TEACHING POETRY IN ELT CLASSES: A SAMPLE EXAMPLE - ANDREW MARWELL’S “TO HIS COY MISTRESS”

1. Introduction

1.1. Aim of the Study

Literature can be regarded as a valuable part of our language and life experience. Hunt (1994) states that it is a difficult task to define literature. Eagleton, on the other hand, reveals that literature is a ‘special’ kind of language, in contrast to the ‘ordinary’ language commonly used. Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language and deviates systematically from everyday speech (1995, 3).

There have been long debates about the use of literature in ELT classes. The common point reached in all these discussions is that literature enables the students not only to know about the language but also its culture. Language and literature are interrelated. Literature gives both aesthetic, intellectual and emotional pleasure and understanding. It improves language learning and inspires motivation. By offering ample opportunities—topics for discussion and practice—to develop their interpretative power, literature sharpens students’ critical, logical, and analytical thinking. While learning to support their arguments with evidence from texts, they develop oral and written communication skills. Literature enhances higher linguistic competence. Yet, it not only increases the student’s language awareness, but also allowing insight into the human world leads to his/her intellectual and emotional growth as well. As Crompton reveals, it helps us “developing an understanding of oneself and other people” (1992:Preface).

Poetry, like novel, drama, and short story is a genre; a form of literature that deals with experience, and aims to arouse the same experience in the reader by saying so much in so few words. Since language is insufficient to express our emotions, emotional attitudes which cannot be expressed in a direct statement are expressed with the use of figures of speech, rhyme and rhythm. Poet uses poetic diction to express his emotions by distorting the language. In poetry, language does not have an immediate referent. It is differential, or connotative rather than denotative. That means each poem has its own grammar.
1.2 Scope of the Study

How to teach literature in language classes have been problematic for language teachers. Scholars such as Robert Scholes and H. L. B. Moody come up with their own theories to be used in literary texts. Scholes puts forward a new competence in reading – textual power. In Scholes’s explanation of textual power, there are three approaches to reading a text; the first is reading i.e. reading “within” a text. It requires the reader’s - in language classes - the student’s ability to understand the linguistic code of the text and realize the artistic use of language in a literary text. The second approach for reading a text is reading “upon” a text, which is interpretation. Reading moves from a summary of events to the discussion of meaning or theme of the text in the light of the metaphorical, symbolic and paradigmatic dimensions. The reader reconstructs the text in the light of both the writer’s experience and of his own experience and creates a new organic whole, which is a broader synthesis than the work of art itself. If the first step, reading “within” a text is the grammatisation of the text, this second step is the thematization of it. The reader brings his collective subjectivity to the interpretation of the text. Scholes’s last stage of reading is called “criticism” which requires a critique of both themes and the codes. The reader evaluates the text reading it “against” itself by comparison and contrast with other modes of production to which it belongs (1985: 24). However, in language classes students are not asked to read the text “against” itself and evaluate it in the literary canon.

H.L.B. Moody (in Brumfit 1983: 23-25) suggests his own method in studying literature. In this method there are extrinsic and intrinsic features. The extrinsic features point out the background information about the writer – his life, his literary background; the social, political, historical or ideological occurrences in the period the writer lived. The intrinsic features, on the other hand, focuses on the grammatical, structural, lexical and cultural features. While trying to arrive at a full realization of a literary text, the reader should make use of both extrinsic and intrinsic features. This study attempts to apply the above mentioned

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theories as a base in teaching poetry in language classes by exemplifying it with Andrew Marwell’s metaphysical poem ‘To His Coy Mistress’.

2. Discussion

2.1. The Extrinsic Features in Moody’s Approach

Before the analysis of the poem, students are firstly familiarized with Marwell’s life and his literary background bearing in mind that it will help students a great deal in understanding his poetry.

Marwell was born in Winestead -in- Holderness, East Riding of Yorkshire, near the city of Kingston upon Hull. He attended Hull grammar school and Trinity College, Cambridge, graduated B.A. in 1638. He travelled in Europe. Until 1650 there is no certain information about him. Yet, it is recorded that in 1650 he served as tutor to the daughter of Sir Thomas Fairfax, Lord General of the Parliamentary Forces. He lived during that time at Nun Appleton House, near York, where he continued to write most of his non-satiric English poems including ‘To His Coy Mistress’. In 1657 Marwell was appointed assistant to the Latin Secretary for the Commonwealth, John Milton. He was elected M.P. for Hull from 1659 onwards till his death in 1678.

He wrote his Poems, which, for the most part, belong to the years 1650–2; the Satires, which he wrote on public men and public affairs in the reign of Charles II; the News-letters, which he regularly addressed to his constituents in Hull after his election as M.P. from 1660 to the time of his death in 1678; and his Controversial Essays on ecclesiastical questions, written at intervals between 1672 and 1677. All Marwell’s poems have been published after his death in 1681.

Marwell is a metaphysical poet. Just like John Donne, he, too, wrote seduction poems. The use of imagery, the rhyme pattern employed to relate his ideas, the way Marwell puts his arguments to seduce his mistress have something in common with that of Donne. During the Renaissance and the 17th century, poets such as Shakespeare, Herrick, and Marwell elaborated the ‘theme’ or the ‘motif’ of “Carpe Diem”. It means “seize the day”. The theme of “Carpe Diem” is “Enjoy yourself while you can”. This theme is found in Greek as well as in Latin
poetry and is used extensively by the 15\textsuperscript{th} and 16\textsuperscript{th} century love poets in their appeals to their mistresses not to deny them. The reason for the frequent use of this motif should have been the realization of the brevity of life and the inevitability of death.

2.2. The intrinsic features in Moody’s Approach and Scholes’s First Approach for Reading a Text: Reading “within” a Text

Having focused on the external features, students’ attention is drawn to the intrinsic features of the poem. Since poems are short enough to be read and studied in the classroom, they first become familiarized with the poem by hearing the teacher reading it to the class her/himself. This helps students to get the poem’s dramatic and rhythmic qualities. Pronunciation, emphasis, tone of voice, pausing and so on would also help them to grasp the general meaning. Having read the poem aloud once or -if necessary twice- teacher asks some questions to check if students can read “within” the poem i.e. if they are in a position to give the general meaning. They tend more to paraphrase it. The questions asked may vary as: Who is speaking in the poem? Who is being addressed to? What is the situation? What does s/he want to do? How does s/he feel? Is there any change in her/his mood?, etc.

At first look, “To His Coy Mistress” is a typical “Carpe Diem” poem. It is a plea to a young lady. It is also obvious that the speaker pursues passion rather than true love. There is a dramatic monologue. The speaker is a young, most probably an immature and a selfish person addressing to his beloved. He is in love with the young lady and declares his love for her. Yet, she is not easily persuaded. She is hesitant. The speaker starts off his argument first by trying to convince her with flattery, telling her how charming she is, etc. Then, he makes her rush and fear since time is flying, and death is certain. And lastly his romantic mood turns into that of a passionate one and tells her that they should seize the day and have sex ‘now’ instead of waiting until they were married.

2.3. The intrinsic features in Moody’s Approach and Scholes’s Second Approach for Reading a Text: Reading “upon” a Text

What Scholes points out by reading “upon” a text is interpretation. This is a step further than catching the general meaning in the poem. In this detailed meaning students’ attention is drawn to the explanation of the detail by stressing the metaphors, imagery,
symbolism, structure and style. Teacher focuses on each stanza one by one to make the students get how the poet begins, how he develops his theme and how he concludes it.

The poem is made up of three stanzas. In the very first two lines, Marwell stresses the idea of time. Time has an important role in poems written in the philosophy of ‘carpe diem’. In “To His Coy Mistress”, too, it has a vital function. The poem starts with a conditional statement. If there were enough time, the speaker says, then the coyness of the lady were no crime. Therefore, her shyness or unwillingness is a crime to him since she has been resisting the advances of the persona. In order to demonstrate the startling attempts of the speaker to convince the lady, in the first stanza Marwell creates a sense of time which is not flying and in no hurry, but a continuing and a slowly moving element. He achieves this image by making references to past and future events on a grand scale. Since they have plenty of time, just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, they could arrange how they can spend their ‘long’ love’s day while the poet praises the beauty of the lady. She would walk by the beautiful Oriental Ganges and find rubies since she is worth them, while the poet takes a walk by the Humber; a little river which flows through Marwell’s hometown Hull, and complains; i.e. sings songs of sorrowful love. When the two rivers are compared, Ganges is a magnificent river, while Humber is a little stream. This instability in the comparison should also be serving to flatter the lady. Drawing a parallelism between the flowing of the river and that of time, Marwell tries to emphasize the slowness of time. In the following lines the idea that there is an ample time is stressed this time by the two religious allusions made. There is a reference to the period between the Genesis and the Last Judgement. The flood referring to Noah is a part in the Genesis in the Bible. What the poet wants to indicate is that he would love her ten years before the flood “till the conversion of the Jews” as it is believed that the Jews were to be converted just before the Last Judgement. If there were “world enough and time”, that is; centuries for the young man to explain how he feels and for the lady to refuse him just by not responding to him, he would wait and patiently go on spending centuries to flirt with her. He would take his time and praise each part of her body – her eyes, her breasts - for at least a hundred years. Even the speaker himself gets impatient while he is imagining this endless time period and realizing the length of the list that he makes, cuts it short by quickly assigning “thirty thousand to the rest” and carefully arranging the place of the last praise to go as her heart; his main target. In the rest of the first stanza Marwell goes on with the employment of hyperboles. He compares his love to a vegetable. This is another startling imagery he uses. A metaphysical quality is likened to a concrete object. The speaker’s love
“should grow vaster than empires and more slow”. This indicates a long process. The growth of his love is just like that of a plant. It grows slowly and its overtaking big spaces wider than empires takes longer than people’s short lifespan. Therefore, throughout the first stanza Marwell dwells on this image of a slow-moving time.

Yet, there is a negative implication in the very first word of the second stanza with the word ‘But’ which will hint at the mortality of human beings. Time is personified. It is after the mortals with his winged chariot in a hurry and is unmerciful. Therefore, the lovers are not immortal and cannot waste their time with courtship because eternity or timelessness is just a vast desert – a dream. If she keeps resisting him, she will get old and her beauty will fade. If she preserves her virginity until the grave, her honour will turn to dust and his lust into ashes. Then she will just lose it to the worms. This is another startling imagery that Marwell uses. The speaker warns the young lady. If she does not act ‘now’ and be with him, she will have to face death and decay. Love songs will come to an end and will not echo any more. He says “the grave’s a fine and private place,/But none, I think, do there embrace ”. With the use of understatement he shocks both the lady and the reader implying that she should not let time pass.

The third stanza unmasks the speaker’s intention. “Now therefore” in the beginning of the stanza indicates that the speaker is more insistent to make the lady submit to him. His advice to the lady is “seize the moment” before death comes, for their time expires. The theme that she should live the life to the full when “the youthful hue” is still present is emphasized once more. They should make their minds up about whether they will be “amorous birds of prey” or not. In this stanza there is a sense of hesitancy and violence. The image of mating birds refers to sexual love. Having so much dealt with the idea of time in the previous stanzas, the speaker paves the way to tell that death is coming nearer. Time is flying. The situation is serious. This time, time is envisaged as a hunter or an unmerciful giant chewing up the world and the people in it. If the lovers do not want to be the slaves to time by being eaten by it, they should eat it up. They cannot make it stand still, but they should love each other by not letting time have control over them. Before death comes to claim them, they should live the life to the full.

Although Marwell uses different images, hyperboles, and a number of references to events in history, he dwells on the same theme: seduction. He reinforces his theme both with
the title he uses and the structure of the poem. With the variation in rhythm and rhyme, he puts forward his argument to seduce his “mistress”.

The title of the poem is “To His Coy Mistress” and is significant when looked at the poem as a whole. There is an ‘I’ persona in the poem. This ‘I’ is a young man who is begging to a young lady and this experience of the young man is reported by Marwell in his poem. Therefore this use of ‘his’ in the title is referring to the young man because this is ‘his’ experience. The word ‘coy’ tells the reader that the lady is shy, not responding to the speaker’s wish. The word ‘mistress’, on the other hand, can mean lady, sweetheart, lover, and beloved.

Having gone through the poem stanza by stanza focusing on the metaphors, allusions, imagery to grasp the whole meaning, students’ attention are also drawn to the form of the poem. The poem rhymes in couplets. Pairs of rhyming lines are called couplets. The first part ("Had we...") is ten couplets long, the second ("But...") six, and the third ("Now therefore...") seven. There are eight syllables (four feet) per line. Each foot consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The last syllable of Line 1 (time) rhymes with the last syllable of Line 2 (crime), the last syllable of Line 3 (way) rhymes with the last syllable of Line 4 (day), the last syllable of Line 5 (side) rhymes with the last syllable of Line 6 (tide), and so on. (Rhyme pattern of the poem is like aabbccddeeffgghhijj.). The following two lines exhibit the meter and rhyme prevailing in most of the other couplets in the poem:

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The poem is in iambic tetrameter, with
1 2 3 4
Had WE | but WORLD | e NOUGH | and TIME
......1......... 2......... 3...........4
This COY | ness LA | dy WERE | no CRIME
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3. Conclusion

This study discusses the use of poetry in language classes in the light of Robert Scholes and H.L.B. Moody’s theories. While analysing Andrew Marwell’s poem “To His Coy Mistress”, it is seen that this kind of deconstructive and semiotic reading is helpful in gaining a good grasp of the poem and can be applied to any literary text analysis.
Considering the steps mentioned, students can get the underlying meaning in any literary text, be it a novel, short story, play or a poem. As a result, it can be claimed that the contribution of literature in language classes is inevitable. A literary text improves not only students’ language and communicative competence, but also plays an important role in their intellectual and emotional growth. It provides a comprehensive outlook on life. Interactive class discussions allow students feel independent, and this, consequently, improves their critical ability and creative power.
Bibliography


