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**Teaching Literature through Language -  
Some Considerations**

**Abraham Panavelil Abraham, Ph.D.**

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**Abstract**

Teaching literature through language calls for active involvement of both the teacher and the taught. Here, the focus is on teaching literature and medium is the language. The context and form of a literary work brings forth meaningful discussion and enjoyment. The paper will discuss the importance of teaching literature in the language teaching and learning process, the question of choosing an appropriate literary text and some strategies for teaching literature by creating an awareness of linguistic possibilities and sensibility

I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity.

– George Eliot, 1866/1967: 9-10

A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and not conversant with linguistic methods, are equally flagrant anachronism.

- Roman Jakobson, 1960: 377

**1. Introduction**

Language through literature is a subject that has been discussed among academicians for quite some time. However, the notion of literature through language may raise a few  
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eyebrows. Many universities around the globe offer a number of literature courses as part of the undergraduate program. Teachers who teach these courses often use the traditional method of lecturing on topics like theme, characterization, plot, motifs etc directly without giving any emphasis on the stylistic/linguistic aspect of the literary texts that they teach. Of course, students must be taught literature and it must be taught by creating an awareness of linguistic possibilities and sensibility. It is in this context that the idea of literature through language becomes relevant.

Teaching and learning literature through language demands active involvement of both the teacher and the taught in bringing the literary text to life. The medium is language and the context and form of a literary work arouse interest in the meaningful use of that medium. This, in the words of George Eliot is "aesthetic teaching". Here, the role of the teacher is crucial. His/Her role is to support the students' efforts to establish intensive relationship with literary texts without interfering too much in their act of creating meaning.

It is heartening to note that many academicians nowadays consider the importance of literature in language teaching. The time has come to realize that the ultimate objective of teaching and learning literature is the study of words, idioms and syntax at the highest level of thought and imagination. It is an exercise depicting as to how words and sentences are made and molded in order to communicate what the writer wants to say.

It is not literature through literature that is to be emphasized, but literature through language. In this paper, an attempt will be made to explain why teaching literature in the language classroom is important, what are some of the criteria to select suitable literary texts for students and what are some of the strategies that may be adopted while teaching literature. Robert Frost's poem "Stopping By Woods on A Snowy Evening" will be used as an illustration.

## **2. Why Literature?**

Beyond the sentence are both a challenge and an opportunity. Surely, literary texts give us much aesthetic, intellectual and emotional pleasure in that the writer often seeks to express his/her vision of human experience through a creative, emotive use of language and this in turn provides much impetus and motivation for the students to learn the language. Learning Literature not only improves the basic skills like reading, writing, listening and speaking but also other language areas like vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. One of the pre-requisites for language learning is that students should have a feeling for the language which can be achieved through creative and critical use of literary texts where they can experience language in use.

For such experience to facilitate language learning, "the language experience needs to be contextualized and comprehensible" (Krashen 1985, 1993, 1999) and the learner needs to

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be motivated, relaxed, positive and engaged (Arnold 1999: Tomlinson). Literature provides such rich experience to language learners and gives ample opportunities to develop their interpretative power- an important asset to language learning. It also provides a rich source for both teachers and students of shared experiences that can stimulate discussion.

Literature also can introduce the students to the varieties of English; it can be a source of linguistic and communicative enrichment, and it can be a powerful source of inspiration and motivation from which students may develop an interest for practical criticism.

Moody (1971:7) is of the opinion that literature also helps students improve their listening skills. The various topics in literature give students a chance for discussion which encourages oral practice. And often, a literary text is read out in full or in part by the teacher, or a record or tape version of it is played for the purpose of bringing out its rhythmic quality and stimulating interest. Thus, when used orally, Literature can develop the students' listening ability.

According to Obediat (1997:32), literature helps students acquire a native-like competence in English, express their ideas in good English, learn the features of modern English, learn how the English linguistic system is used for communication, see how idiomatic expressions are used, speak clearly, precisely, and concisely, and become more proficient in English, as well as become creative, critical, and analytical learners.

Collie and Slater (1990:30) point out four main reasons for using literature in a language class - literature is authentic material, it is helpful in cultural and language enrichment and finally students will have a lot of personal involvement. According to Maley (1989:12), the themes that literature deals with are common to all cultures in spite of the different approaches of the writers – death, love, human relationship, belief, nature etc and they are relevant to all human beings at all times. In short, literature is authentic material that can generate a new creative learning experience in the class and the students in turn will come out as competent learners of both language and literature.

### **3. Choosing an Appropriate Text**

One of the challenges teachers face is regarding the selection of a suitable literary text for the students. The types of literary texts that can be used are plenty. However, a teacher should be extremely careful while choosing the text that s/he wants to deal with in the classroom. The needs of the students, their motivation, interest, and cultural background should be taken into consideration while selecting a literary work for the classroom teaching.

First of all, the teacher should enjoy the text that he/she chooses. It is also important to select a text of an appropriate length. Texts need to be appropriate to the level of the

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students' comprehension. Shorter texts may be easier to use within the class time available, but longer texts provide more contextual details, and development of character and plot. According to Sage (1987: 87) lengthy texts might pose "the question of how to maintain students' interest". Extracts from a novel, abridged versions of a play or a novel and selected poems can be used in the classroom.

The most important criterion is of course to select texts that stimulate interest in the students. According to Brumfit (1986: 32), "of equal importance, however, is the choice of texts that lend themselves to student discussion and personal experience". Different themes will, of course, have different degrees of popularity at different levels. For example, a play like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, with its theme of youthful passion, might interest students a lot. However, a text chosen should be culturally significant and appropriate. This is especially important while choosing texts for those students from the Gulf region.

Duff and Maley (2007: 12-13) believe that teachers can cope with many of the challenges that literary texts present, if they focus on some of the questions like:

- Is the subject matter interesting to the students?
- Is the level of the language suitable?
- Is it the right length for the available time?
- Does it need a lot of cultural or literary background knowledge?
- Is it culturally appropriate?
- Can the text be used for language learning purposes?

#### **4. Integrated and Communicative Teaching Approach**

One of the important strategies a teacher can adopt in the class is an integrated approach of teaching literature through language where the students are involved full well. In this method, language skills will not be taught in isolation but in an integrated way, incorporating a set of text- based, student – centered activities which as Collie and Slater (1987: 8) suggest "add fresh momentum into the teaching of literature by stimulating students' desire to read and encouraging their responses".

Teaching literature should involve pre-reading tasks, interactive work on the text and follow up activities. Activities like predicting, gap filling, creative writing, role-playing, integrating spelling with vocabulary etc can establish the necessary connection between language and literature which eventually make the teaching and learning of literature a very productive and enjoyable enterprise. These activities not only create a challenging environment where the students try to put their mettle in the best way possible, but also call for a great deal of attention on the part of the teacher who becomes a facilitator, blending in himself/herself the "intuitive response of a practicing literary critic and the analytical tools of a practical linguist" (Dutta: 522).

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Roman Jakobson's important statement quoted in the beginning of this paper implies that language, the medium through which a writer brings out his/her creative output claims a closer attention than most teachers of literature are willing to devote.

In an integrated approach, a teacher ceases to teach and instead he becomes a participant and guide who works with his/her students. Here, the classroom activities may be divided into three categories viz. "Pre-Reading Activities", "While- Reading Activities" and "Post- Reading Activities". Pre-reading activities are kind of warming up which can provide a forum to elicit from students their feelings and responses to ideas and issues in a prescribed text. "While- reading activities" aim at helping the students to experience the text holistically by developing a fruitful interaction between the text and the reader. Post-reading activities encourage students to reflect upon what they have read and they generate thoughtful discussion on different issues related to both language and literature arising from the text.

In what follows, I shall try to enumerate some strategies for teaching a poem in an undergraduate class. The selected poem is Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (Appendix)

#### **(A) *Pre-Reading Activities***

Before students read the poem, it is useful to involve them into activities that will create the right attitude for receptivity and enjoyment with the result that they are inspired to read the poem again and again. The activities involve the students who will be asked to make use of their experience of life and their imagination and intelligence which will enable them to guess what may happen in certain situations. The title of the poem, illustrations, keywords, warmers, language exercises are some of the tools that may be used in the classroom for generating inferences.

##### **(i) *Title***

The title of a piece of literary work is important, as it tends to indicate the subject/theme of the text. The teacher announces in the class the title of the poem that s/he wants to discuss and without giving the poem ask the students to infer what is likely to happen in the text. After writing the title "Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening" on the board, the teacher may ask a range of questions to elicit responses from the students:

1. Is the title of the poem a sentence or a group of words?
2. What do you understand by woods?
3. What is the difference between "wood"and "woods"?
4. Give some examples of nouns that give you one meaning in the singular form and another meaning in the plural form?

5. Do you have woods in your country? Name them
6. Can you predict from the title what is likely to happen in the poem?
7. Is the poem going to be a description of the woods?
8. Is the poem going to describe some incident that took place in the woods?

At this juncture, students can be asked to work in groups, pairs or individually. The teacher may collect the answers and share with the students the different responses that they have given. With this activity, the teacher can generate interest among the students who will also bring forth inferences on the poem. In this way, students will have an opportunity to use their imagination and intelligence.

### **(ii) *Illustration***

Having discussed the title, the teacher may now give a pictorial presentation of the poem. Such an activity can provide important clues for predicting the content of the poem. There are many texts that have front- cover illustrations including pictorial representations of the contents. Alternatively, the teacher (if s/he has artistic talent) can draw a picture based on the poem or take the help of an artist friend.

An illustration of the poem, "Stopping By Woods..." should show a forest with a lake where the water is frozen as it is winter time. Near the lake there is a traveler who has stopped his horse and watching the beautiful scene. The horse has harness bells around its neck. The teacher asks the students to derive as much information as possible about the background/setting of the poem by closely examining the details. While students go through the illustration, the teacher may ask some questions like:

- What could be the time in the forest- evening/night/afternoon/dawn?
- Why do you think the traveler has stopped his horse in the forest?
- Do you know what is a "farmhouse"?
- Is the traveler afraid?
- What must he be thinking?
- What do you think about the lake? Why is it frozen?
- Is it a beautiful or frightening site? Explain

These questions, prompting further involvement and responses, bring students one step closer to the text and encourage them to read and understand the poem better.

### **(iii) *Warmers***

One line warmers can be picked up from the poem or chosen from maxims, proverbs and quotations that are closely related to some aspect of the theme or content. Warmers facilitate open discussion and help elicit inferences about the content of the poem. The teacher, choosing some related warmers, distribute them to students and asks them to

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explain the idea contained in them. In order to elicit more interest in understanding the poem the teacher may choose the following one-liners:

- The woods are lovely, dark and deep
- Man's heart away from nature becomes hard
- A thing of beauty is a joy for ever
- There is pleasure in the pathless woods
- For every promise there is a price to pay
- Miles to go before I sleep
- The fear of death follows from the fear of life
- A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time

Students may discuss the above in group, or in pairs and the teacher can ask them to write briefly about what they have understood from the warmers. The warmers help the students to formulate ideas on a more concentrated level about the possible meaning of the poem.

**(iv) Key words and expressions**

The text sometimes gives clues for predicting its theme or motif through the vocabulary used. It is, therefore, useful to pay some attention to the structure, organization, selection and collocation of lexical items in a literary piece. They usually appear in the form of key words/expressions sentences or lines and the students will be able to judge what the atmosphere within the text is going to be. In this case, the teacher can present a list of lexical items from the poem and may ask the students to prepare a mental picture of what they have imagined/understood from the connotative implications of the given words and expressions.

Watch ...woods...fill up with snow

Frozen lake

Harness bells

The only ...sound's the sweep

Of easy wind and downy flakes

Miles to go before I sleep

Students may be asked to discuss these in groups or pairs as being done earlier and they may be able to recreate the imaginative world depicted in the text. The teacher can

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prompt some questions which may be of help for the students to come to certain conclusions:

- Why is the narrator watching the woods?
- Are the woods filled up with snow? What is the reason?
- What do the "woods" represent? Something good or bad?
- What do you understand by the expression "frozen lake"? Why is the lake frozen?
- The wind is described as "easy" and flakes are "downy" - Why?
- What do you think the poem is about? Does it convey a message?

The activities discussed so far are meant to elicit inferences from the students regarding the poem that they are going to learn. These activities will create a lot of interest and curiosity in the mind of the students and inspire them to read the poem closely. At this juncture, the teacher can ask the students to open the text and engage them in the following While- reading activities

### **(B) *While-reading Activities***

After doing the pre-reading activities, students are ready to read and study the text that they are supposed to deal with. Here, they are going to develop a purposeful interaction between the text and its readers. The following While-reading activities can be tried out in the class:

- Listening to a good reading of the text
- Reading of the text
- Language Exercises
- Checking against the inferences made about the text in the pre-reading activities

Students often enjoy listening to a text either on a tape or when it is being read out loudly by the teacher in the classroom. It is, of course, very advantageous if the teacher has a good voice quality and a dramatic sense while reading the text. This will help students to "feel" the language, its rhythm, intonation, sounds etc. If the text is long, the teacher can read some of the interesting sections which will encourage them to read the whole. ``

Now, it is the turn of the students to read first, silently and then loudly individually, in pair or in group. The teacher can then ask them to mark some of the difficult words or expressions in the text and help them to find out the meanings.

From the reading, students will be happy to note that they have formed some clear ideas about the poem before actually going through it.

### **(C) *Post-reading Activities***

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Post-reading activities are meant to create a suitable situation for the students to express their reactions to reading the text. These will not only deepen their understanding of the text but also generate interest in the creative use of the language. Some of the post-reading activities are:

**(i) *Comprehension Questions***

These questions are meant to assess how far the students have understood the text. The teacher may ask the following questions regarding the poem:

- What are "harness bells"?
- Why does the horse shake his harness bells?
- What other sounds alone can be heard in the woods?
- Why does the poet mention these sounds?
- "My little horse must think it queer" – What does "it" mean here?
- Can the horse think like a human being? Why does the poet give this quality to an animal?

Students may be asked to answer the questions orally or in writing and the teacher can go through the answers and if necessary improve upon them.

Other subsidiary questions may also be asked to know whether the students have understood the poem wholly:

- Who is the narrator of the poem? Is it the poet?
- What do you understand by "poetic persona"?
- Explain what a lyric poem is?
- Is the poet speaking to some one or himself?
- Do you know what soliloquy/monologue is?
- Why does the poet use the Present tense all through the poem?
- Why has the poet repeated the last two lines?
- Explain some of the figures of speech in the poem?

At every stage the teacher is required to give guidance/explanations to the students in answering the questions. They also may be asked to make use of the Internet and Library facilities available.

**(ii) *Language Exercises***

A variety of language exercises can be introduced in the class at this juncture. These exercises may be either element-based, focusing on particular areas of language or skill

based, focusing on any four skills of language learning. Some of the language exercises that may be carried out with regard to the present poem are:

- Giving antonyms of the selected words and phrases and change certain lines into passive voice ( example: "He will not see me stopping here")
- Change the use of present tense of the poem into past tense a different version of the poem.
- Studying structural peculiarities of the poem (Example: Inverted structure "Whose woods these are I think I know". Ask the students to put the line in the usual prose order. Or repetition of the line "And miles to go before I sleep")

### **(iii) Memorizing**

Memorization is a useful pedagogical tool especially regarding poetry. It is not as some say a "rote exercise". On the contrary, memorization allows the students to 'feel' and experience language. It is a profound source of 'spiritual nourishment'. If the poem is very lengthy, some interesting lines or stanzas could be memorized and it is a very fruitful and rewarding experience.

### **(iv) Creative Activities**

Re- writing exercises and role playing are two creative activities that the teacher can introduce in order to enhance the students' understanding and appreciation of the poem for the improvement of their expressive and receptive skills.

Re-writing activities may be 'free' or 'controlled'. In the former, students enjoy the freedom of expressing, in their own words, what they have understood from the text. Here they can write a parallel poem using the same theme in a different background, may be a local one. In controlled or guided writing exercises, students are given guidelines. They may be asked to summarize the poem in a fixed number of words, or to rewrite the text with a different ending.

In role playing, students are asked to assume different roles. Such activities help students gain self confidence and self esteem. In the case of the poem under study, one student can play the role of the poetic persona, who is the narrator of the poem and the other the traveler on horseback. There are numerous poems that the students can perform with the guidance and encouragement from the teacher. Frost's other poems like "The Death of a Hired Man", "Mending Wall" "The Road Not Taken" are a few examples.

## **5. Conclusion**

There are umpteen strategies and methods for teaching literature in the class room. The strategies described in this paper are just a few. They can be applied in the case of teaching any other genres in literature- a short story, a novel or drama.

Whatever strategies a teacher adopts in the class, the aim is that students gain a fuller understanding of the text and have linguistically and conceptually prepare themselves to study it for interpretation and evaluation. Using the strategies discussed above, students learn how to make predictions and check them against the details in the given text. They also learn how to derive meaning of a text and form a semantic chain from the key words, examine how language is used to describe a setting and create desired effects, analyze how to assess them, and also find out ways of transferring the text and reconstructing its specific and literal meaning.

Thus, with awakened language sensitivity and improved literary insight, they gain the ability to read a literary work critically as a creative expression with aesthetic sensibility. In short, they have learned "literature through language".

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## Appendix 1

*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*  
*Robert Frost*

**Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village, though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.**

**My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.**

**He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sounds the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.**

**The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,**

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**And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.**



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