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## Pre-requisites for the Learning of Literary Theories: An Exploratory Analysis

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### Abstract

The present age is popularly known as 'modern' and creative. It is marked by rapid changes such as globalization, cross linguistic, comparative, competitive and more importantly innovative.

There is a big difference between the classic educational methods and modern approaches. Education today emphasizes on producing to prepare open minded, dynamic, innovative and useful human resource. Knowledge alone is not enough these days rather the learner must be able to utilize the knowledge in a sophisticated manner to yield maximum output.

Therefore, along with other pedagogic and curricular dimensions, the traditional approaches to teaching literature have been replaced with modern approaches. The main task of the teacher of literature in general is to inculcate those skills that may result into productive

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literary thoughts based on certain theories and approaches of criticism. The present paper explores certain aspects of literary theories, its teaching and perceived difficulties in the process. It has been found that the target learners may face a lot of difficulties that arise out of many known and implicit reasons in general and weak literary background in particular. The findings will lead to further research in the area, and recommendations for latest curricular design in general and teaching strategies in particular.

**Keywords:** pedagogic, approaches, literary thoughts, human resource, learning difficulties.

## **1. Introduction**

The present attempt is an analysis of the expected and perceived problems in learning of the literary theory. It argues the literary dimensions, teaching problems and some solutions to such problems in the modern socio-linguistic and pedagogic context.

The present time is the age of plurilingualism, multiculturalism, cross-linguistic communication and digital devices and programs. Education today is considered as an important mechanism and effective means to develop creative and effective human resource (Gould 1993: 148; Rao 1996: 2). Studies whatever available lay an emphasis on educational theory and practice today supports developing higher-order thinking skills of students. A due emphasis is laid on preparing students to be independent for taking logical decisions, explore and brainstorm opportunities, evaluate available resources, and arrive at solutions for crucial issues (Geertsen 2003; Ruggiero 1988; Feden & Vogel 2003; Halpern 2003). These curriculum related issues in general and pedagogies in particular aim to produce the country's capital (students) to be competitive with the whole world. Thus, based on the need analysis, most students are facilitated by the teachers and institutions to develop innovations, creativity, assimilate and develop to cope with issue in an effective manner.

### **1.1. Literary Theory vs Literary Criticism**

#### **1.1.1. Literary Theory**

Theory is the process of understanding what the nature of literature is, what functions it has, pertaining to the language, to society, to cultures and individuals. It is not judgment but understanding of the frames of judgment. Literary criticism may depend on literary theories in order to judge a piece of literature. Culler (1997, 122) believes that a theory involves a process of challenge, dispute and debate. It is noted that the judgment or criticism is a continuous process that is never complete, and it may change in a given context.

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### **1.1.2. Literary Criticism**

Literary criticism is nothing but an assessment of a particular piece of literary work on certain bases: the personal and/or cultural significance of the themes and the uses of language of a text. In addition to that the assessment is related to the insights and impact of a literary piece. The word 'criticism' is generally misunderstood as to negative remarks, but the reality is that no literary critic passes comments on somebody's literary work out of prejudice, jealousy or enmity. Rather, the comments are genuine, artistic and honest.

Making any literary or artistic judgments in order to evaluate one's work may not be an easy work. However, it is indeed a daring endeavour. Therefore, teaching 'literary criticism' needs a lot of expertise, understanding, open mindedness, effective language and in-depth knowledge to justify the role.

### **1.2. Issues Related to the Teaching of Literary Theory/Criticism**

The teachers of literary theories/criticism are often faced with the issues in a particular class (that is not ready to take up the course) such as: lack of understanding, lack of participation, lack of motivation. And, such issues may actually emerge from other root issues that need to be catered in an effective manner. These theories offer certain possibilities but also have some limitations in the critical reading of literary texts.

The learners in the Gulf in general are no exception to such issues. They face a lot of literary problems while pursuing such important courses at tertiary level. It has always been noted that most of the students often show no motivation thus almost no participation in and out of the class in understanding the literary concepts.

Out of many significant reasons, such students prefer to be passive and silent in the class. They show no agreement or disagreement because they don't actually go deeper into the textual river of knowledge which is an important requisite to understand literary theory and criticize a literary piece. They are often confused with one or the other of the following crucial questions:

-Why do most target students fail to understand the course taught?

-Why do they often escape from reading the text critically? and

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-Finally, who do they lack motivation to study a subject like literary theory/criticism?

In order to try and answer these and similar questions concerning student passivity in literary criticism classes, it is perhaps necessary to probe the origins and essence of criticism. Such an enquiry could shed light on some cultural and political factors affecting student reactions and also demonstrate that the difficulty of teaching literary criticism at Arab universities stems from a closed mind set or misunderstood cultural barriers.

### **1.3. Relevance of Teaching ‘Literary Theories’**

‘Literary theory’ initially provides a sound basis for studying the nature of literature and the methods for analyzing literary pieces. Teaching of Arts, literature and related disciplines enables the learners to use their intelligence, be creative, innovative, rational, logical and critical for the betterment of the artistic piece and the society. It is highly important to teach at a particular level because the ultimate purpose of education is to develop an individual 's all-round personality: psychological, social, philosophical, and academic.

### **1.4. Wordsworth and Romantic Literary Criticism**

In the present attempt, only one critic has been focused. English literary criticism of the Romantic era is most closely associated with the writings of William Wordsworth in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). However, some critics disagree on the issue if the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge was pioneering in the direction of literary histories.

## **2. The Research Context**

Literature is an important segment and component of educational institutions and curriculums. Therefore, scholars and theorists such as Wagner (2005), Knapp (2004), Rosslyn (2005), Showalter (2004), and Dresang and McClelland (1999), all agree that the teaching of literature which makes the most sense in the context of twenty first century needs to be student-centered and guided by the research on education in the twenty first century. They discard traditional approaches to teaching and studying literature and recommend approaches which are guided by the contemporary research.

Dresang and McClelland’s attempt (1999) emphasizes the need to incorporate the

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characteristics of today's digital world in the teaching of literature in order to enable the students to learn information processing skills. Rosslyn (2005) accepts that English as a university subject has undergone a change with the advent of the twenty first century. Hence it is the need of the time to accept that "the student does think" (p.321) and to redesign syllabuses according to the needs of the students. Wagner (2005) taking the changing social values and structures into consideration suggests that literature should be taught as a tool to teach inquiry and investigation skills and not merely as a source of knowledge. Similarly Knapp (2004) thinks that in the present age the focus needs to be shifted from what texts mean to what students think about them and how they learn.

A bulk of related literature is also available which recommends reader response approaches and introduces cognitive teaching strategies, techniques, and activities that promote creative, active, collaborative learning in literature classroom in order to make literary study life-relevant and personally meaningful to students. In this regard Showalter (2004), Egan (2005) and Moore (2002) recommend activities such as mental imagery, gossip, play, mystery, maintaining reading journals and writing response essays.

### **3. Factors Affecting the Learning of the Lyrical Ballads**

There are many factors that directly or indirectly affect the learning process of literary theories. The following (terms/ concepts/ philosophies/ideologies/political revolutions) are some of them:

- Historical: French revolution,
- Revolution against the classical norms of poetry
- Lack of cultural awareness
- Concept of man and nature
- Pantheistic philosophy
- Wordsworth's definition of poetry
- The concept of imagination
- The rural/countryside setting
- Poetic diction: long sentences

While reading and understanding the literary pieces of William Wordsworth, it should be kept in mind as a background that Wordsworth was born in Cumberland in England's Lake District in 1770, the second of five children to Anne and John Wordsworth. His father was an

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attorney and chief law agent for Sir James Lowther. In other words, he came from a solid middle-class, conservative family background, to whose status he returned in the second half of his life, after a somewhat troubled radical youth. His mother died when he was seven, and the children were farmed out to various relatives. Among the five siblings, William was especially close to his brother John, and to his sister Dorothy, who was 18 months his junior, both from whom he was separated for a period of not less than nine years. Nature, redefinitions of nature and characteristics of 'NATURE' are the focal points of the Romantic revival. Now, with the growth and expansion of industries and technologies, 'Nature' even in the English countryside, is no more as beautiful as it used to be in olden days. In addition, the perception of the beauty of Nature has changed due to many reasons.

According to the account given of his early life in his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, the young William was allowed to enjoy the lap of nature, roam around and feel proud under the guardianship of Nature—a kind of mother. As well known, the poet was a pantheistic who believed that God adheres in the natural world around one, so God is in NATURE. The opening of the *Prelude* reads:

“Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up  
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear:  
Much favoured in my birthplace.”

The latter was the Lake District, as mentioned earlier. Mother 'Nature' was to him a guardian, an important conception for him. Now more formally, young William was educated at grammar school. He was quite lonely in his childhood which was depicted in the 'Prelude'. Wordsworth is obsessed with himself, and perhaps most romantics are of the type. 'Solitude', natural beauty and 'peace' are vital elements in Wordsworth's work of art. One of the Wordsworth's most famous poems, *Daffodils*, opens as follows:

“I wandered lonely as a cloud/That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd/A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees/Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.”

As a precursor of the romantic poetry, Wordsworth is unique which the readers/students should also realize. In other words, they should develop an understanding of the background of the historical development as under:

The Romantic Revival is the result of many literary events, forces and movements. One of the significant forces that shaped Romantic Revival is the French Revolution (1789–1799).

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The French Revolution in one of them. The new philosophy of the rights of all men was expressed both in politics and literature. This led to the “Liberalism in Literature.” The Romantic poets were inspired by the ideals of equality, fraternity and liberty. They revolted against the restrictions of pre determined conventions. They focused on the MAN- the individual and the ‘individual freedom’. This new form of philosophy created one of the main bases for the romantic works.

Along with his friend Coleridge, Wordsworth successfully breaks with the classical theory of poetry, and advocated importance and power of human feelings and emotion. To him, ‘reason’ is not at all important. This is a subjective in nature. It may be recognized that his views are modern and innovative yet can be truly plain, simple and impressive. William Blake is genuinely considered as the precursor of romantic poetry, but Wordsworth and Coleridge are the two champions of the romantic poetry. It has always been evident that Wordsworth created a literary ground for this new trend in poetry through the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. Such backgrounds needs to be noted ad understood in order to deliver the best.

#### **4. Wordsworth’s Conception of Poetry: Passion and Reflection**

Wordsworth propounded his views on poetry, its nature and functions and the qualification of a true poet in his ‘Preface’. Regarding the nature of poetry, Wordsworth is of the opinion that “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Poetry has its origin in the internal feelings of the poet. It is a matter of passion, mood and temperament. Poetry cannot be produced out of certain rules and regulations. It must flow out naturally and smoothly from the soul of the poet. But, it must be noted that good poetry, according to Wordsworth, is never an immediate expression of such powerful emotions. A good poet must ponder over for a long time and in an intensive manner. However, one must not ignore the definition of poetry offered by Wordsworth: ‘poetry... recollected in tranquility.’

##### **4.1. Process of Poetic Composition**

Poetry can’t be an outcome of a temporary phase and ordinary endeavour. Rather, it has to pass through certain crucial artistic stages. In other words, the poetic piece is a result of certain processes and sub-processes. The following piece, Lucy poem: three years she grew....’is an apt example:

Three years she grew in sun and shower/  
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower  
On earth was never sown/  
This Child I to myself will take;

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She shall be mine, and I will make/A Lady of my own.

"Myself will to my darling be/Both law and impulse: and with me  
The Girl, in rock and plain/In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,  
Shall feel an overseeing power/To kindle or restrain.

"The stars of midnight shall be dear/To her; and she shall lean her ear  
In many a secret place/Where rivulets dance their wayward round,  
And beauty born of murmuring sound/Shall pass into her face.

.....Thus Nature spake -The work was done/How soon my Lucy's race was run!  
She died, and left to me/This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;  
The memory of what has been/And never more will be.

In another poetic composition, '*The Solitary Reaper*' by Wordsworth exemplifies this poetic process.

Behold her, single in the field/ You solitary Highland Lass!  
Reaping and singing by herself/ Stop here, or gently pass!  
Alone she cuts and binds the grain/ And sings a melancholy strain;  
O listen! for the Vale profound/ Is overflowing with the sound.  
No Nightingale did ever chaunt/ More welcome notes to weary bands  
Of travelers in some shady haunt,

Among Arabian sands:

A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard/ In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,  
Breaking the silence of the seas/ Among the farthest Hebrides.  
...Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang/ As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er the sickle bending;--  
I listened, motionless and still/ And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore/ Long after it was heard no more.

*(The Solitary Reaper, William Wordsworth)*

Feelings of the poet started overflowing spontaneously as the poet listened to the song of the Highland girl: 'the Vale profound / is overflowing with the sound.' Removed from the scene he started recollecting his experiences in tranquility which is highly relaxing and enjoyable. Spontaneously, this state of mind disappears, and a work of art is created. The background and setting of almost all the poetic works of Wordsworth is the 'NATURE' and quite natural in nature. This is perhaps the essence of Wordsworth's poetry.

## 4.2. Concept of Imagination

The actual concept of romantic imagination is well explained in Coleridge's *biographia literaria* (chapter-14). Imagination is real in nature and concrete while fancy is not real. If we visit the [Language in India www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 January 2014  
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lake district and find out the sceneries and events happened to be there long back around 1800, nobody will be surprised to believe that the expressions of the valley, trees, pastures, greenery etc existed at the time of Wordsworth and even now. Without ‘imagination’ literary work and creation is not possible at least from the viewpoint of the romantics. Romantic poets in general place ‘Imagination’ to a higher position, however there exists a little difference among the poets.. For most of them, it is a highly creative faculty as explained in *biographia literaria* by Coleridge. It just rearranges materials but also shapes, orders, modifies and colours sense objects with the mind's own light. Imagination integrates different elements to generate a new reality. William Wordsworth like other romantics including Blake realized the sheer importance of Imagination in the poetic process. The imagery in the poems of romantics in general and Wordsworth in particular relates to the significance universal appeal.

The following lines in the poem ‘*Tintern abbey*’ (lines: 44-50) qualify imagination in real sense:

Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul:  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.

### **4.3. Poetic Diction**

The term *diction* includes the words, phrases and sentence structures etc that are artistically utilized in the work of literature. Wordsworth’s criticism on the neo-classical philosophy of a special language for poetry, in his preface to 1800 Lyrical Ballads defends the idea of the language/diction of the romantics: “There is no difference between language of poetry and language of prose.” He states that the poetic diction of eighteenth century writers is artificial and unnatural. This is why the poetic language of the romantics in general and Wordsworth in particular is more appealing to the readers.

### **4.4. Matter of Poetry**

Any subject between heaven and earth can be treated poetically and the similar idea is noted by Wordsworth in 1798, 'It is the honourable characteristic of poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind.'

Wordsworth states that subjects are poetic and un-poetic in themselves. A simple expression of ordinary village life may be an impressive subject for poetry. The effectiveness lies on the handling and the expertise of the artist/poet. Wordsworth always succeeded in creating 'great' out of a simple phenomenon, and that is mastery of the great romantic.

The reason that he gave was that the rustic people were close to nature and hence free from artificiality and vanity. Love of Nature has been found throughout Lucy poems, and the poet presented Lucy as the embodiment of nature. (Slakey, 1972)

#### 4.5. Schools of Philosophy

There are two schools of thought holding opposite views with regard to the function of Literature or Art. The view of the moralists is that the writer can and does influence the lives and characters of his readers; and therefore it should try to influence the readers to a great influence. This view is called 'art for Life's sake'. Dryden also believes, "Delight is the chief, if not the only end of poesy". Dr. Johnson's idea is more concerned about the connection of literary writings with its subject matter-the life. He contends, "The end of writing is to enable the reader better to enjoy life, or to endure it".

#### 5. Perceived Difficulties in the Learning of the Text (Lyrical Ballad)

(<http://www.bartleby.com>)

Table.1  
(Types of problems)

| Textual examples    |           |   |                        |                             |                      |
|---------------------|-----------|---|------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Literary/<br>Poetic | Lexical   | Stylistic/<br>Figurative                | Philosophical          | Geographical/<br>historical | Knowledge<br>related |
| Ballads             | Lyrical   | Vivid<br>sensation                      | Moral<br>relations     | German<br>tragedies         | Catullus             |
| Milton              | Ventured  | Style                                   | Concept of<br>'Nature' | Shakespeare                 | Reasoning            |
| Overpower           | Flattered | Dwelt                                   | Sympathy               | Beaumont                    | Terence              |
| Poetic diction      | Perusal   | Personification                         |                        | Fletcher                    | Lucretius            |
| Comprehensive       | Gratify   | Extremely long paragraphs with too many |                        |                             | CLAUDIAN             |

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|  |              |            |  |  |                  |
|--|--------------|------------|--|--|------------------|
| soul   |              | commas etc |  |  |                  |
| Sympathy   | accumulation |            |  |  | Shakespeare      |
|  | Melancholy   |            |  |  | Beaumont         |
| Thomas Gray  | Disgust      |            |  |  | Fletcher         |
|  | Emanation    |            |  |  | Donne,<br>Milton |
|  | Dwelt        |            |  |  | Cowley           |
|  |              |            |  |  | Dryden,<br>Pope  |
| Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and emotions recollected in tranquility. |              |            |  |  | Thomas Gray      |

Besides the above list of the type and nature of difficulties, the following is another list of terms/words from the text which may pose great problems if not understood prior to the reading of the text.

### 5.1. Other Words/Concepts that Students May Find Difficult While Reading Wordsworth

|                      |             |             |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Worshipper of nature | Humanity    | Rhyme       |
| Nature               | Humour      | Wit         |
| Revolt               | Classical   | Rustic      |
| Genius               | Puritanism  | Pantheism   |
| Neo-classicism       | Classicism  | Medievalism |
| Romantics            | Intellect   | Rationality |
| French revolution    | Imagination |             |

### 5.2. Perception on the Learning Difficulties of the Literary Theories

Students face trouble in understanding the literary concepts especially romantic literature, ‘romanticism and ‘romance’ etc. A very simple question like what is a poet and poetry seem crucial to understand. Similarly, some basic questions related to literary theories and criticism is also significant in order to understand the deep rooted ideas in literary texts.

In romantic poetry, the essence lies on the concept ‘imagination’. Coleridge's assertion that the imagination is both synthetic and magical only reaffirms what is already known about him. His works, especially in the Lyrical Ballads, deal with the supernatural in so far as they express real emotions regardless of whether one believes in the phenomena. There are people

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who believe that Coleridge's supernatural detailing especially in 'the rhyme of the ancient mariner' was nothing super natural, but very natural. But, as the mariner has shot dead the little albatross, the whole natural setting turned into a supernatural for him. The reason was the religious feeling, and a feeling of guilt because the albatross symbolized nature and thus god.

Abrams (2005, 315-324) said, "The first critic of Wordsworth's poetry is Wordsworth himself." Wordsworth's Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, which expresses the spirit of Romanticism in his words, is a critical document that puts stress on the relationship between poet and poetry rather than on the relationship between poetry and reader. He defines poetry in terms of the author's creative activity. So, he discusses the idea of poetry after discussing the idea of poet. For him, a poet is affected more than others by imagining things not immediately present to his perceptions. The definition given by Wordsworth refers to this process of poetic work emphasizing the roles played by memory and contemplation. Wordsworth, while defining poetry, goes beyond the Aristotelian concept of poetry as an imitation of an action or 'thrice removed from the reality'.

As mentioned, the target students encounter a lot of problems out of many. The following are some of those corresponding factors: students' indifferent attitude towards reading books/literature, reviews, criticism may affect the learning as a whole. The depth of knowledge is missing in general among nearly all the students.

## **6. Discussion, Findings and Conclusions**

### **6.1. Discussions**

Based on the above analysis, it may be discussed that there are many issues related to the teaching-learning of literary theories in general and romantic literary theory in particular.

Cultural factors are important to understand any kind of literature. The comparison of poetry with wine can never be understood by those who have not tasted wine. Saudi students are those who can't even imagine consuming alcohol in Islamic countries. It is forbidden in Islam. Similarly, in order to understand lyrical ballad or criticism of Wordsworth, one has to know about the schools of philosophy/thoughts which are indeed a difficult area for Saudi learners. Poets are not of any importance in Islam except in some cases. Therefore, the position of poets, definitions of poetry, subject matter, diction etc may not attract the target learners.

## 6.2. Findings

The findings may be concluded as under:

Literary theories are important for the development of critical/creative and innovative dimensions of one's personality. However, it remains a fact that it is not an easy task to teach the target learners unless there is enough literary background, sufficient motivation and a good teaching style. In this connection, the teachers should be prepared for coping difficulties if they are engaged in teaching literary criticism/theory in the gulf region.

## 6.3. Conclusions

Literary criticism is becoming a promising discipline even in the Arab world where teaching of literature is not pursued the way it is carried out in other parts of the world. Critical theory and practice cannot be possibly taught unless the learners have good background of literature in general. The teachers are supposed to work doubly harder to strengthen the basis of literature and lay a foundation of literary theory/criticism.

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