

Is it a play? Is it an advert? Is it a poem? How We Decide What is Literature

George Norton asks how we know that something is literature or not. Using extracts from texts and critical comment, he offers some ways of deciding that get to the heart of what we do when we study texts.

The critic Robert Eaglestone has written that

As you try to give it a definite meaning, literature slips through your fingers like water.

Why does he say that? Literature is just poetry, plays and drama, isn't it? This piece explores the slipperiness of defining literature, with a short activity for you to do to begin to work out your ideas, and a commentary that might take your thinking further.

To start with, the views of three critics:

Literary and non-literary texts might share a number of stylistic features but literary texts do not belong in the same category of functional, purposive language as the judicial ruling or the theological tract.

Richard Bradford: Stylistics (1997)

A work of literature is a work that calls for an aesthetic reading and gratifies it. If it doesn't, it isn't.

Denis Donoghue: The Practice of Reading (1988)

Anything can be literature, and anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature – Shakespeare, for example – can cease to be literature. Any belief that the study of literature is the study of a stable, well-definable entity, as entomology is the study of insects, can be abandoned as a chimera. Some kinds of fiction are literature and some are not; some literature is fictional and some is not; some literature is verbally self-regarding, while some highly-wrought rhetoric is not literature. Literature, in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties, does not exist.

Terry Eagleton: Literary Theory (1983)

With these extracts in mind, read the following short texts carefully. Decide what makes them literary or non-literary. For each, write down the reasons that enabled you to decide on its category; think about why each text was written and for whom, the sort of language you encounter, the genre (or type) of text you're reading, and any contextual factors which may be important.

The Texts

Text 1

To boil: place 400 ml (14 fl. oz.) boiling water in a saucepan with ½ teaspoon of salt and 1 tablespoon oil. Add 250g (8oz) couscous and stir, cover and stand for 5 minutes. Add 25g (1oz) butter and place over a moderate heat and cook gently for 3-5 minutes. Separate grains with fork before serving.

Text 2

Voluptuous, dark and full-bodied. Aroma of passion. How high can you roast without sacrificing your charisma? An Arabica adventure of flavour, where bitterness bites the dust. Alta Rica, we bask in your glory. A cup of coffee that can only come from the heart of Latin America and the soul of Nescafe.

Text 3

*Two happy people –
One life to share ...
Hearts celebrating –
Love's in the air ...
Joining together
As husband and wife ...
A brilliant start
To a happy life.*

Text 4

Yes, love, that's why the warning light comes on. Don't panic. Fetch some universal brake-fluid and a five-eighths screwdriver from your toolkit then prop the bonnet open. Go on, it won't eat you. Now, without slicing through the fan-belt try and slide the sharp end of the screwdriver

*under the lid and push the spade connector
through its bed, go on, that's it.*

Text 5

Bellow is sixty-eight. His hair is white and peripheral but the eyes are still the colour of expensive snuff. Generous yet combative, the mouth is low-slung, combining with the arched brows to give his face an animated roundness. In repose the face is squarer, harder. He looks like an omniscient tortoise.

Text 6

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.*

Where the Texts Come From

Text 1 is a recipe for cooking couscous, found on the side of a packet so it's quite easy to understand this as a non-literary text. Its purpose is to instruct the reader in how to prepare couscous; the language needs to be simple and uncomplicated so the recipe can be easily followed. If, as Richard Bradford argues, the language is functional and purposive, then it follows this isn't literature.

Text 2 is an extract from a print advert for instant coffee. The purpose of advertising is to persuade the reader to buy the product or, at least, lodge the idea of the product in her mind. What's interesting about this text is that it uses quite a lot of foregrounded language; in other words, language which draws attention to itself as language before the reader takes note of the meaning, language which is moved to the foreground. The words used are quite complex ('voluptuous', 'charisma', 'aroma') and metaphorical (do coffee beans have charisma? do multinational food corporations have souls? Almost certainly not). In fact, if you try to work out what is actually being said, you'll find it doesn't really make a lot of sense. What the copywriter has tried to do is create an impression of exoticism, sexuality and luxury. Does this make it literature? Certainly, it makes extensive use of literary techniques and it would be hard to argue that the language is functional and purposive, but Denis Donoghue would probably insist that a coffee ad isn't calling 'for an aesthetic reading' and thus doesn't gratify a reader in search of one.

Text 3 is much easier to categorise, isn't it? It's a poem; it rhymes and has a rhythm and is set out in a stanza. It's obviously literature. The trouble is, it's not very good. The rhymes are obvious (life/wife; air/share); the metre is clumsy, especially in the last four lines – lines 6 and 8 deviate badly from the pattern established in lines 1-4; and the language is clichéd and hackneyed (two becoming one, love being in the air, the dead metaphor of hearts celebrating when in fact they're just muscles pumping blood round our bodies with little time, one assumes, for cheering and drinking champagne). This type

of analysis, of course, is highly subjective. Look at the language I've used to describe the poem: 'obvious', 'clumsy', 'hackneyed', 'dead', 'not very good'. Does this mean that to be literature a text must have a certain verbal quality, be original, surprise us, use language in an elegant and exciting way? Donoghue would doubtless suggest that this example doesn't call for an aesthetic reading and no one would be interested in giving one so it isn't literature, but such a judgement is exactly that: a judgement, an opinion, which tells you as much about the values of the person making the judgement as it does about the text in question. The text comes from a greetings card for a couple getting married; do you think they care about dead metaphors or dodgy scansion?

Text 4 is perhaps a more complicated example. It's from a poem by Simon Armitage called 'Very Simply Topping Up the Brake Fluid'. If you didn't know this and the words had been set out differently, there's a chance you might have thought it was from a car manual; certainly lots of the words ('universal brake-fluid', 'toolkit', 'bonnet', 'fan-belt', 'spade connector') are likely to be found there. The poem doesn't have (or seemingly doesn't have) any foregrounded or especially literary language. So does this mean it's not literature? The point of the poem is to capture the voice of a mechanic who is speaking to a woman customer. This explains the patronising tone of his instructions (calling her 'love', telling her the bonnet won't eat her, assuming she will slice through the fan-belt) which starts to make the whole text ironic, a literary technique which you're unlikely to find in car manual. The arrangement of the lines is quite artful, putting emphasis on certain words such as 'eat' and 'panic'. We might also say that, beyond exposing the mechanic's sexism, Armitage is trying to encourage us to think again about what poetic language might consist of; in this way, it's possible to suggest that the language used is foregrounded because we wouldn't expect to find a phrase like 'a five-eighths screwdriver' in a poem and so the words stand out to us as different from the linguistic norms of a literary text.

Text 5 is a piece of journalism, an extract from a profile of the American novelist, Saul Bellow. Usually, we'd think of journalism as a non-literary genre, its function being to inform readers about the subject of the article, its language functional and purposive. Here, the purpose at least is fulfilled – we're informed what Saul Bellow looks like and how old he is, but the language used is heavily foregrounded and, in Terry Eagleton's phrase, 'verbally self-regarding'. The simple, factual opening sentence is followed by a wittily economical description of Bellow's balding head (his 'peripheral' hair) and a complex simile used to describe the colour of his eyes. How many readers know what colour expensive snuff is? The combination of adjectives – 'generous', 'combative', 'low slung' – isn't an obvious one and brings together several different and not especially complimentary ideas about Bellow to suggest the complexity of his character. The final simile ('like an omniscient tortoise') is especially arresting as it's funny and slightly strange and yet brilliantly precise all at the same time. Here is a writer calling for Donoghue's 'aesthetic reading' and getting it; there is a pleasure to be taken from the words themselves beyond the information they convey. Indeed, without a generic context, you would probably have identified this passage as a description of a character in a novel rather than in a newspaper article. The profile is by Martin Amis, one of the most influential and significant novelists of the last forty years; it shows that classifying texts as literary or non-literary purely by the genre to which they belong is probably a mistake.

Text 6 is the first four lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 so obviously it's literature. It's by Shakespeare, the most famous writer ever, and these are some of his most famous lines. It's all there, isn't it? The iambic pentameter with some subtle variations (the poem starts with a strong stress which we wouldn't expect from an iambic pattern); the ABAB rhyme scheme conforming to the conventional structure of an Elizabethan sonnet; the teasing ambiguity of the first line (is the question rhetorical or not? Why has Shakespeare begun by creating uncertainty?); the clever extended metaphor whereby the object of the speaker's affections is compared to the loveliness of a summer's day but with the

implicit acknowledgement that his or her beauties will fade because, like the summer, attractiveness doesn't last for ever. The language isn't functional or purposive; the poem clearly calls for and receives an aesthetic reading; and, although written within an established poetic tradition, it is verbally exciting and original, using language in an elegant, concentrated way. As a culture, we've been pretty impressed with Shakespeare since the late 16th century (although there was a period in the 18th century when he was considered insufficiently refined). Will we always feel this way? Will we always regard him 'as unalterably and unquestionably literature', as Eagleton puts it? Certainly the English educational system (subject to government intervention and influence) thinks so, which is why you can't do English Literature A Level without studying one of his plays. By such political measures is our idea of what constitutes literature controlled and consolidated. Now there's something to think about as you proceed through your course...

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