
UNIT 1 'UNDERSTANDING PROSE': AN INTRODUCTION

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall give you a general introduction to **varieties of prose** as well as to different **prose forms**. If you read this unit carefully, you should be able to:

- distinguish between prose and poetry;
- define descriptive, narrative and expository prose;
- describe prose forms such as the short story, novel, essay, biography and autobiography.
- recognise various figures of speech.

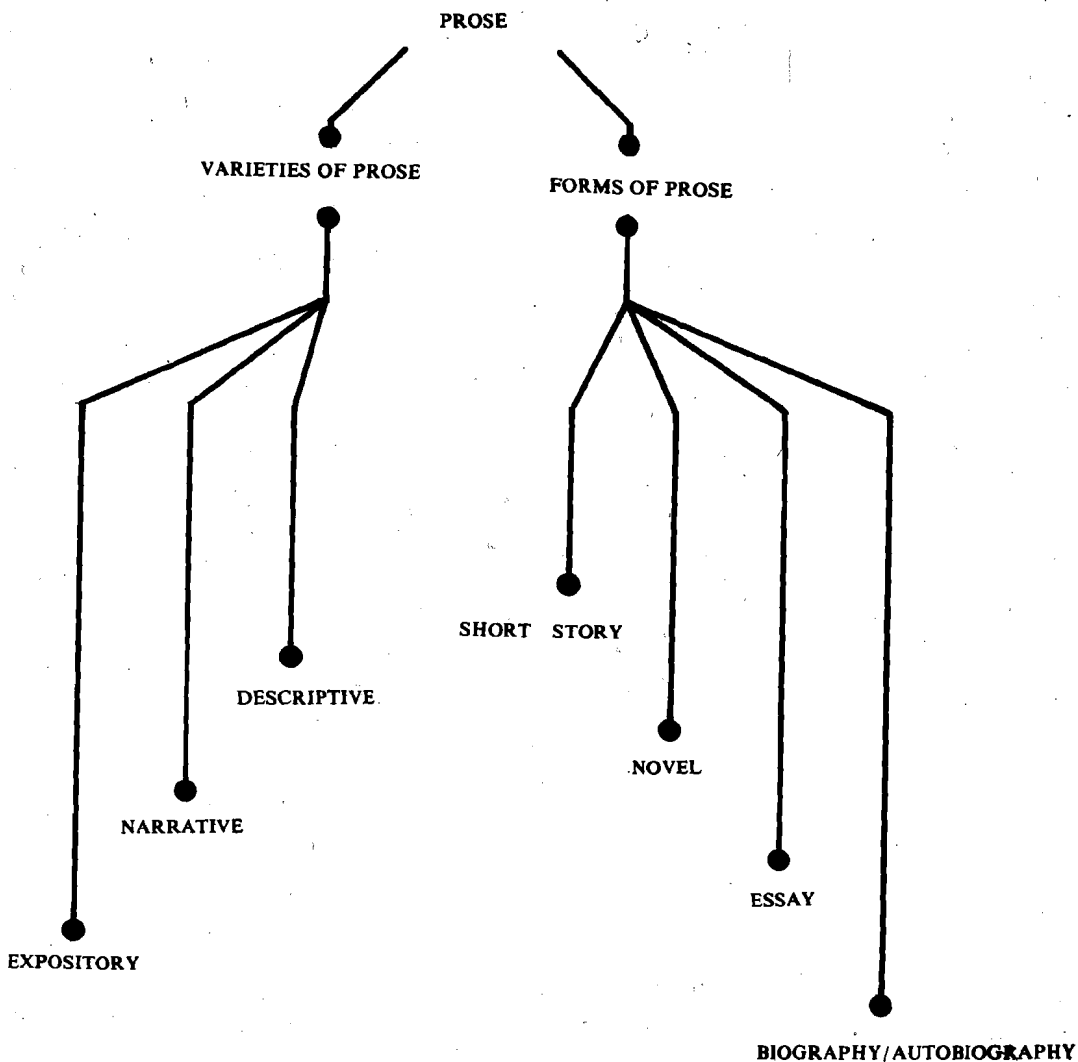
1.1 INTRODUCTION

As you know, the present course is divided into two parts. The first deals with **varieties of prose** while the second concentrates on different **prose forms**. This unit aims to provide a general introduction to the varieties and forms of prose. We shall discuss descriptive prose at some length in the next four units in this block. A detailed study of each variety and form of prose will be provided in subsequent blocks. In short, the first unit of this block gives a general introduction to the whole course. Units 2-5 deal specifically with descriptive prose.

In this unit, we shall first examine the difference between prose and poetry. This will be followed by a discussion of three varieties of prose. We shall then give you a brief introduction to the forms of prose that you will read in greater detail later in the course.

Figurative language is used extensively by most writers. We have defined some figures of speech so that you will be able to identify these in your critical appreciation of literary prose.

You may like to skim through the unit first and then tackle each section in detail. We would advise you to read each section carefully before attempting the exercises. These are fairly simple and you should complete them before looking at the answers given at the end.



1.2 PROSE AND POETRY

The word 'prose' is taken from the Latin '*prosus*' which means 'direct' or 'straight'. Broadly speaking, prose is direct or straightforward writing. In poetry, which is generally written in verse, a lot of things may be left to the imagination of the reader.

In ordinary prose, the aim is to communicate one's thoughts and feelings. What is important then is (a) *what* one wants to say, and (b) *how* one chooses to say it. What is said is the topic or subject of the composition. How it is said is the style or manner in which the topic is expressed. The style of course greatly depends upon who we are writing for and what sort of personality we have. There are different topics and different styles. Whatever the number of topics, they all come under one or another variety of prose and each variety may have a distinct style of its own.

What then are the different varieties of prose? For purposes of analysis we have categorised them as (a) descriptive, (b) narrative and (c) expository. But these three are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes you find more than one variety in a piece of work. It depends on the skill and intention of the writer. For example, in a novel or short story, we are likely to find all these varieties of prose worked together in interesting and innovative combinations.

1.2.1 Difference between Prose and Poetry

A French poet and critic, Paul Valéry, compared prose to walking and poetry to dancing. We walk in order to go from one place to another. We do it for a

particular purpose. When we walk for exercise, we do it for the improvement of our health. In other words, walking is utilitarian, that is, it is something that we do with a purpose in view. We are talking about ordinary prose and not literary prose. Ordinary prose is like walking. We use words to give information, to get something done, to make someone do what we want him/her to, and so on. In ordinary prose, what is important is the message. But this is not the primary consideration in literary prose. What is important also is how language is used, how ideas and emotions are communicated and how the style suits the content.

When you go to see a dance, you are not interested in seeking information. When you see a good dance, you enjoy it. In other words, the objective is enjoyment and not mere information or instruction. When you like a particular dance, you go and see that dance over and over again because every time you see it, you get a new aesthetic experience. In the case of poetry and literary prose, you have what you call your favourite poem or passage. You read it several times and are not tired of it. If it is an ordinary prose passage, the moment you understand the meaning, you don't want to read it again. In literary prose as well as in poetry, it is not just the meaning that is important, but also the medium. It is often difficult to say what is more important, the form or the content. There is, however, an inseparability between the two, a togetherness. This is exactly the meaning of the Indian term 'Sahitya'. 'Sahitya' literally means 'togetherness'. It is the togetherness of the sound and the sense, it is the togetherness of form and content. This is what is unique to great literature.

In dancing, every gesture is important for the position that it occupies in that particular dance. No one posture is more important or less important than another. Each gesture contributes to the total effect of the dance. In the same way, in a good poem or a piece of literary prose, every word is important for the position it occupies in it, and contributes to its total effect. Again, in a good dance, when the dance is on, you cannot distinguish the dancer from the dance. In any great poem or passage of literary prose, it will be difficult to separate the effect of the medium from the effect of the message. We do paraphrase a poem, but the paraphrase of a poem is not the poem. A prose piece can be paraphrased, summarised but not a poem. The meaning of the poem is the meaning that you experience every time you read the poem and you cannot say of any poem that you've exhausted it. The 'literariness' of a particular poem or prose piece lies partly in this quality. A literary piece usually has layers of meaning, for the writer works through suggestion, allusion, imagery and other such devices. The use of literary devices alone does not make a piece "literary". What is important is the way in which they contribute to the unity and thereby the final effect of the piece. Every time you go to it, you get a new meaning, a new aesthetic delight. This is mainly because of the connotation of the words in poetry.

1.2.2 Denotation and Connotation

Words have a denotative and also a connotative meaning. Denotation is the literal meaning of a word. For example, when you say 'This is a stone', you are referring to an object which is a stone. It is a clear statement. There is no other meaning of this sentence. On the other hand, if we say 'she has a heart of stone' the meaning changes. What does it mean? It simply means that she is cruel or hard-hearted. In fact, it refers to all the qualities you associate with the stone. This is what we mean when we say that a word has several connotations. The word 'home' means a place where one lives with one's family. This is its primary meaning. But it suggests warmth, intimacy, family security, comfort, affection. A house is also a place where one lives. Does it have the same connotations of the word 'home'? No. Poetry is full of connotations and our appreciation of poetry stems a great deal from the connotations of words used in it. Now that we have discussed the difference between denotation and connotation let us discuss the different varieties of prose. But before doing so, it would be a good idea to work out a few exercises.

Check Your Progress I

- i) In about 3-4 sentences, enumerate some differences between prose and poetry in the space provided below.

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- ii) What do you understand by the denotation and connotation of words? Can you think of some examples?
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1.3 VARIETIES OF PROSE

Now that you have seen the general difference between poetry and prose, let us turn to the varieties of prose. Let us examine the nature and characteristics of descriptive, narrative and expository prose briefly. These varieties will be discussed in detail in subsequent units. Here we only aim to give you a general introduction.

1.3.1 Descriptive Prose

Descriptive writing describes things as they are or as they appear to be. It can be the description of a person or a landscape or an event. In descriptive writing, we are able to see things as they are or were seen or heard or imagined by the describer. A narrative tells us what happens or happened. It deals mainly with events. A good description translates the writer's observation into vivid details and creates an atmosphere of its own. Through his/her description, the author tries to recreate what s/he has seen or imagined. A fine description is a painting in words. Here is a description of Mr. Squeers in Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39):

Mr. Squeers' appearance was not **prepossessing**. He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental: being of a greenish grey, and in shape resembling the fan-light of a street door. The blank side of his face was much wrinkled and **puckered up**, which gave him a very **sinister** appearance, especially when he smiled, at which times his expression bordered closely on the villainous. His hair was very flat and shiny, save at the ends, where it was brushed stiffly up from a low **protruding** forehead, which assorted well with his harsh voice and coarse manner. He was about two or three and fifty, and a trifle below the middle size; he wore a white neckerchief with long ends, and a suit of **scholastic** black; but his coat sleeves being a great deal too long, and his trousers a great deal too short, he appeared ill at ease in his clothes, and as if he were in a perpetual state of astonishment at finding himself so respectable.

Glossary

- prepossessing:** inspiring
puckered up: full of folds and wrinkles
sinister: wicked, evil
protruding: jutting out, projecting
scholastic: formal/academic

This is a graphic description of the appearance of Mr. Squeers. The details are so sharp that we can easily visualize the person. We are told about his height, his eye, his face, hair, forehead and dress. A successful description, it enables us to picture the person vividly. It is also a very enjoyable passage. Did you notice the irony in 'He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two'? The *irony* and subtle humour continue throughout the passage so that the reader cannot help smiling to her/himself. The eye is further likened to 'the fan-light of a street door'—a very interesting and unusual analogy. You must also have noticed how carefully Dickens chooses his words so that we can 'see' the hair that was 'very flat and shiny', 'hear' his 'harsh voice' and so on. These then are some of the devices that you will find used effectively in literary prose.

Here is another descriptive passage :

Ishtiaq Ali is a thin man of medium height. He looks older than his age—he is about 50....Even after a long service, his salary remains meagre. An unlettered man, his family expanded in a big way—he has nine children. (Pushp K. Jain, 'On the Ofttrodden Tracks', *The Times of India*, April 27, 1989)

Does this delight us in the same way that the previous passage did? Perhaps not. Although it certainly does give us some information about Ishtiaq Ali. Where is the difference? It is in the use of language. Here the language is purely functional with bold statements aimed at providing information rather than delight. In the earlier passage, it is a pleasure to read the sentences again and again savouring their suggestiveness.

As we have seen successful description makes you visualize the scene or the person. Generally, description is not an independent form of writing, that is, a whole book will not consist of descriptions alone. It is often used as an aid to narrative or expository writing. Its main purpose is to describe a sense impression or a mood. We will discuss this in greater detail in the next four units of this block.

1.3.2 Narrative Prose

A narrative is a description of events. It may deal with external or internal events. By internal events, we mean the thoughts, feelings and emotions of individuals. Narrative writing tries to recreate an actual experience or an imaginary one in a way that we are able to experience it mentally. We lose ourselves in the characters and events of the narrative temporarily. Narratives can deal with the facts or fiction. Autobiographies, biographies, histories are narratives of fact. The short story and novel come under the category of narrative fiction.

In a narrative, we are carried along the stream of action. When we narrate a story, we concentrate on the sequence of events. It is the action that grips the attention of the reader. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are examples of narrative writing. Narration is concerned with action and actors, it may make use of description but description is secondary. Action, characters and setting are the elements that are woven into a pattern to make the narrative interesting. Rudyard Kipling mentioned the ingredients of a narrative in the following verse:

I keep six honest-serving men
They taught me all I know :-
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

What happens? Why does it happen? When does it happen? How does it happen? Where does it happen and to whom does it happen? All these questions are answered satisfactorily in a narrative. What makes a narrative interesting is not just what is said but the way it is said. Look at this passage from Charles Dicken's novel *Oliver Twist* (1837). Here we shall read about the trial of the Artful Dodger when he is produced in court on charges of pick-pocketing.

It was indeed Mr Dawkins, who, shuffling into the office with the big coat-sleeves tucked up as usual, his left hand in his pocket, and his hat in his right hand, preceded the jailer, with a rolling gait altogether indescribable, and, taking his place in the dock, requested in an audible voice to know what he was placed in that 'ere disgraceful situation for.

'Hold your tongue, will you?' said the jailer.

'I'm an Englishman, ain't I?' rejoined the Dodger; 'where are my privileges?'

'You'll get your privileges soon enough,' retorted the jailer, 'and pepper with 'em.'

'We'll see wot the Secretary of State for the Home Affairs has got to say to the beaks, if I don't', replied Mr Dawkins. 'Now then! Wot is this here business? I shall thank the madg'strates to dispose of this here little affair, and not to keep me while they read the paper for I've got an appointment with a genelman in the city, and as I'm a man of my word and very punctual in business matters, he'll go away if I ain't there to my time, and then pr'aps there won't be an action for damage against them as kept me away. Oh, no, certainly not!'

At this point the Dodger, with a show of being very particular with a view to proceedings to be had thereafter, desired the jailer to communicate 'the names of them two files as was on the bench', which so tickled the spectators, that they laughed almost as heartily as Master Bates could have done if he had heard the request.

'Silence there!' cried the jailer.

'What is this?' inquired one of the magistrates.

'A pick-pocketing case, your worship.'

'Has the boy ever been here before?'

'He ought to have been, a many times,' replied the jailer. 'He has been pretty well everywhere else. I know him well, your worship.'

'Oh! you know me, do you?' cried the Artful, making a note of the statement.

'Very good. That's a case of deformation of character anyway.'

Here there was another laugh, and another cry of silence.

'Now then, where are the witnesses?' said the clerk.

'Ah! that's right,' added the Dodger. 'Where are they? I should like to see 'em.'

This wish was immediately gratified, for a policeman stepped forward who had seen the prisoner attempt the pocket of an unknown gentleman in a crowd, and indeed take a handkerchief therefrom, which, being a very old one, he deliberately put back again, after trying it on his own countenance. For this reason, he took the Dodger into custody as soon as he could get near him, and the said Dodger being searched, had upon his person a silver snuff-box, with the owner's name engraved upon the lid. This gentleman had been discovered on reference to the Court Guide, and being then and there present, swore that the snuff-box was his, and that he had missed it on the previous day, the moment he had disengaged himself from the crowd before referred to. He had also remarked a young gentleman in the throng particularly active in making his way about, and that young gentleman was the prisoner before him.

'Have you anything to ask this witness, boy?' said the magistrate.

'I wouldn't abase myself by descending to hold no conversation with him,' replied the Dodger.

'Have you anything to say at all?'

'Do you hear his worship ask if you have anything to say?' inquired the jailer, nudging the silent Dodger with his elbow.

'I beg your pardon,' said the Dodger, looking up with an air of abstraction.

'Did you redress yourself to me, my man?'

'I never see such an out-and-out young wagabond, your worship,' observed the officer with a grin. 'Do you mean to say anything, you young shaver?'

'No,' replied the Dodger, 'not here, for this ain't the shop for justice; besides which, my attorney is a-breakfasting this morning with the Vice-President of the House of Commons; but I shall have something to say elsewhere, and so will he, and so will a very numerous and 'spectable circle of acquaintance as'll make them beaks wish they'd never been born, or that they'd got their footmen to hang 'em up to their own hat-pegs afore they let 'em come out this morning to try it on upon me. I'll—'

'There! He's fully committed!' interposed the clerk. 'Take him away.'

'Come on,' said the jailer.

'Oh, ah! I'll come on,' replied the Dodger, brushing his hat with the palm of his hand. 'Ah! (to the Bench), it's no use your looking frightened; I won't show you no mercy, not a ha'porth of it. *You'll* pay for this, my fine fellers. I wouldn't be you for something! I wouldn't go free, now, if you was to fall down on your knees and ask me. Here, carry me off to prison! Take me away!'

This is a hilarious passage that tells us about the Artful Dodger's defiant conduct at his trial ('I'm an Englishman, ain't I?...where are my priweleges?'). We respond at one level to the hilarious situation but at another we also wonder: what should the poor do against such oppressive judicial systems? ('This aint the shop of justice'). We also get a clear picture of the Artful Dodger: his 'coat-sleeves tucked up', his 'hand in his pocket' and his 'rolling gait' are described vividly at the outset. What then follows is a dialogue full of ironical, witty and quick rejoinders by this habitual offender. This is alternated with third person narration: "At this point the Dodger, with a show of being very particular with a view to proceedings to be had thereafter, desired the jailer to communicate 'the names of them two files as was on the bench', which so tickled the spectators, that they laughed almost as heartily as Master Bates could

have done if he had heard the request". In short, what we wish to point out is that narrative writing makes use of narration as well as description. In order to dramatize the situation, dialogues and conversations are introduced so that the writer is able to recreate the situation and communicate the experience.

1.3.3 Expository Prose

Expository writing deals in definition, explanation or interpretation. It includes writing on science, law, philosophy, technology, political science, history and criticism. Exposition is a form of logical presentation.

Its primary object is to explain and clarify. It presents details concretely and exactly. Expository writing is writing that explains. But we are not interested in writing that merely explains. We are interested in expository writing that can be read as literature. The following is a piece of expository prose:

In the leg there are two bones, the *tibia* and *fibula*. The tibia or shin-bone is long and strong and bears the weight of the body. The fibula or splint bone is an equally long but much slenderer bone, and is attached to the tibia as a pin is to a brooch.

Leonard Hill, *Manual of Human Physiology*

This piece clearly defines the two bones, the tibia and the fibula. But can this be read as literature? Now let us look at another piece of expository prose.

Now mark another big difference between the natural slavery of man to Nature and the unnatural slavery of man to man. Nature is kind to her slaves. If she forces you to eat and drink, she makes eating and drinking so pleasant that when we can afford it we eat and drink too much. We must sleep or go mad: but then sleep is so pleasant that we have great difficulty in getting up in the morning. And firesides and families seem so pleasant to the young that they get married and join building societies to realize their dreams. Thus, instead of resenting our natural wants as slavery, we take the greatest pleasure in their satisfaction. We write sentimental songs in praise of them. A tramp can earn his supper by singing Home, Sweet Home.

The slavery of man to man is the very opposite of this. It is hateful to the body and to the spirit. Our poets do not praise it; they proclaim that no man is good enough to be another man's master. The latest of the great Jewish prophets, a gentleman named Marx, spent his life in proving that there is no extremity of selfish cruelty at which the slavery of man to man will stop if it be not stopped by law. You can see for yourself that it produces a state of continual civil war—called the class war—between the slaves and their masters, organized as Trade Unions on one side and Employers' Federations on the other.

(G.B. Shaw, 'Freedom'—one of a series of BBC Radio Talks—18 June, 1935 in *Modern Prose*, Michael Thorpe, pp 147-48)

There is a clear difference between the two passages. Shaw puts across his argument logically and convincingly.

He first talks about the natural slavery of man to Nature by giving a series of examples. He then contrasts this with unnatural slavery of man to man. By use of contrast, this argument is further strengthened. The result is that difficult concepts like freedom and slavery are readily understood. What is however, remarkable is that his use of simple language, tongue-in-cheek manner and conversational style immediately strikes a sympathetic and receptive chord in the reader. These two passages must have given you some idea about the difference between literary and non-literary expository writing. The different varieties of expository writing will be discussed in greater detail in Block 3.

Check Your Progress II

- i) Read the following passages and name the dominant variety of prose that you find in each: descriptive, expository and narrative.
 - a) Sambo of the bandy legs slammed the carriage-door on his young weeping mistress. He sprang up behind the carriage. 'Stop!' cried Miss Jemima, rushing to the gate with a parcel.

'It's some sandwiches, my dear', said she to Amelia 'You may be hungry, you know; and Becky, Becky Sharp, here's a book for you that my sister—that is, I—Johnson's Dictionary, you know, you must not leave us without that. Good-bye. Drive on, coachman, God bless you.'

And the kind creature retreated into the garden, overcome with emotions. But, lo; and just as the coach drove off, Miss Sharp put her pale face out of the window and actually flung the book back into the garden.

G.M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (1847-48)

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- b) Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the bible,—or from one of our elder poets,—in a paragraph of today's newspaper.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-72)

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- c) The general mistake among us in Educating our Children, is, that in our Daughters we take care of their persons and neglect their minds, in our Sons, we are so intent upon adorning their minds, that we wholly neglect their bodies. It is from this that you shall see a young body celebrated and admired in all the Assemblies about Town; when her elder Brother is afraid to come into a Room. From this ill Management it arises, that we frequently observe a Man's life is half spent before he is taken notice of and, a Woman in the prime of her years is out of fashion and neglected. (You must have noticed that certain words are written in capitals. Steele often followed this convention for emphasising those particular words).

Richard Steele 'The Education of Girls'
The Spectator No. 66. R. Steele and J. Addison.
Selections from the Taller and the Spectator (Penguin 1982.)

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1.4 FORMS OF PROSE

The division of prose into three kinds—descriptive, narrative and expository, is a rough one. You may find good description in narrative writing. When you explain, you may also describe and narrate to make your explanation effective. The three divisions are not rigid. A good writer may use a little description here, a little narration there, and a bit of exposition in another place. A knowledge of the three varieties is useful in that you can appreciate how the writer makes use of one or more of them effectively. You would realize that they are very often used in combination and they rarely exist alone.

Having discussed the different kinds of writing, let's discuss briefly the different literary forms in prose. Some of the prose forms are the novel, short story, essay, biography and autobiography. Let us look at each of these forms briefly now. They will be discussed in detail in subsequent blocks.

1.4.1 Short Story

A short story is not a novel in an abridged form. A short story is complete in itself. Therefore a short story writer must have great skill to achieve an impression of completeness in a few pages. The characters and incidents are sketched in a few effective strokes. A short story thus has intensity and a singleness of purpose. There is no single acceptable definition of a short story. All that we can say is that it is short, has a plot and character(s) and has a beginning, a middle and an end. According to one definition, a short story is 'a relatively short narrative which is designed to produce a single dominant effect and which contains the elements of drama'. The aim of a good short story is to make the reader feel, to make him/her enter into the experience of the characters. You must have read short stories in magazines as well as in anthologies. For a more detailed discussion of the short story as a literary form, please turn to Block IV, Unit 1.

1.4.2 Novel

Like the short story, it is difficult to define a novel. When we talk about a novel, we usually mean a piece of fiction, written in prose and of a certain length. A novel is an individual vision of the novelist. It is a picture of life as viewed by the writer. It has a story which tells us what happened and a plot which tells us how it happened. E.M. Forster, an English novelist, said this of the difference between a story and a plot: 'The King died and the Queen died' is a story. 'The King died and then the Queen died of grief' is a plot. The difference is quite clear from this example.

The plot and characters in a good novel leave a lasting impression on the reader. A good novel gives us an insight into the world and ourselves; it is full of vitality and humanity and appeals to human sensibilities. The style varies from one novelist to another. Each novel bears the signature of the novelist. A good short story is like a small garden. A fine novel is like a forest. We will discuss the characteristics and types of novels in Block 5, Unit 1.

1.4.3 Essay

An essay is a piece of prose composition usually of moderate length. The word 'essay' derives from the French word *essai* or attempt. It "attempts" to throw some light on the subject under discussion.

There are two kinds of essays. One is informal or personal and the other is formal. You can say anything you like in an informal essay so long as it is interesting and pleasing to the reader. It is written in a light style. Its purpose is to delight and entertain the reader. The style of the essay is generally familiar and conversational. The subjects can often be light such as in 'Apology for Idlers', 'On Tremendous Trifles', 'On Bores' and so on. The informal essay tries to inform, persuade or entertain the reader.

A formal essay is a serious one and it weighs, evaluates and judges. It discusses the merits and the demerits of the topic in question. The style is objective and serious. A good essay however, is balanced, thoughtful and not biased. The judgement is based on facts.

You will read five different essays in Block VII.

1.4.4 Biography and Autobiography

A biography is the story of the life of an individual. Our concern here is with biography as a piece of literature. A good biography usually tries to project an objective picture of the life of a particular person. It avoids the temptation either to praise too much or to be too severe and critical. In this kind of writing, the writer selects the salient features of a particular life and gives them a shape. It tries to make the reader share the hopes, the fears, the interests and aspirations of that person. In an autobiography, the writer attempts to reveal selected experiences of his/her own life in retrospect. Here the picture presented is necessarily subjective. It presents the events and impressions of the past as recollected by the writer at the time s/he is writing the autobiography. It cannot be a complete account of one's life, as the future has still to be lived.

The autobiographies of Gandhiji and Nehru are good examples of this form of writing. In Block VIII, you will read excerpts from famous biographies and autobiographies.

Check Your Progress III

Fill in the blanks:

Our teacher told us that there are.....varieties of prose. Broadly, they can be categorised as.....,..... and..... We are also told that there are various..... of prose. In school, I remember reading from an anthology of short..... The one I liked best, was the one about the diamond necklace. Recently, I have started reading..... This is another prose..... that I enjoy thoroughly even though some..... are rather long. I have also read..... though I must admit that I've written quite a few as part of composition at school and prefer reading short stories and novels. Reading about the lives of others is very interesting and I make it a point to borrow..... from the library. Some day I will write my.....

1.5 FIGURES OF SPEECH

Let us now discuss some of the more commonly used figures of speech. This will help you identify them when you are analysing a particular passage. Is it enough to identify figures of speech? No. We must also be able to say why the writer has used them and to what effect.

Figures of Speech

Let us consider this scenario. Deeply in love, a young man tells his friend: 'My girlfriend is very beautiful'. Without going into the question of whether the young lady in question was indeed beautiful or not, let us consider the sentence. It is clearly a straightforward statement. On the other hand, Robert Burns (1759-96), a Scottish poet, says the same thing but in more poetic words: 'My luv is like a red red rose'. This is what we would call figurative use of language. In other words, the poet is making use of a figure of speech, a simile in this case, which we shall discuss a little later. First, let us be clear about what figurative language is. By comparing the above sentences, you must have got an idea about what a figure of speech is. The first statement gives us the literal meaning whereas in the second, words are used in a way that is different from their literal meaning.

Why do writers use figurative language? In order to draw attention to the language and to communicate the experience more effectively. For example, when we read 'My luv is like a red red rose', the sentence evokes images of a beautiful red rose and a very young rosy-cheeked girl who is as beautiful as this exquisite flower. Do poets alone use figures of speech? No. Figures of speech are used in all types of writing: prose, poetry, drama. In fact, we too use figurative language in our daily conversation. When we say, 'He drinks like a fish' or 'It's raining cats and dogs', we are using figurative language.

We shall now briefly discuss some of the more common figures of speech: simile, metaphor; image; symbol; personification; metonymy; synecdoche; apostrophe; hyperbole; understatement; irony.

Simile

A simile is a comparison between different terms belonging to different classes for the purpose of describing one of them. The comparison is usually made by the use of connectives such as 'like' or 'as'. For example, when we say 'as sweet as honey' or 'white like snow', we are using similes. But if we say 'Ram is like Shyam', is this a simile? No. Because Ram and Shyam belong to the same class, i.e., male human beings.

Metaphor

Broadly speaking, a metaphor is also a comparison. But here there is no direct comparison as in a simile. Nor are any connectives such as 'like' and 'as' used. The writer uses an expression which describes one thing by stating another. For example, we can say 'The road snaked its way up the mountain'. Here the word 'snaked' is used metaphorically. The word snaked suggests a winding path. You must have noticed that there is no direct comparison between the snake and the course of the road. The comparison with the snake is indirect and implied.

Image

An image is a visual picture evoked by the use of either a word or phrase. Writers use imagery to make descriptive writing more effective. Does an image only refer to the visual? No, an image can also refer to the sense of taste, smell, touch and hearing. An image is usually written in the form of a simile or metaphor. For example :

There is a garden in her face,
Where roses and white lilies grow.

What a beautiful and vivid word-picture is evoked by these lines! Do you think this is a simile or metaphor? It is a metaphor, isn't it?

Symbol

An image is a description that enhances the significance of a literary work. A symbol is something that stands for something else. A dove is a symbol of peace. It is a concrete expression of an abstract concept such as peace. A literary symbol is not simply descriptive like an image. It usually has a range of meanings. In *Bleak House*, the novel by Charles Dickens, we have 'Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, fog down the river....' Fog here is the symbol of confusion, obscurity and the endless delays caused by outdated legal practices.

Personification

This involves giving human characteristics, powers or feelings to objects or to abstract qualities. As in a metaphor, a comparison is implied. The purpose is to make the description more vivid and concrete. The writer speaks of something which is non-human as if it were human. For example, 'The sun traced his footsteps across the sky' is a more poetic way of expressing the passing of a day. Joseph Conrad has personified the West Wind in *The Mirror of the Sea*, 'The West wind reigns over the seas surrounding the coasts of these kingdoms...' (You will read this passage in Unit 5 of this block). As you read on you will find that Conrad conceives of the West Wind as a despotic ruler with the capacity for doing good as well as evil.

Metonymy

Let us look at this sentence: 'I enjoy listening to Ravi Shankar'. What does this mean? Ravi Shankar is the name of a great musician and when we say 'I enjoy listening to Ravi Shankar', we mean that we enjoy listening to his music. Here the person's name is substituted for that of his music. In short, metonymy means 'change of name'.

Synecdoche

You may have heard the expression 'Doctor on wheels'. What does this mean? Wheels here stand for transport and the doctor in question certainly has this facility. Synecdoche then is a figure of speech in which we use a word referring only to a part of something instead of the whole ('wheels' instead of a vehicle).

Apostrophe

This is an address to a person or thing that is absent and not listening. As Charles Lamb says: 'Waters of Sir Hugh Middleton—what a spark you were like to have extinguished for ever!'

Hyperbole

A deliberate exaggeration for the sake of effect. For example, we often say 'I nearly died of laughing'. We often use hyperbolic expressions without realising it. Here is another example from Thoreau: 'The blue bird carries the sky on his back'.

Understatement or Litotes

This is the opposite of hyperbole. Instead of exaggeration, the author expresses

him/herself with restraint. The British are known for their habit of understatement. If someone is looking extremely ill, the Englishman may just say 'You do look a bit under the weather!' Or for a person who died of a bullet shot 'He stopped a bullet last night, poor chap'.

Irony

One of the most important figures of speech in English. Irony is saying one thing while meaning another. In short irony occurs when a word or phrase has one surface meaning and another different meaning beneath this surface. The reader must be able to understand the hidden meaning. Charles Dickens describes Mr. Squeers in his novel *Nicholas Nickleby*: 'He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental....' Irony usually gives pleasure or relief and must not be confused with sarcasm which deliberately inflicts pain.

This list is by no means exhaustive. However, we hope it will be useful not only in analysing the prose passages in this course but will also help you with your reading of poetry and drama.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed :

- the general difference between poetry and prose;
- how words have denotations as well as connotations;
- how descriptive prose describes things as they are seen or imagined;
- narrative prose recreates an actual or imaginary experience or sequence of events;
- expository writing deals in definition, explanation or interpretation;
- the novel, short story, essay, biography and autobiography are forms of prose;
- the different figures of speech used by writers to convey their feelings and thoughts more effectively.

1.6 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Check Your Progress I

- i) If you haven't been able to answer this, you should read sub-section 1.2.1 once again and then it will be easy to attempt the question.

Prose is direct or straightforward writing. Here the writer communicates his/her thoughts or feelings as clearly and precisely as possible. On the other hand, poetry which is generally written in verse leaves a lot of things unsaid and to the imagination of the reader. **Prose** is like walking—that is, it is functional and provides information. **Poetry** on the other hand, is like dancing, and aims to delight. A prose piece **can be a** paraphrased or summarized but not a poem. We can and do paraphrase a **poem**, but the paraphrase of a poem is not the poem. In prose, what is **important** is the message but in a poem what is important is the experience **conveyed** rather than any meaning or information.

- ii) You will find the answer to this in sub-section 1.2.2. Words, as we know, have a denotative as well as a connotative meaning. Denotation is the literal meaning of a word whereas the connotation is the meaning it has gained by association. For example a snake as we know is a reptile—but it is also very dangerous. So, if we call a human being a snake we mean that that person is dangerous. Similarly the word rose denotes a flower but because it is such a beautiful flower, if we call anyone a rose, we are referring to that person's beauty.

Check Your Progress II

- i) a) narrative prose

- b) descriptive prose
- c) expository prose

Check Your Progress III

three; descriptive, expository, narrative; forms; stories, novels; form; novels; essays; biographies; autobiography.