



# **ENG 113**

## **Prose Literature**

### Course Manual

**Francis Olufemi Olatokunbo, M.A.**

# Prose Literature

ENG113



University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre  
Open and Distance Learning Course Series Development  
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*General Editor:* Prof. Bayo Okunade

**University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre**

University of Ibadan,  
Nigeria

Telex: 31128NG

Tel: +234 (80775935727)

E-mail: [ssu@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:ssu@dlc.ui.edu.ng)

Website: [www.dlc.ui.edu.ng](http://www.dlc.ui.edu.ng)

## **Vice-Chancellor's Message**

The Distance Learning Centre is building on a solid tradition of over two decades of service in the provision of External Studies Programme and now Distance Learning Education in Nigeria and beyond. The Distance Learning mode to which we are committed is providing access to many deserving Nigerians in having access to higher education especially those who by the nature of their engagement do not have the luxury of full time education. Recently, it is contributing in no small measure to providing places for teeming Nigerian youths who for one reason or the other could not get admission into the conventional universities.

These course materials have been written by writers specially trained in ODL course delivery. The writers have made great efforts to provide up to date information, knowledge and skills in the different disciplines and ensure that the materials are user-friendly.

In addition to provision of course materials in print and e-format, a lot of Information Technology input has also gone into the deployment of course materials. Most of them can be downloaded from the DLC website and are available in audio format which you can also download into your mobile phones, IPod, MP3 among other devices to allow you listen to the audio study sessions. Some of the study session materials have been scripted and are being broadcast on the university's Diamond Radio FM 101.1, while others have been delivered and captured in audio-visual format in a classroom environment for use by our students. Detailed information on availability and access is available on the website. We will continue in our efforts to provide and review course materials for our courses.

However, for you to take advantage of these formats, you will need to improve on your I.T. skills and develop requisite distance learning Culture. It is well known that, for efficient and effective provision of Distance learning education, availability of appropriate and relevant course materials is a *sine qua non*. So also, is the availability of multiple plat form for the convenience of our students. It is in fulfilment of this, that series of course materials are being written to enable our students study at their own pace and convenience.

It is our hope that you will put these course materials to the best use.



Prof. Abel Idowu Olayinka

Vice-Chancellor



## **Foreword**

As part of its vision of providing education for “Liberty and Development” for Nigerians and the International Community, the University of Ibadan, Distance Learning Centre has recently embarked on a vigorous repositioning agenda which aimed at embracing a holistic and all encompassing approach to the delivery of its Open Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. Thus we are committed to global best practices in distance learning provision. Apart from providing an efficient administrative and academic support for our students, we are committed to providing educational resource materials for the use of our students. We are convinced that, without an up-to-date, learner-friendly and distance learning compliant course materials, there cannot be any basis to lay claim to being a provider of distance learning education. Indeed, availability of appropriate course materials in multiple formats is the hub of any distance learning provision worldwide.

In view of the above, we are vigorously pursuing as a matter of priority, the provision of credible, learner-friendly and interactive course materials for all our courses. We commissioned the authoring of, and review of course materials to teams of experts and their outputs were subjected to rigorous peer review to ensure standard. The approach not only emphasizes cognitive knowledge, but also skills and humane values which are at the core of education, even in an ICT age.

The development of the materials which is on-going also had input from experienced editors and illustrators who have ensured that they are accurate, current and learner-friendly. They are specially written with distance learners in mind. This is very important because, distance learning involves non-residential students who can often feel isolated from the community of learners.

It is important to note that, for a distance learner to excel there is the need to source and read relevant materials apart from this course material. Therefore, adequate supplementary reading materials as well as other information sources are suggested in the course materials.

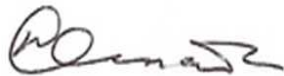
Apart from the responsibility for you to read this course material with others, you are also advised to seek assistance from your course facilitators especially academic advisors during your study even before the interactive session which is by design for revision. Your academic advisors will assist you using convenient technology including Google Hang Out, You Tube, Talk Fusion, etc. but you have to take advantage of these. It is also going to be of immense advantage if you complete assignments as at when due so as to have necessary feedbacks as a guide.

The implication of the above is that, a distance learner has a responsibility to develop requisite distance learning culture which includes diligent and disciplined self-study, seeking available administrative and academic support and acquisition of basic information technology skills. This is why you are encouraged to develop your computer skills by availing yourself the opportunity of training that the Centre’s provide and put these into use.

In conclusion, it is envisaged that the course materials would also be useful for the regular students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria who are faced with a dearth of high quality textbooks. We are therefore, delighted to present these titles to both our distance learning students and the university's regular students. We are confident that the materials will be an invaluable resource to all.

We would like to thank all our authors, reviewers and production staff for the high quality of work.

Best wishes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bayo Okunade', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Bayo Okunade

Director

## Course Development Team

Content Authoring

Francis Olufemi Olatokunbo, M.A.

Content Editor

Prof. Remi Raji-Oyelade

Production Editor

Dr. Gloria O. Adedoja

Learning Design & Technologist

Folajimi Olambo Fakoya

Managing Editor

Ogunmefun Oladele Abiodun

General Editor

Prof. Bayo Okunade



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## About this course manual

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Prose LiteratureENG113 has been produced by University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre. All course manuals produced by University of Ibadan Distance Learning Centre are structured in the same way, as outlined below.

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### How this course manual is structured

#### The course overview

The course overview gives you a general introduction to the course. Information contained in the course overview will help you determine:

- If the course is suitable for you.
- What you will already need to know.
- What you can expect from the course.
- How much time you will need to invest to complete the course.

The overview also provides guidance on:

- Study skills.
- Where to get help.
- Course assignments and assessments.
- Margin icons.

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We strongly recommend that you read the overview *carefully* before starting your study.

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#### The course content

The course is broken down into Study Sessions. Each Study Session comprises:

- An introduction to the Study Session content.
- Study Session outcomes.
- Core content of the Study Session with a variety of learning activities.
- A Study Session summary.
- Assignments and/or assessments, as applicable.
- Bibliography

## Your comments

After completing Prose Literature we would appreciate it if you would take a few moments to give us your feedback on any aspect of this course. Your feedback might include comments on:

- Course content and structure.
- Course reading materials and resources.
- Course assignments.
- Course assessments.
- Course duration.
- Course support (assigned tutors, technical help, etc.)

Your constructive feedback will help us to improve and enhance this course.

# CourseOverview

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## Welcome to Prose LiteratureENG113

Technically, literature is a work of art with special use of language. Literature is created from imagination. Hence, literature relates to life in all understanding of what it stands for, and how it is translated to the people through the creative ability of literary men. The course is therefore prepared to familiarise undergraduate students of Prose literature with the various forms of prose, such as the short story, the novella, the novel and their illustrative texts in English drawn from different cultural and literary backgrounds.

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## Course outcomes



Upon completion of Prose LiteratureENG113 you will be able to:

- *explain* the concept of prose literature;
- *discuss* what the short story, the novella and the novel mean as forms of prose;
- *discuss* the art of decoding and situating various prose texts through the knowledge of prose types, such as the Diary, Epistolary, Biography and Autobiography;
- *distinguish* between various types of prose; for example, Biography and Autobiography;
- *present* the significance in English various techniques of writing, such as the first person, the third person and omniscient or Eye of God narrative techniques; and
- *point out* the elements of prose: story, plot, setting, theme and characterisation.

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## Timeframe



How long?

This is a 15 week course. It requires a formal study time of 45 hours. The formal study times are scheduled around online discussions / chats with your course facilitator / academic advisor to facilitate your learning. Kindly see course calendar on your course website for scheduled dates. You will still require independent/personal study time particularly in studying your course materials.

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## How to be successful in this course



As an open and distance learner your approach to learning will be different to that from your school days, where you had onsite education. You will now choose what you want to study, you will have professional and/or personal motivation for doing so and you will most likely be fitting your study activities around other professional or domestic responsibilities.

Essentially you will be taking control of your learning environment. As a consequence, you will need to consider performance issues related to time management, goal setting, stress management, etc. Perhaps you will also need to reacquaint yourself in areas such as essay planning, coping with exams and using the web as a learning resource.

We recommend that you take time now—before starting your self-study—to familiarize yourself with these issues. There are a number of excellent resources on the web. A few suggested links are:

- <http://www.dlc.ui.edu.ng/resources/studyskill.pdf>

This is a resource of the UIDLC pilot course module. You will find sections on building study skills, time scheduling, basic concentration techniques, control of the study environment, note taking, how to read essays for analysis and memory skills (“remembering”).

- [http://www.ivywise.com/newsletter\\_march13\\_how\\_to\\_self\\_study.html](http://www.ivywise.com/newsletter_march13_how_to_self_study.html)

This site provides how to master self-studying, with bias to emerging technologies.

- <http://www.howtostudy.org/resources.php>

Another “How to study” web site with useful links to time management, efficient reading, questioning/listening/observing skills, getting the most out of doing (“hands-on” learning), memory building, tips for staying motivated, developing a learning plan.

The above links are our suggestions to start you on your way. At the time of writing these web links were active. If you want to look for more, go to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) and type “self-study basics”, “self-study tips”, “self-study skills” or similar phrases.

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## Need help?



As earlier noted, this course manual complements and supplements ENG113at UI Mobile Class as an online course.

You may contact any of the following units for information, learning resources and library services.

**Distance Learning Centre (DLC)**

University of Ibadan, Nigeria  
Tel: (+234) 08077593551 – 55  
(Student Support Officers)  
Email: [ssu@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:ssu@dlc.ui.edu.ng)

**Head Office**

Morohundiya Complex, Ibadan-  
Ilorin Expressway, Idi-Ose,  
Ibadan.

**Information Centre**

20 Awolowo Road, Bodija,  
Ibadan.

**Lagos Office**

Speedwriting House, No. 16  
Ajanaku Street, Off Salvation  
Bus Stop, Awuse Estate, Opebi,  
Ikeja, Lagos.

For technical issues (computer problems, web access, and etcetera), please send mail to [webmaster@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:webmaster@dlc.ui.edu.ng).

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## Academic Support



A course facilitator is commissioned for this course. You have also been assigned an academic advisor to provide learning support. The contacts of your course facilitator and academic advisor for this course are available at [onlineacademicsupport@dlc.ui.edu.ng](mailto:onlineacademicsupport@dlc.ui.edu.ng)

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## Activities



This manual features “Activities,” which may present material that is NOT extensively covered in the Study Sessions. When completing these activities, you will demonstrate your understanding of basic material (by answering questions) before you learn more advanced concepts. You will be provided with answers to every activity question. Therefore, your emphasis when working the activities should be on understanding your answers. It is more important that you understand why every answer is correct.

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## Assessments



There are three basic forms of assessment in this course: in-text questions (ITQs) and self assessment questions (SAQs), and tutor marked assessment (TMAs). This manual is essentially filled with ITQs and SAQs. Feedbacks to the ITQs are placed immediately after the questions, while the feedbacks to SAQs are at the back of manual. You will receive your TMAs as part of online class activities at the UI Mobile Class. Feedbacks to TMAs will be provided by your tutor in not more than 2 weeks expected duration. Schedule dates for submitting assignments and engaging in course / class activities is available on the course website. Kindly visit your course website often for updates.

---

## Bibliography



For those interested in learning more on this subject, we provide you with a list of additional resources at the end of each Study Sessions; these may be books, articles or websites.












# Getting around this course manual

## Margin icons

While working through this course manual you will notice the frequent use of margin icons. These icons serve to “signpost” a particular piece of text, a new task or change in activity; they have been included to help you to find your way around this course manual.

A complete icon set is shown below. We suggest that you familiarize yourself with the icons and their meaning before starting your study.

			
Activity	Assessment	Assignment	Case study
			
Discussion	Group Activity	Help	Outcomes
			
Note	Reflection	Reading	Study skills
			
Summary	Terminology	Time	Tip

## Study Session 1

# The Meaning of Prose Literature

## Introduction

This Study Session will provide you with alternative meanings and thorough explanations of the concept of prose literature. Prose literature is perceived and interpreted differently by literary scholars. Also, this Study Session will provide explanations on why it is necessary for you and other students of humanities and other related disciplines to have the knowledge of prose literature.



### Learning Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 1.1 *explain* prose literature.
- 1.2 *justify* the inclusion of prose literature in the study of English.

## 1.1 What is Prose Literature?

The word 'literature' is any written or printed expression. Hence, we can regard as literature anything that is written down on any subject. Therefore, we have literature of history, religion, social sciences, science and technology. *The definition of literature depends on the angle from which we look at it.*

**Prose** A text, either spoken or written, which has a storyline and is without regular rhythmic pattern.

**Prose** literature is a form of literary writing, which is based on story line. Prose is applied to all forms of written and spoken expression, which do not have a regular rhythmic pattern. Usually, prose is without sustained rhythm regularity, but it has some logical, grammatical order and its ideas are connectedly stated rather than merely listed.

Prose literature is also a story of meaningful sequence of events. It is often structured in episodes, sections and chapters. The smallest unit in any form of prose literature is the paragraph. The actions or experiences are traced in an imaginative way such that no two writers create the same experience in the same way. A prose work can be descriptive, narrative, expository, dramatic, argumentative, technical or scientific in nature. But literary appreciation is often based on narrative fiction. The most common form of narrative fiction are the novel and the short story form. Examples are: *A Walk in the Night* by Alex Laguma; *Old man and the Sea* by Earnest Hemingway; *Animal Farm* by George Orwell; *Hearts of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*

Prose literature is also defined as a fictitious narrative of considerable length, in which characters and actions representative of real life are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity.

Literature as a specific branch of study: this idea conceives literature as a branch of study which any interested individual can venture into. Not only this, it sees literature as a product of our imagination and creativity, which is rendered in a very interesting language. Thus, we call this sense or concept of literature as creative or imaginative literature because the situations in it are created or imagined; it is not real but fictional. When real situations are involved, they are created and not presented as they actually happened or occurred as you can find in history or religion.

Literature, as a branch of study, is more interested in general or universal truths about human life and existence in any society. It is also concerned with the patterns which are created to expose human experiences. Literature is also subjective in nature because the writer is more interested in creating or manipulating the instrument of language in various ways that can put across his own vision of the world not as it is often is.

Aristotle in his poetics sees literature as “an imitation of life”. However, in this definition he believes that literature should be close to reality as much as possible. This is because imitation does not often portray a true picture but a reflection. But one word that often describes the closeness of literature to presenting real life is called verisimilitude. Therefore, one fundamental factor why prose literature is needful is its closeness to real life situations.

People in the humanities/arts (like English, Philosophy, Classics, Religious knowledge, Linguistics, Communication Arts, Theatre Arts and Education) require a good knowledge of prose literature, as a genre of study, because it is educatively fascinating.



Tip

Prose literature is usually divided into episodes, sections and chapters.

## 1.2 Significance of Prose Literature

The significance of engaging in the study of prose literature is reflected in the following reasons:

1. Prose literature is about life. Even when a story is manufactured by the imagination of an individual, such a story will relate to life. However, funny, sad, light-hearted or serious any work of literature may be, it will have a reflection on life, either of an individual, a group of people, a language or cultural group or of even a mixed society of diverse views and preoccupations. For example, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* reflects on the ideology of socialism (cum communism), which was practiced in the old Soviet Union.

2. Prose literature relates to society, to the people operating in that society, to individual or group behaviours and to the culture of people from one society to another e.g. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*.
3. Prose literature examines human values and relates to the readers those things which are common in human existence. Example is Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.
4. Prose literature deals with particular and contemporary events and issues or with attitudes and behaviours in contemporary and particular situation. For example, Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth My Brother* (1971) portrays the ills of colonial administration, the antiquity of Ghana's corruption and man's inhumanity to man is also clearly depicted. In J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), Coetzee presents a parody of the Afrikaner ideal of womanhood. He portrays how the women's stubborn courage made possible the survival of the Afrikaner tribe. These writings are varied accounts of Ghana and South Africa.
5. Prose literature refreshes the mind after a period of mental or physical exertion. A good example is Amos Tutuola's, *The Palmwine Drunkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1975).
6. Prose literature broadens individual outlook by telling people what they do not know about their own culture and other cultures, and also by reminding them of aspects of their culture that are neglected. Because people do not pay much attention to prose literature today, they have lost much contact with important aspects of their cultures such as: stories of creation, migration, war and valour, family history and lineage, and some important details of political evolution, are getting lost. Prose literature can be an opportunity for the reader to learn about the history of his community and people, or other communities and peoples. For example, Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* presents the culture of Igbo people of Nigeria; V. S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, also depicts aspects of West Indies culture and ways of life.
7. Prose literature improves our knowledge of English Language by providing new opportunities for learning new idioms and expressions. Prose literature provides ample opportunities for extensive use of language devices. A lover of prose will not only pick up fresh and useful expressions in English, he will also come across the intricate, but correct use of words to construct sentences. For example, Festus Iyayi, Ben Okri, Peter Abraham, Sembene Ousmane, Nuruddin Farah, Thomas Hardy, George Orwell and Chinua Achebe and a host of other writers, write in simple, but correct English.
8. Prose literature helps our ability to read fast. Because of its volume, a lover of prose develops the critical eye to read fast with minimum vocalisation. Students need to develop the ability to skim through words without missing important details, and a veritable training ground is prose literature.



What are the things you have gained from your contact with literature?

## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we approached prose literature from three perspectives. First, prose literature is taken as a literary writing, which is based on a specific story line. Second, it is regarded as a story of meaningful sequence of events, structured in episodes. Third, it is described as a fictitious narrative of considerable length, in which characters and actions are portrayed.

Also, we learnt that prose literature is needful to us as individuals. The knowledge of prose literature helps us to examine life and human values, deals with events both old and contemporary. Furthermore, it relates to society, it refreshes the mind; it helps in improving our knowledge of English Language and also enhances our writing and reading skills

## Bibliography



### Reading

[http://open.salon.com/blog/jakewilliams/2009/09/14/what is the role of literature in society](http://open.salon.com/blog/jakewilliams/2009/09/14/what%20is%20the%20role%20of%20literature%20in%20society)

<http://www.bartleby.com/60/161.html>

[www.ariyam.com/docs/NovelEssay1.doc](http://www.ariyam.com/docs/NovelEssay1.doc)

[www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/479353/prose-fiction](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/479353/prose-fiction)

## Study Session 2

# Sub-Division of Prose Literature

## Introduction

As noted in the previous Study Session, prose literature is a form of literary writing, which is based on story line. Prose is applied to all forms of written and spoken expression. The prose form has three main sub-divisions:

- 1) the short story
- 2) the novella and
- 3) the novel.

This Study Session will introduce to you these three sub-divisions of prose literature and the distinguishing features of each



### Learning Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

- 2.1 *distinguish* appropriately between the three sub-genres of prose literature:
- **short story**
  - **novella**
  - **novel**

## 2.1 Sub-genres of Prose Literature

### 2.1.1 The Short Story

**Short story** A compact prose literature which has limited episodes and thematic preoccupation.

The **short story** has a limited thematic scope. It presents only one episode or a few episodes. The characters, the subject and the theme appear to us as fully developed. The short story is the least of the sub-genres of prose literature. In volume, it is compact if it is compared with the novella and the novel. The subject matter is by presentation through selected occurrences that adequately reveal the whole. The compact nature of the short story form is achieved with careful use of language: brevity and appropriateness of symbols and metaphorical expressions.

The short story is related in content with the novel; it is a condensed form of the novel. It is meant to be read at a sitting. It is direct, brief and brisk. It represents a single impression from one dominating character and incident. Examples are Chinua Achebe's *Girls' at War and Other Stories* (1972) and Selma Al-Hassan's *The Cowrie Girl and Other Stories*

(1971). The remarkable thing about these traditional stories in the written medium is that they still retain their creative balance between imagination and reality, and the truth that emerges is stated without apologies. Other examples of short stories include Alex La Guma's, "Blankets", "Out of Darkness", "Etude", "Coffee for the Road", and Cyprian Ekwensi's, *The Rainmaker and Other Stories* (1971), *Lokotown and Other Stories* (1966).

Chinua Achebe's *Girls' at War and Other Stories* deal with the obscenities, both physical and spiritual, that accrue from the civil war; Mabel Dove Danquah's short story, *Anticipation* (1947), the story takes a sardonic look at the institution of polygamy, when a village Chief, Nana Adaku II, Omanhene of Akavasin, out of greed and stupidity courts and marries his own wife twice. Mabel Dove-Danquah deftly succeeds in portraying the institution of polygamy as bereft of love, affection and romance, a mindless institution in effect.

## 2.1.2 The Novella

**Novella** An Italian word which means new. It denotes a short prose narrative that is popular before the novel.

This is an Italian word that comes from the name for certain short prose narratives popular before the novel. The **novella** is not as strict or disciplined as the short story, or as relaxed as the novel. In volume, its thematic scope is broader than the short story but considerably less than that of the novel. The novella highlights a series of episodes discussed in a more detailed manner than the short story. It occupies the middle level in terms of length between the short story and the novel. Examples are Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*; *Still Born* by Zainab Alkali and *Hearts of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. Another example of the novella is the hundred stories about relations between the sexes collected in Boccaccio's, *Decameron* (1358). Novelists themselves have used a variety of terms, including 'novella', 'tale', 'romance', to suggest concern with a single episode or state of affairs in prose narrative that are shorter than a novel. Such terms are never finally fixed in meaning. They depend upon the changing perceptions of their subject within particular cultural practices.

## 2.1.3 The Novel

**Novel** A long prose narrative that describes fictional characters and their experiences in a context that is representational of reality.

The **novel** is a sustained fictional narrative involving ordinary human beings and their experiences in a realistic human society or world. The novel is mainly noted for its unlimited length and scope in its dealing with themes that touch every aspect and level of life. It is also noted for its flexibility and freedom of expression of the writer. It enables the writer to bring out his thought in the narrative sequence of a story. The novel is the most ambitious of the sub-genres of prose fiction. The novel tries to be total and comprehensive in its coverage of the events and the characters it presents in a story. In the novel, characters develop considerably; sometimes, we see a character grow from childhood through adulthood. For example, 'Pip' in *Great Expectation*, by Thomas Hardy. The language of the novel is more relaxed, unhurried and sometimes simple. Examples are Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; *Anthills of the Savannah*; Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*; *A Walk in the Night* by Alex La Guma, etc.



According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, novel is a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length, in which characters and actions representative of real life are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity. From the foregoing definition, novels are fictions, or may be called 'fictitious', because they depict imaginary characters and actions. However, this is not entirely correct. We know that parts of *Dicken's Great Expectations* were drawn from the author's own life and that other novel, such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), were suggested by and even based on real events. On the other hand, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, was derived from a dream of nightmare, and could hardly have happened to somebody in real life. Some novels, therefore, seem to be more or less fictitious than others.

Another element of the novel is narration. This is the process of telling, and it helps to distinguish novels from plays, or drama, in which the action is directly presented rather than related. Novels must be longer than an anecdote or short story, but how long is 'longer'? Almost anything seems possible, and some novels have been immense. *Clarissa*, for instance, which appeared in eight volumes, was one of the earliest novels of immense length running to more than a million words. In 1993, Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, with over 700,000 words, created a sensation in the publishing industry, while proving that readers were still willing to buy very long fictional works. It is not just a question of length, however. It is also a question of how much space a writer requires to fulfill his expectation: A novel should engage us for a considerable time for us to feel it has dealt with its subject in some depth and complexity.



Tip

The novel is more voluminous and developed than the short story and the novella.

Another important aspect of the novel is characterisation, which is perhaps the most important aspect of novels. Most of us can recall characters from novels we have read over a long period of time, more easily than the stories, or even their titles and the authors. Examples of important characters in novels are Ernest Hemingway's Santiago, Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*; Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, Emma, David Copperfield, Anna Karenina, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Kin, Mrs. Dalloway, Chinua Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah*, *His Excellency*, *Ikem*, *Beatrice*, *Oriko*, etc.

## Study Session Summary

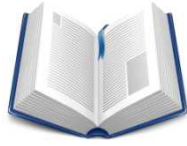


Summary

In this Study Session, you learnt the distinguishing characteristics of the three prose forms which are: the short story, the novella and the novel. The features of each of the sub-divisions were also extensively discussed.

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## Study Session 3

# Aspects of Novel

## Introduction

This Study Session will discuss aspects of the novel, which the writer combines to present a realistic story to the reader in the novel. The aspects include the setting, symbolism, theme, characterisation, point of view, the plot of the story and language.



### Learning Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

3.1 discuss the aspects of novel.

## 3.1 Aspects of Novel

The aesthetic nature of literature forms the nucleus of the identification of its parts in their uniqueness. The aspects of novel include the setting, the plot of the story, theme, characterisation, point of view and language.

### 3.1.1 Setting

The setting of a novel is the background against which the characters live out their lives. So, setting can refer to (a) the time in which the story is set and (b) the geographical location of the action. It is important for a reader to understand the feature of setting in order to really grasp the message of a text. *Wild Conquest* (1950), by Peter Abraham on apartheid, for instance, is read according to prevalent issues in the new millennium, the bearing of the reader would be wrong because, events have overtaken its theme and content. Knowing the time will make one appreciate the message of the novelist. It is possible however, for some texts to cover a wide expanse of time in relevance. This refers to a novel that is timeless in its theme coverage. For example, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* by Ayi Kwei Armah is still relevant to contemporary issues in many African countries. Corruption and other social vices examined in the work are the order of the day in these countries.

Time and place have a great effect upon the personalities, actions and way of thinking of the characters. For example, most of Thomas Hardy's books like *Far From the Madding Crowd* are set in rural England just before the new ways of communication like railway, had penetrated into these areas. So also, Ferdinand Oyono's, *The Old Man and the Medal* was set in the sixties in Cameroun, West Africa. To talk of place in setting allows us to understand many things; it dictates the characters, the cultural values, the occupation, religion, language and social status or

general outlook of the characters. This knowledge assists to a great extent in registering the subject matter in the minds of the readers. Such is the experience a reader has when he reads Kenneth Kaunda's, *Zambia Shall be Free* and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*.

The prevalent social circumstances at the time a novel is written will if known by the reader assist in understanding the message and enable one to access or evaluate the story. For example, the theme of disappointment and unrealised dreams was prevalent in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977) particularly with regard to inequalities and hypocrisy of the post-independence era in Kenya.

### Hint

The setting of a novel refers to the period in which the story is set (temporal setting) and the physical location of events in the novel (spatial setting). Three things should be generally considered as far as setting is concerned, these are time, place and atmosphere. The setting in a novel can be used to evoke a mood or atmosphere that will prepare the reader for what is to come

## 3.1.2 The Plot

**Plot** The logical arrangement of events in a novel.

A **plot** can be said to be the arrangement of incidents in a novel. The plot must have unity, that is, it must be a whole that possess a beginning, middle and an end. Aristotle defines the plot in *Poetics* as "ordered arrangement of the incidents". The normal chronological flow of events in a novel is the story while the artistic arrangement, that is, a deliberate organisation meant to create a special effect is known as the plot. *Suspense* and *flashback* are employed in such organisations.

Events can be presented in a variety of orders. A chronological arrangement begins with what happens first, then second, and so on, until the last incident is related. That is how Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* is told. The events in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, however, are not arranged in chronological order because that would give away the story's surprise ending. Instead, what Ngugi does in the work is to move back and forth, between the past and the present to provide information that leads up to the final startling moment.



**Tip**

A plot can follow a chronological order or can be arranged in such a way that event A is not necessarily followed by event B.

Some stories begin at the end and then lead up to why or how events worked out as they did. A good example of this is Ralph Ellison's *Battle Royal*. This interesting arrangement makes it difficult for one to stop reading such works. Stories can also begin in the middle of things or in the midst of functioning events (the latin term for this is, *in medias res*). In this kind of plot, we enter into the world of the story on the verge of some important moment.

**Flashback** A literary device in which an earlier event is inserted into the normal storyline, usually to provide additional information on the current event.

**Flashback** is another common strategy adopted in plots. This is a literary device that informs us about events that happened before the opening scene of a work. For example, works of Ngugi, Armah and Orwell use this literary device extensively. In Ellison's *Battle Royal*, we read how the narrator recounts his identity as a black man was sharpened by the circumstances that attended a high-school graduation speech he delivered twenty years earlier in a hotel ballroom before a gathering of the town's leading white citizens.

A well planned plot makes a story interesting, exciting and easily understandable. An interesting story can easily be soiled by a badly articulated plot. A plot may also be simple or complex. Traditionally, a good plot usually follows a principle of five-stage structure (i) the exposition (ii) complication/crisis (iii) climax (iv) anti-climax (v) denouncement. Whatever the plot arrangement, adopted in a work, you should be aware of how the writer's conscious ordering of events affects your responses to the action.

### 3.1.3 Characterisation

**Characterisation** The process of creating characters for a narrative text, including the way information is conveyed about the characters.

The methods by which a writer creates people in a story so that they actually seem to exist are called **characterisation**. It is the way in which characters are presented in a novel. Characters, the imaginary persons, are created by the novelist as the actors and actresses of the various episodes of the novel are thematically selected. Okonkwo never lived; yet, those who have read Chinua Achebe's novel about his bravery in Umuofia and Mbata feel as if they know him. A good writer gives us the illustration that a character is real, but we should bear in mind that a character is not an actual person but instead has been created by the author. The illusion of reality is the magic that allows us to move beyond the circumstances of our own lives into a writer's fictional world, where we can encounter everyone from royalty to paupers, lovers, destroyers, murderers, arrogance, ambitions, cheats, artists, sympathizers, martyrs, and nearly always, some part of ourselves. The life that a novelist breathes into a character adds to our own experiences and broadens our own perception of the world.

Considering the theme of the novel, the novelist decides whether there would be a main or major character around whom the whole story will centre or some few characters who are going to be equally treated. Oftentimes, a major character features and other characters (minor) are used to assist in effecting the intended traits to be elicited in the major character. The major character is gradually developed from a certain stage in his life to old age.

Importantly, the only qualification to be placed on character is that whatever it is – whether animal or even an inanimate object, such as a robot – it must be imbued with recognizable human qualities. The action in the plot interests us because we care about what happens to people and what they partake in. We may identify with a character's desires and aspirations, or we may be disgusted by his or her cruelty and self – centeredness. To have a clear understanding of our response to a story,

we should be able to recognize the methods of characterisation the author uses.

It is also possible to get to know a character in several ways (a) the actions and interactions of the character with other characters in the work (b) the comment on the character by other characters, and (c) the novelist's comment on the character. The novelist has the authority of making the characters in any form he likes: he could make them either round, character flat or some others. The personality traits of the characters are revealed through these forms and they are pointers to the thematic intention of the writer. Some types of characters are examined below.

#### Quick Tip Box

- **A round character** is a dynamic character that evolves through the course of the story.
- **A flat character** is a minor character that does not undergo any significant change or growth through the course of a story

### Round Character

A round character is a developing character. He lives a life that is dynamic; he is unpredictable in manner, reactions and approaches to issues. He oftentimes issues surprises to the readers. A round character considers, weighs reasons and becomes convinced before he takes actions. He is highly intelligent in approach. 'Li' in Zaynab Alkali's, *Stillborn*; Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God*, and Beatrice Okoh in *Anthills of the Savannah* are good examples of a round character. Beatrice Okoh, assumes the role of avenging goddess and is determined to remind His Excellency of his power but also to prevent him from abusing it.

"I did it shamelessly. I cheapened myself. God I did it to your glory like the dancer in the Hindu temple. Like Esther, Ok yes like Esther for my long suffering people", (1987:81).

### Flat Character

A flat character is the one that refuses to develop in the course of the novel. This is a predictable character who is tied to a peculiar way of life. He is diametrically opposite to the round character. The attitude and manner of a flat character does not change from the beginning of the story to the end. Nothing can change his belief and decision. A good example of a flat character is Okonkwo in Achebe's, *Things Fall Apart*. Almost all the characters in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* are flat characters. They have peculiar traits. It should be noted that a major character's experience is often a pointer to the thematic intention of the novelist.



Note

A character can be understood through his his/her actions and interactions with other characters; what other characters say about him/her and the authors comments on him/her.

### 3.1.4 Theme

**Theme** The central idea or subject explored by an author in a literary work

The **theme** refers to the subject of discussion in any piece of writing. It is packaged to present a message from the author or from a group of individuals. Sometimes, the theme is conceived as the overall idea that runs through a story. It is the central idea or meaning of a story. It provides a unifying point around which the plot, characters, setting, point of view, symbols, and other elements of a story are organised. Whenever a writer decides to write a novel or a story, it is not for the fun of it. He has a purpose in mind for it. There is an idea which is the focus of all discussions; that central idea is the theme.

Though, there is a central theme, it is possible for some other minor themes to feature, and they play complementary roles in piloting the main theme to its port of landing. For instance, in the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe, there are two themes; (i) The personal tragedy of Okonkwo; and (ii) the theme is overtly stated. In Ayi Kwei Armah's, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, for example, the novel's opening pages centre on what happens after a particular bus ride. The starting point of the ride and its destination are not given to us. However, we know that Armah talks about environmental degradation, corruption, political betrayal and personal integrity.

Most modern writers, however, present their themes covertly (as Armah does in *Two Thousand Seasons*). So, determining the underlying meaning of a work often requires more effort than it does from the reader of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Importantly, the reason for the difficulty is that the theme is fused into the elements of a story, and these must be carefully scrutinised in relation to one another as well as to the work as a whole. Determining the theme requires a close analysis of all the elements of a work. This close reading often results in sharper insights into an overworked character or that seemingly unrelated incident. Seeking for details and seeing how they fit together result in greater understanding of the story. Such familiarity with the details, creates pleasure in much the same way that a musical piece heard more than once becomes a rich experience rather than simply a repetition.

Some cardinal principles can assist you in articulating the central meaning of a work, this is because themes are not always easy to express. First, distinguish between the theme of a story and its subject; these are not the same. Many stories share identical subjects, such as death, life, youthfulness, loneliness, innocence, racial discrimination, oppression, and disillusionment. Yet, each story usually makes its own statement about the subject and expresses some view of life. Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* express their disappointments with neo-colonialism in Africa, but the meaning of each story is quite different. There is no single, absolute way of expressing a work's theme. A thematic generalisation of Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* could be something like this: 'The disappointment/broken dreams of Ilmorogians'. However, the theme of Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* could be stated this way: 'The diabolical angst unleashed on Africa by imperialists'. More so, the emphasis in each of these themes could be



modified or expanded, because interpretations of interest, complex works are always subject to revision. People have different perspectives of life; so, it is hardly surprising that responses to literature are not identical. A consideration of theme usually expands the possibilities for meaning, rather than reducing them to categories such as “right” or “wrong”.

The possibilities for readers to differ in their interpretations of a story is very rife, however, that does not mean that any interpretation is valid. For example, if we were to believe in the ‘powers’ of Ezeulu, as the representative of the gods (Ulu), on earth, we would be missing Achebe’s purposes in writing the novel; we would have failed to see the real essence of the novel that the community is more important than an over-bloated individual. (*Arrow of God*). To be valid, the statement of the theme should be responsive to the details of the story. It must be based on evidence within the story rather than solely on experiences, attitudes, or values the reader brings to bear on the work.

Sometimes, readers erroneously conclude that a story’s theme always consists of a moral, some kind of lesson that is dramatised by the various elements of the work. A tendency to look for a lesson in a story can produce a reductive and inaccurate formulation of its theme. Determining all the themes of a story can be a difficult task, because all the story’s elements may not contribute to its central idea. One may also discover that, finding the theme is more challenging than coming to terms with the author’s values as they are revealed in the story. There is no precise code for detecting a story’s meaning and help you to articulate it. However, several strategies are practical and useful after reading the story. The strategies are:

1. Pay attention to the title of the story; it will provide the lead to a major symbol (Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*); Achebe’s *Arrow of God*.
2. Look for details in the story that have potentials for symbolic meanings. Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*; “Desert”, “Stream”.
3. Decide if the protagonist changes or develops some important insight as a result of the action. Tess (Teresa) in *Tess of The D’urbervilles*.
4. When you formulate the theme of the story in your own words, write it down in a concrete sentence that makes some point about the subject matter.
5. Make sure your expression of the theme is a generalised statement rather than a specific description of particular people, places and incidents in the story.
6. Do not use clichés as a way of stating themes. They limit ideas instead of generating them. For instance, “It pays to be good”; “love is the greatest”.
7. Be conscious of the fact that some stories emphasise their themes less than others. For example, stories that have as their major purpose adventure, humour, mystery, or terror may have little or no theme.





## Note

What is most important about realising the theme of a work is not a brief summary statement but the process by which the theme is determined. Basically, the theme is articulated by the story itself and is inseparable from the experience of reading the story.

### 3.1.5 Point of View

It is possible for a novelist to adopt more than one technique in telling his story; this is because there are many ways of telling a story. Let us examine various points of view that story tellers draw upon.

#### The First Person Narrator and the Third Person Narrator

The third person narrator uses *he*, *she*, or *they* to recount the story and does not participate in the action. The first person, on the other hand, uses *I* and is a major minor participant in the action.

The first person narrative technique is a technique adopted by the author when he uses the Pronoun “I” or “We” to indicate personal involvement of the narrator in the story. Using this technique, the reader is limited to the perceptions, thoughts, feelings and emotions of that single character. In this case, he knows he is a character in the story and tells us what he knows and experiences along with information about other characters. He does not know what goes on in other places but only where he is. An example of this is that of Chinua Achebe in *Anthills of The Savannah*. In this novel, there are three first – person narrators who provide personal accounts of the events in the novel. They are: Christopher, Ikem and Beatrice Okoh. There is an excerpt:

I did it shamelessly. I cheapened myself. God! I did it to your glory like the dancer in the Hindu temple. Like Esther, Oh yes like Esther for my long suffering people.

And was I glad the king was slowly but surely responsible! Was I glad! The big snake . . . (1987: 81).

Daniel Defoe, in his novel *Robinson Crusoe*, employs the first – person narrative technique by which the main character, Robinson Crusoe, is also the narrator, giving us a first – hand account of the events as they occur to him. As earlier said, this has the implication of a limited and subjective account by which issues are only seen from the perspective of the narrator. But it also leads authenticity to it, coming straight from the horse’s mouth. An example of the first – person narrative technique is also found in Gerald Durrell’s *My Family and Other Animals*.

Another example of the First – person narrative technique can be situated in Peter Abrahams, *The Path of Thunder*, when Mako, one of the major characters for instance, observes:

I do not object to the coloureds grading upward, or trying to, because it is toward the whites. I do so because it shows the way in which he is not free . . . (1952: 91).

The first – person narrative technique tends to limit the narrator’s account to only those events he or she is involved in, and even these are presented from a strictly personal perspective. Nevertheless, the use of the first –

person narrative technique makes it possible for the reader to know the innermost thoughts, feelings and emotions of individual characters. As said earlier, it is possible for the author to make use of different techniques in a work. Achebe attempts this in his novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. In the novel, he uses the first – person and the Omniscient narrative technique. The combination of these two techniques and the changing point of view of the first – person narrator lend the novel an exciting variety which increases the reader's interest in the story.

For me, lying on the floor, labelling my collection of shell's, it had brought catarrh, pouring it into my skull like cements, so that I was forced to breathe strenuously through open mouth. For my brother Leslie, hunched dark and glowering by the fire, it had inflamed the Convolutions of his ears so that they bled delicately . . . (1956: 17).

### The Omniscient Narrative Technique

This sub-section will discuss the narrative techniques known as the omniscient narrative technique. It is more sophisticated than any of the narrative techniques examined so far. It allows for greater versatility in narration in that it portrays the narrator as the all-knowing and all-seeing narrator who is able to report the feelings and thoughts in the mind of the characters.

As earlier said, the Omniscient narrator is all-knowing. The narrator is neither the author nor a character in the novel. He moves from place to place and passes back and forth through time, slipping into and out of characters as no human being could in real life. He sees the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs and other things about the characters; he simultaneously sees what goes on everywhere and in every character.



**Tip**

An omniscient narrator is an all-knowing and all-seeing narrator who sees and knows everything that goes on in a story.

A good example of this technique is demonstrated in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*:

Alec d'Urbervilles had pushed on up the slope to clear his genuine doubt as to the quarter of the chase they were in. He had, in fact, ridden quite at random for over an hour taking any turning that came to hand in order to Tess's moonlit person than to any wayside object. (1993: 64).

You can imagine who the narrator is in the above passage.

Thomas Hardy employs the Omniscient narrative technique in this novel. This is also an objective technique that makes it possible to probe the innermost depths of the characters and determine their psychological and emotional states. Thus, the reader has access to most of the information he or she needs for a fair assessment of each character's action and motivation. This technique gives Hardy's novels a broad, picture like appeal.

Another example of the Omniscient narrative technique is also found in Ngugi's *The River Between*:

The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kamenno, the other was Makuyi. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kamenno and Makuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never work (1965: 1).

### **The Third Person Narrative Technique**

This sub-section will introduce to you the third person narrator, which is also referred to as the limited omniscient narrator. Here, the author very often restricts the narrator to the single perspective of either a major or minor character. At times, a narrator can see into more than one character, particularly in a longer work that focuses, for instance, on two characters alternately from one chapter to the next.

Here, the narrator is not an active participant in the sequence of events. The author refers to his characters in the third person "he" or "she", "they" or "them". Here, the narrator is not confined to know what is experienced through the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Oftentimes, a narrator can see into more than one character, especially in a longer work that focuses, for example, on two characters alternately from one chapter to the next. Short stories, however, frequently are limited by length to a single character's point of view. The narrator here does not seem to know everything. The narration comes more in a reported form. The way people, places, and events appear to the characters is the way they appear to the reader. The reader has access to the thoughts and feelings of the characters revealed by the narrator, but neither the reader nor the character has access to the inner lives of any of the characters in a story. In presenting the story, the narrator in the third – person is like a referee handling a match. A typical example of the third – person narrative technique is in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Burning Grass*.

He reached out, and taking one of the books began to examine it with interest.

A vein was throbbing in his head. The characters began to dance with staggering unrest before his eyes. He placed a hand against his brow and noticed that it was very hot. The fever had come. (1962: 57).

Another example of this is found in Alex La Guma's Adonis walks through the street:

He turned down another street, away from the artificial glare of Hanover, between stretches of damp, battered houses with their broken ribs of front – railings; cracked leftovers of a bombed area in the twilight; vacant lots and weed-grown doorways resembling the entrances to deserted castles ... (1974: 21)

### **The Epistolary Narrative Technique**

This sub-section will present the epistolary narrative technique. It is a unique narrative technique in which the story is presented in a series of letters written between the characters. It is not common in the modern

writing except for a few ones used within stories. In reading Mariama Ba's *So Long A letter*, one is particularly overwhelmed by the amount of affective and emotional language that pervades the novel. The romantic language bursts out in the very first line and page of this long letter. *So Long a Letter* is a typical example of the epistolary narrative technique. This method begins thus:

*"Dear Aissatou, my friend, my friend, my friend, I call on you three times" (1980: 9).*

A typical characteristic of this technique is that it is laden with sentimental and emotional outburst. In Ramatoulaye's description of how she fell in love with Modou Fall.

*. . . Modou Fall, the very moment you bowed before me to dance, I know you were the one I was waiting for. Tall and athletically built, of course, Olive-Coloured due to your distant Moorish blood, no question. Virility, fineness of features harmoniously blended, once again, no question. As we danced, your forehead, hairline already receding bent over my own. The same happy smile lit up our faces. The pressure of your hand became more tender, more possessive. Everything in me gave in. (1980: 13).*

The epistolary technique shows that the author can use characters to manipulate language, to make subjective statements, statements which may be unacceptable in a situation of communication. It has also shown that a speaker can assume the role of proprietor of a whole communication network. The result, in the final analysis, is the exposition and emergence of words and expressions of psychological, cultural and political dimensions.

### Stream of Consciousness Technique

Stream of consciousness is a literary technique through which a character is used to narrate a story. Using this kind of technique in a story, the narrator starts by talking to himself, having something to debate on. He asks questions, entertains confusion and speculates. It takes the reader inside the character's mind. This technique therefore suggests the flow of thought as well as its contents; hence, complete sentences may give way to fragments as the character's mind makes rapid associations free of conventional logic or transitions. It is a technique by which the thought of the character is used to narrate the story. As an event or action leads to another, the thought becomes a chain of different associated issues. The narration comes in interior monologue. The narrator starts by talking to himself, having something to debate in his mind. He asks rhetorical questions, entertains confusion and speculates.

As a narrative technique, stream of consciousness was developed by modern writers, such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf. A good example of this technique can be found in Armah's *Why Are We So Blest or Blessed?*

*. . . See myself in the couple; . . . See them in me. The man in me: the African absolved into Europe, trying to escape death, eager to shed privilege.*

At another level, Armah adopts monologue through Solo, a major character in the novel:

*. . . read him, watching me, a spectre from an unwanted destiny, wondering how little time he had to go before his fire also went out and he too was reduced to me. (1974: 257).*

*. . . The design was a mask: a pained, human face, a huge head, huge, bulbous, All-seeing eyes, pained, distorted ears open to all possible sounds, super-imposed on a shrivelled mouth are nostrils cramped with hard control. The limbs emaciated, reduced to spindly lines were attached directly to the human spider head. (1974: 32).*

In order to penetrate the mask, Solo seems to ask what to him is a very simple question:

*. . . What is this love we suffer from, impelling us to embrace our own destroyers? (1974: 32).*

Here, the narrator's thoughts range from specific observations to speculations about death. Armah creates the illusion that we are reading the narrator's thoughts as they occur. The stream of consciousness technique provides an intimate perspective on a character's thoughts.

### **Mixed Method Narrative Technique**

The mixed method, the combination of several other methods in a work of fiction (novel), is yet another significant narrative technique. The mixed method is the combination of two or more of the techniques earlier discussed. The author does this based on the freedom he possesses to organise his writings according to the theme and setting he is presenting. Variety and dexterity can not be ruled out in this kind of writing because the work of literature itself is dynamic and laden with creativity. An example of this technique is found in Ayi Kwei Armah's, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*,

*. . . someday in the long future a new life would may be flower in the country, but when it came, it would not choose as its instruments the same people who had made a habit of killing new flowers. The future goodness may come eventually, but before then where were the things in the present which would prepare the way for it? (1968: 157).*

Armah's technique in the above work is focused on certain narrative ploys, including the use of allegorical form, the application of more than one narrative view-point, hazy description of characters, the use of flashbacks, anecdotes and dreams. Importantly, the plot structure in the novel predicated on a journey or movement in a kind of personal purification rite.

The author also uses the Omniscient voice most of the time but brings in the 'I' viewpoint when Teacher narrates their 'wee' trip experience at the seaside. This incident is an artistic flashback into the past which reveals the country's colonial experience of despair, suffering and life of hopelessness brought about by the World War II and the unemployment that followed.



### Discussion Activity

Thus far, we have examined all the narrative techniques in literature. How does a narrative technique used by an author contribute to the success or otherwise of a novel?

Post your response on Study Session Three forum page on course website.

## Study Session Summary



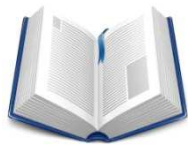
### Summary

In this Study Session, we examined the aspects of prose literature. We stated that the setting of a novel refers to the place, time and social circumstances in which the actions or episodes of the novel occur. You also learnt that the plot is one of the basic features of the novel. We discussed that the arrangement of incidents in a novel is what is referred to as the plot.

Thereafter, we discussed the significance of characters in a novel. You learnt that characters are persons in the novel who are involved in the actions and events. The theme is the central idea or meaning of a story. It provides a unifying point around which the plot, characters, setting, point of view, and other elements of a story are organized. Sometimes, it may be difficult to realise the theme of a given story; while it may be pretty easy at some other times.

Our final section was on “point of view”. Here, we explained that first – person narrative technique provides personal accounts of events in a novel. The use of this technique makes it possible for the reader to know the innermost thoughts and feelings of the narrator. We also explained the omniscient narrative technique. The omniscient narrator technique is an all-knowing and all-seeing narrator who is able to report the thoughts, feelings and goings – on in the mind of the characters. We went further to discuss the third person narrative technique. We stated that the narrator does not seem to know everything. He is confined to know what is experienced through the thoughts and feelings of the characters. The narrator in the third-person usually refers to his characters, using pronouns, such as he, she, and they. We capped this section with a discussion on epistolary narrative technique. Using this narrative technique, the writer puts his story in a series of letters written between the characters involved in the story. We discussed the narrative technique of stream of consciousness as an event or action that leads to another in the thoughts of the character; and the mixed method of narration as the method that deals with the combination of two or more of the techniques.

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## Study Session 4

# Symbolism

## Introduction

This Study Session will introduce to you the use of symbols in prose literature. Symbols appear all around us; anything can be given symbolic significance. Without symbols our lives would be curiously uneventful. Awareness of a novelist's use of symbols is not all that different from the kinds of perceptions and interpretations that allow us to make sense of our daily lives.



### Learning Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:  
4.1 *define* and *use* correctly the term “symbolism”.

## 4.1 Symbolism

**Symbol** An object, event or person that carries extra layer of meanings other than the ordinary.

A **symbol** is a person, object, or event that suggests more than its literal meaning. It is the use of one thing to stand for another, that is, objects, actions; ideas are given symbolic meanings when they are used to represent other ideas, actions or objects other than themselves. This fundamental definition is explicit enough, but the use of symbol in prose fiction makes some students slightly jittery because they tend to regard it as a trap, a covert device that can go off during a seemingly harmless class discussion. This kind of attitude is naturally common.

We know, for instance, that the ring that is used in a wedding is more than just a piece of jewellery because it suggests the unity and intimacy of the couple involved. The bride's gown may be white because we associate innocence and purity with that colour. Or, consider the meaning of a small alligator pepper and kolanut among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria. The ring, the white gown, and alligator pepper are symbolic because each has meanings that go beyond its specific qualities and functions.

Symbols, such as these that are widely recognised by a society or culture are called *conventional symbols*. The Christian cross or a national flag have meanings understood by large groups of people. Certain kinds of experience also have traditional meanings in African cultures. The appearance of the moon, rain, etc symbolises one thing or another. So also black means death; green evokes the image of youthfulness and regeneration, etcetera.



**Note**

Individual cultures have their own conventions; some oriental countries associate white rather than black with death and mourning.

A literary symbol includes traditional, conventional, or public meanings, but it may also be established internally by the total context of the work in which it appears. In Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Armah does not use the Bus Conductor as a conventional symbol of transportation, movement, safety and comfort from the poverty – stricken society. Instead, the bus at the beginning of the story is rickety, and its parts barely hold together. Symbolically, this is Ghana after years of misrule. Everything about the bus is unwholesome.

The light from the bus 'moved uncertainly down the road' (P. I); the light from the two headlights produces 'two vague circles'. A literary symbol can be a setting, character, action, object, name, or anything else in a work that maintains its literal significance while suggesting other meanings. Importantly, symbols cannot be limited to a single meaning; they are suggestive rather than definitive. Their evocation of varieties of meanings by the use of symbols allows a writer to say more with a few words. Symbols are economical devices for evoking complex ideas without having to resort to painstaking explanations that would make a story more like an essay than an experience. For instance, the several sights of dirt in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* cannot be reduced to one idea. They have multiple meanings that unify the story.

**Allegory** A literary device in which characters or events represents recognised ideas and concepts

When a character, object, or incident indicates a single, fixed meaning, the writer is using **allegory** rather than symbol. Unlike symbols, which have literal functions as well as multiple meanings, the primary focus in allegory is on the abstract idea called forth by the concrete object. Oftentimes, stories include symbols that you may or may not perceive on a first reading. Subtle use is a sign of a writer's skill in weaving symbols into the fabric of the characters' lives. Symbols may sometimes escape you, but that is probably better than detecting symbols where only literal meanings are intended. Allow the text to help you verify if a symbolic reading is appropriate. Once you are clear about what literally happens, read carefully and notice the placement of details that are emphasized. The repeated references to 'kola', (P. 107) in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* call attention to themselves and warrant symbolic readings. A symbol, however, need not be repeated to have an important purpose in a story.

By not losing focus of the total context of the story, you should be able to decide if your reading is reasonable and consistent with the other facts; plenty of lemons in literature yield no symbolic meaning even if they are squeezed. Be sensitive to the meanings that the author associates with people, places, objects and actions.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we discussed the significance of symbolism as a device in prose literature. We stated that a symbol is the use of one thing to stand for another; that is, object, actions; ideas are given symbolic meanings when they are used to represent other ideas, actions or objects other than themselves.

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## Study Session 5

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# Biography and Autobiography (Non-Fiction)

## Introduction

This Study Session will introduce to you two non-fictional prose forms to you – biography and autobiography. Unlike prose fiction, these literary works are based on actual events or information that is verifiable in time and space. The nature of these literary works would be examined here



### Learning Outcomes

When you have studied this session, you should be able to:

5.1 write a biography

5.2 write your autobiography

## 5.1 Biography

**Biography** A Story that focuses on the life story of an individual written by another person.

This is a story that deals with the life story of an individual written by someone else who may be a friend, relation or a paid writer. It is an account of the life of a person written by another person. The biography presents the facts of a person's life as he uncovers them through research, interviews and visits. For example, works like MANDELA: THE AUTHORISED BIOGRAPHY By Anthony Simpson; The Autobiography of Malcolm by Alex Haley.

## 5.2 Autobiography

**Autobiography** A story of someone's life written by that person.

This is the story of a person's life written by himself, or an account of a person's life written by the person himself. This must be relevant to people in the society. Most people who write about themselves may be great writers, politicians, artists, leaders of men, engineers or war veterans. Examples of such autobiographies include: *The Downing Street Years* by Margaret Thatcher; Camara Laye's *The African Child*; Obafemi Awolowo's *Travails of Democracy*; Olusegun Obasanjo's *Not My Will*; and Odumegwu Ojukwu's *Because I was Involved*. In Camera Laye's *The African Child*, Laye presented his account of growth and development from childhood to maturity, and his corresponding loss of innocence.

### 5.2.1 Why Do People Write About Themselves?

These are various reasons that motivate people to write about themselves. Some of them are:

1. To share a very special and thrilling experience with others
2. There is the need or desire to assert oneself.
3. A desire to reveal the source of a writer's inspiration or the factors that shape the writer's literary or moral development.
4. There is also the need to "confess" one's guilt.
5. In this, he defends his moral or psychological action which may have brought a sense of guilt.

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## Study Session Summary



### Summary

In this Study Session, we discussed both biography and autobiography which are non-fictional prose. These works are based on factual events that are verifiable unlike prose fiction. While biography deals with the life story of an individual written by someone else, an autobiography is a story of a person written by himself or herself or an account of a person's life put together by the person himself.

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