

Reading, Analyzing and Appreciating a Poetic Text

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Introduction

The teaching of poetry appears to present various problems for both students and teachers alike. A great majority of our students are simply "turned off" by poetry. For them poetry is too complicated because of its deviant language. Unfortunately, the teaching of poetry continues to be an unsatisfactory and problematic affair. Poetry is seen as being the highest literary genre, yet it holds the lowest priority in our English department and possibly other departments throughout the country. This may be due to the fact that some if not most teachers read little poetry and are unskilled in the way it should be interpreted. They are so ill at ease in its presence. That's why they skip it rather than teach it. It is a truism to say that the teacher's inability to interpret poetry is likely to distort its value and aesthetic side. What is in fact mysterious is how many of us feel hesitant in the teaching of poetry. It is no exaggeration to say that some are actually afraid of it. The concern of the following chapter is an attempt to fill this gap in teaching poetry. The focus of attention will be mainly on reading, analyzing and appreciating a poetic text.

Teaching poetry

Teaching poems helps learners experience on the two main features of aesthetic experience: distance and relation (Kramsh, 1993)⁸. Poetry first detaches the readers from their usual frames. It in fact immerses them in a wonderful word of sounds, rhythms and figures of speech. It also sensitizes to the relationship existing between the referential and the expressive aspects of language. By referential

⁸. Kramsh, C *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 156.

we mean content i.e. ideas, facts and beliefs. The expressive aspect, however, is the rhetorical space:

*this rhetorical space is based on new ways of forming sounds, new ways of shaping words , phrases, sentences, of structuring discourse, of relating to other texts, and of conceptualizing experience.*⁹

Kramsh (1993)¹⁰ suggests three ways of teaching the aesthetic reading of a given poem. Firstly, "celebrating poetry" by considering the physical properties of the poem being studied. Secondly, understanding poems through an in-depth study to get meanings clearer and lastly, helping students experiment with both linguistic and literary knowledge they possess to compose their own poems. This will certainly develop their skill in writing.

By "celebrating poetry" it is meant inviting students to 'taste' the flavour of its visual as well as prosodic features. Traditionally, copies of poems are handed out to students to be read by the teacher then analyzed at the surface level of its lexical items and syntax. Such a method is likely to refrain the reader from appreciating poetry.

*...each reader remains an island unto him or herself, each word is decoded in isolation and examined only for its referential content. By contrast, celebrating poetry is a group experience that foregrounds the pleasure of form as content.*¹¹

New methods suggest that a poem should first be recited in front of the class by the teacher who uses appropriate gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice to convey meanings. In this context, Dipietro¹² states that " non- verbals , such as hand gestures , body posturing , do more than embellish the verbal content of discourse. They are often an integral part of it."

⁹. Ibid:156.

¹⁰. Ibid.

¹¹. Ibid:157.

¹². Di pietro, J.R. *Strategic Interaction: learning languages through scenarios*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1987) , 36.

Poets and distinguished teachers highly recommend memorizing poems. Some see memorization as the first significant step in reading poems. Indeed, reciting poems from memory help teachers to keep eye contact with the students to anticipate eventual problems of comprehension.

The next step is to write the poem onto the board or project it with the aid of an OHP and students are asked to copy it. This procedure enables students to work co operatively with the teacher or peers to negotiate meaning and clarify ideas and concepts.

Understanding poetry signifies recognizing sound devices, sense devices and structural devices. It also means recognizing the characteristics and qualities of the voice in the poem. To understand poetry the reader must become acquainted with the speaker.

Writing poetry in a foreign language context is to create a 'secure environment' whereby students are given an opportunity to express their feelings and thoughts. It is in fact a pleasure students can derive from experimenting with literary form. According to Frank Kermode (cited in Showalter)

*It can still be argued that people who have actually written Petrarchan sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, ballades , and so forth, whatever the merit of their performances , actually understand more about poetry than people who haven't, and may have a better understanding of more modern , less communicable , technical achievement...*¹³

In sum, writing poetry is one of the most useful ways to learn to read poetry. Thus, teachers have to encourage students embrace the art of composing poems.

Understanding sound, sense and structural devices

Sound devices are known as "musical devices" in that they contribute to the musical quality of the poem. They are most noticeable when a poem is read aloud. Helping students understand

¹³. Quoted in Showalter, E. *Teaching Literature*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003),71.

sound devices such as alliteration assonance rhythm and meter means enhancing their literary competence.

Similes, metaphors, personification, symbols and allusions are known as sense devices. They have in poetry the same function as in fiction but their identification is sometimes more difficult because of its concise language. Therefore, students should appreciate the poet's inventiveness through a deep analysis of all these devices, after surveying the poetic text as a whole.

Contrast, repetition and illustration are the three structural devices adopted in poetry. Contrast is the most common device that consists of two opposite pictures. Repetition happens when the author wants to focus on a particular idea. In poetry, it is the recurrence of any sound, pattern, phrase, image, or syntactic structure. Illustration happens when the poet adopts a vivid picture in order to make an idea or a feeling more meaningful.

Listening to poetry

Poetry is still too much seen not heard. Like music, poems must escape the bondage of pen and page. To be fully understood, it must be heard. It should be studied and enjoyed not only by the eye but by the ear. Students, therefore, need to be given enough occasions to hear it in order to become accustomed to its rhythmical form. Reading aloud by the teacher and the use of the many excellent recordings which are available provide these opportunities. In this context, Meyer points out that

Poems yearn to be read aloud. Much of their energy, charm and beauty comes to life only when they are heard. Poets choose to arrange words for their sounds as well as for their meaning. Most poetry is best read with ... lips, teeth and tongue, because they serve to articulate the effects that sound may have in a poem. When a voice is breathed into a good poem, there is pleasure in the reading, the saying and the hearing¹⁴.

¹⁴. Meyer, M. *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*, p. 56, 618.

Its rhythms, sound pattering and dynamic organization contribute to its meaning.

Students should learn how to study poetry through actual listening. They must be made aware on how sounds are aesthetically combined to reinforce meaning and imagery or enhance the melody. Increasingly, they must learn to make a distinction between tone, shift in tones and ironies that result when the tone of the speaker is in contrast with the attitude of the poet.

It is to be noted that the oral approach requires mastery of certain techniques of interpretation. The listener is likely to grasp meaning only if the reader phrases it properly.

Greater clarity will also result from careful emphasis. Meaningful emphasis requires good vocal variety. Change of pitch, tempo and quality are essential to good oral reading, hence to the pleasurable heaving of poetry.

One way to teach students poetry and help them develop their listening skill is through the use of audio- aids. Listening to poetry can be practised in the language laboratory. A modern language laboratory of let's say twenty booths equipped with computers, headphones, microphones, DVD, and CD-Rom readers can be a very useful aid for both the teacher and the student alike.

By using the double track, students can listen to one track on their tapes and record on another track. The advantage here is that the students can listen not only to the original recording on the tape but also to what they themselves said. Teachers can, therefore, help students listen to some poems and repeat what they have heard. In fact, the double track can give enough opportunities to practice reading poems aloud and recording, then compare the way they recite the poem with the correct reading on a source tape. With the help of the console the teacher can control individual students' work and give feedback.

Listening from a tape is important in that it provides the perfect opportunity to hear other voices in addition to the teacher's voice.

Reading poetry

To enjoy reading poetry students need first to get its meaning through reading it very deeply because in most poems the thought is compressed where every single word or line has deep meaning.

Reading poetry, however; can be a difficult task for any reader especially for EFL learners. Its difficulty lies primarily on its highly compressed and figurative language. The first impulse of most readers is to look for the meaning of the text, and many are frustrated or even disappointed when they encounter problems to find it.

It is worth mentioning that the beauty of poetry is endemic in its music. Therefore, students are supposed to learn how to read poems aloud so as to get the full effect of its rhythms and rhymes. In other words, students should take the time to read poetry aloud. At the very least, a student has to read it to himself slowly enough so that it can be heard by the "minds' ear".

If a student reads the poem silently to himself, he needs to sound its words in his mind. He may read it aloud or hear somebody else read it to him. He may discover meanings he didn't perceive it before. I refer specifically to the necessity of reading poems aloud even if the student or the teacher reads poorly or even if it means having less time to discuss it. At first most readers do read badly, just as most dancers stumble in taking their first steps in learning how to dance. *"Practice makes perfect"* and over a period of time through continuous training, readers may improve their ability to read poetry in a professional way. In fact, a poem should not be fully analyzed until it has been read aloud by either the teacher or student. Better still, may be, is to read it twice, once at the pre-analytical phase and once at the post analytical phase, so the sound of the poem is the last thing a student hears of it.

In fact, poetry is best read *when* the words are well articulated with lips, teeth and tongue. The latter help to articulate the effects that sound may have in a poem. When a voice is breathed into a good poem, there is pleasure in the reading the saying and the hearing. Indeed, the reading of the poem is the most telling interpretation of it suggesting tone, rhythm and meaning too. A special bonus is when teachers make their students hear a poet read the work in his or her own voice, on CD ROMs or audiotape. I have come to think, in fact, that teachers need to spend time reading a poem aloud before analyzing it.

Reading and interpreting

By interpreting, we mean analyzing and appreciating a poetic text. The analysis consists in a full study and description of its components such as language, poetic devices meaning symbols and allusions, images, alliteration and assonance, rhyme and rhythm. Appreciation asks for an assessment of their interrelation and their poetic function within the total structure of the text. The combination of both analysis and appreciation constitute interpretation.

Surveying the entire text is considered to be the first step of interpretation. Careful reading of the text and looking up for unfamiliar words is the first task students are asked to do. For the purpose of exercise, read the poem below:

Democracy¹⁵

Democracy will not come

Today, this year

Nor ever

Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right

As the other fellow has

To stand

On my two feet

And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,

Let things take their course.

Tomorrow is another day.

I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.

I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom

Is a strong seed

Planted

In a great need.

I live here, too.

I want freedom

Just as you.

Langston Hughes (1949)

¹⁵. Langston Hughes' poem *Democracy* was published in 1949. It talks about the lack of freedom and the wrong means that were being used to achieve it democracy.

After careful reading, start interpreting the text by having a look at the whole text and not at isolated words or lines. The aim is to have a global understanding of the poem in order to analyze it in details later on. To get this basic insight, it is advisable for students to answer the following survey questions:

1. What is the event presented here?
2. Who is the speaker? What is his state of mind, social status, etc.?
3. What is the main theme?
4. What is the author's intention? Is he challenging the reader to react against somebody or something?

How to write the interpretation

Now that we have dealt with a detailed analysis of the text in terms of survey of the text as a whole, composition, vocabulary and syntax, images and figures of speech, our task here is to gather all these findings into a written form.

The aim of the introduction which is the first part of our interpretation is to inform the reader about the title, the author, the time and circumstances of the production of the text, and then we state the subject matter, the idea, theme or situation presented in the poem. This can be concluded by some specific remarks about the significance or the theme for the time when the poem was written or for a present day reader.

In the next step of our interpretation, we have to combine the results of both analysis and appreciation. The difficulty here lies primarily in the task to show the reader how the poet has really succeeded in interfusing the poetic devices and his subject matter. There are two procedures of how to arrange these results of our work. The first is to present the steps of our analysis in a chronological order by following the check-list above. We begin by surveying the text as a whole and add the results of analysis then appreciation which is our final judgment. The second method of organization and presentation is to introduce the results of our analysis and appreciation as we proceed line by line.

Appreciation is the final step of the interpretation if we follow the first procedure. In this phase of the process we have to value the

results of our analysis. We have to show whether the poet has successfully integrated structural devices, language, figure of speech subject matter and intention into one poetic unit. We will have to carry out our personal assessment of the text concerning its meaning. If we have chosen the second method, a short statement concerning the meaning of the theme and subject matter will suffice.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to draw attention mainly on reading, analyzing and appreciating a poetic text and considered the difficulty most students may encounter in reading poetry. Its difficulty is due largely on its highly compressed and figurative language. Since reading poetry is seen as being a difficult task for any reader especially for foreign language learners. Teaching students how to read effectively, however; should be encouraged in our departments.

I have suggested some techniques as a guide to help students analyze the constituent parts of a poem: sound devices, sense devices and structural devices.

References

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