a Culturally Sensitive Textual Analysis of Literary Representations

In practical terms, this means that any analysis of 'literature,' as an analysis of specific representations, needs to address materials according to their formal and functional aspects.

- Formal analysis requires familiarity with the terminology and analytical techniques specific to the particular material (e.g. you have to be familiar with the terms and concepts of narratology in order to analyse narrative fiction, etc.)
- Functional analysis will build on the data generated through formal analysis and probes its relevance to a critical argument or question. This involves the potential function of individual formal specifics for the meanings produced by the text, as well as the potential functions of a specific piece of literature in its historical contexts.

What we practice is culturally sensitive literary analysis: we analyse and discuss a range of materials to which we attest contemporary or past cultural relevance (comprising both a narrower and wider conception of literature).

This requires an expertise in close reading (textual analysis, handouts for particular materials) as well as in cultural and historical contexts.