

## **Critical thinking and autonomy in EFL students of literature**

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This paper approaches the problem of academic response to literature in an EFL context, as experienced by advanced undergraduate students. The challenge for them is to engage in a questioning of texts, and therefore to move beyond mere reproducing knowledge of authors and their works, as well as conventional critical comments on themes and styles.

For students who have had minimal exposure to literature, this objective is rather exacting. It appeals to critical faculties that involve research and comparison of secondary sources, as well as a commitment to express and develop personal viewpoints. It also requires a creative process whereby some language skills, or the metalanguage, need to be deployed for the achievement of a structured argument.

I will attempt to discuss the connection between the knowledge of authors and the critical process it takes to treat particular aspects of their works; I will also draw attention to the multiplicity of extrinsic features about texts, and the need to gather relevant background information for a thorough appreciation. This can lead then to genuine autonomy in the practice of textual interpretation.

### **Critical Thinking and Literature**

As a rule, conventional methods of literature teaching invite students to memorise and re-use the works of professional critics and scholars, who have kept a traditional set of conventions regarding the need to describe historical periods in literature, aesthetic movements, genres and modes of writing, as well as to provide substantial biographical data. Traditional teaching also implies a great deal of information to be held by students concerning the

social and cultural backgrounds informing the “literature of the Canon”. Then what is requested of students is mostly to know about facts, themes and styles which constitute mainstream criticism, and which do not call for personal approaches. So Algerian undergraduates are quite conversant with creative works from such aesthetic movements as the Romantics, the Transcendentalists, the Symbolists, etc. They are trained to produce data on the “Great Tradition” and to identify modes of writing (realism, modernism, postmodernism, etc.). These assets are referred to by Ronald Strickland (1990: 214) as “constructions of critical and practical apparatuses”. I would simply call them received literary knowledge. It is acceptable and even necessary to memorise facts and information, but what is more objectionable -that happens quite often- is to see students imitating their teachers to the extent of plagiarising them; free reproduction of published critical material is also common practice. It seems quite practical and natural for learners to use ready-made material to write their papers. The Brodie’s Notes, Monarch Notes and other guides to tap from are freely used, though they contain commonplace and mostly descriptive comments.

The task of teachers presently is to prompt their learners to treat literature as art, as creative work that is open to different reading options, corresponding to different ways of reading between the lines of texts. As Nancy Packer and John Timpane note (1997:468), learners need “to offer their own interpretation, not that of professional critics”.

So I would like to call attention to some principles, as formulated by John Mac Lean (1997), which are “advocating independent thinking” and “questioning, not merely accepting”. This amounts to saying that the act of reading calls for a permanent critical attitude and in some way a resistance to what seems obvious or familiar in a text on surface reading. As H.G. Widdowson remarks (1975:85), “our task is to make problematic what at first sight seems simple”, so that any treatment of a literary work involves the analysis of a discourse and a worldview, that is the essential elements that need to be pieced together as one delves “below the surface meanings” (Thomas Gwin, 1990:12).

In his plea for an autonomous and personal response from students, Ronald Strickland, already mentioned, takes a somewhat provocative attitude by rejecting the “indoctrination” that is forced on learners by the “knowing” teacher; paradoxically he welcomes “ignorance” as a salutary form of resistance. From this radical standpoint, this scholar urges teachers to encourage alternative responses and to reject “official texts” (R. Strickland,

1990:295), i.e., canonical criticism. There is probably a risk in taking such a libertarian attitude: indeed debates could go out of hand, and involve an emotional factor which could defeat the initial objective of interpretation. The teacher's part would be then to re-direct attention to the intrinsic features of texts which allow for such or such reading options.

I take the example of an undergraduate student of mine who, during a recent class discussion of the novel *Mine Boy* (1946) by the South African Peter Abrahams, offered an interesting critical remark regarding the characterisation of Eliza, the young black girl. She notes an inconsistency in her moral description because her desire "to be white" is motivated by flimsy reasons, i.e. wanting "the things of the white people", and not by any deeper considerations (extract 1 in appendix). The point made is that Abrahams has not adequately rendered the depersonalisation of the girl. This is a point that has escaped the critics' attention. We can move on then to consider Abrahams' fiction with more scrutiny, and to observe his difficulty reconciling conflicting values like black consciousness and multiracial reunion.

So literature invites the expression of diverse views; not infrequently can we see critics disagreeing on textual interpretations. Henry Widdowson, for instance, reports on the way he and Sydney Bolt take different appreciations over the poem by Robert Frost, 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', because of the ambiguity of its metaphoric representation, and of the reader's sensibilities:

The point, then, is that there is not, nor can be without misrepresentation, one definitive interpretation of a poem. different readers will bring their own preconceptions and values to bear on their reading of it and will associate the poem with their own experience of reality(H.G. Widdowson, 1975:123).

### **Towards Learner Autonomy in the Treatment of Literature**

Assessing texts, as the above example shows, requires close reading and the involvement of personal creativeness and observance .It might be true to say that such faculties are personal assets, and there fore skills that cannot be taught. All the same, the teacher's task is to help students to use them to good effect: he can draw attention to the problems and philosophical questions in texts by asking inductive questions. In the same way, he can monitor the use of the relevant literary register by students for the analysis of the writers' styles.

The learner- centred approach I am recommending here is to be coupled with a heuristic attitude whereby the students receive the necessary guidance, in the form of handouts and reading lists; the ensuing documents and data brought to their attention would serve to increase their awareness of the topics to be discussed. Audio- visual aids, in the form of documentaries and feature films, can also be of use, as Ronald Carter and Michael Long suggest(Carter and Long,1991:54), to reconstruct atmospheres and bring into relief particular aspects of literary works. Regarding the need to collect peripheral data, and taking the case of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, for instance, no close and insightful reading of the short stories can be performed without knowledge of Irish society, conditioned by a catholic ethos, and with a strong sense of family relationships. Let us consider the following extract, taken from the short story 'Eveline', after the young heroine is urged by her fiancé to leave Dublin and her family, and to start a new life with him in Buenos Ayres.(extract 2)

How much empathy from Joyce can be detected in his rendition of the girl's still hesitant attitude regarding her imminent departure? More importantly, what can be said of The author's own feelings in relation to the Irish socio cultural background as it conditions individual behaviours? His implied criticism can be seen in his sympathetic exploration of Eveline's conflicting desires.

We can also consider Shakespeare's tragedies, in particular *Macbeth*, and again request students to collect prior data on the history of medieval Scotland and the age of chivalry to size up the significance of Macbeth's betrayal and murder of his sovereign Duncan; meantime a fair knowledge of Elizabethan drama and its practices (for instance the use of magic on stage) can help understand the springs of action in this tragedy. With such information in mind, students can proceed to examine the "tragic villainy"(Wayne C. Booth,1963:180-90) of a man whose mind has been muddled by the evil influence of witches, and that of Lady Macbeth, who induces her husband to kill his benefactor so as to replace him on the throne of Scotland. This development of action can reveal aspects of Shakespeare's sensibility; is Shakespeare' story entirely that of crime and punishment, or is he inviting a deeper reflection about how virtue can be assailed by a darker side in human nature. A gender approach can even trace in this dramatist a tendency to demonise women and to make them responsible for men's misfortunes. In any case, even early classics of literature can be revisited by students, and considered from more holistic standpoints.

When approaching more recent classics, like John Steinbeck's novel *In Dubious Battle*, or Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, it is again important for students to gather information about the corresponding historical periods, both of which being dominated by conservatism in American politics. These two writers can be seen then to explore the human condition during difficult periods in the life of their country. The dramatic developments in Steinbeck's novel disclose an implied aspiration to better living conditions for the common people during the Great Depression, while Miller's play, though set during the witch hunt in Salem, Massachusetts, refers us to the post-war period dominated by Mac Carthyism, and perhaps incidentally to the Holocaust meted out by Hitler. This calls to mind the somewhat flamboyant declaration of Geoffrey Strickland that "the student of literature is a student of history" (G. Strickland, 1981:109). This reliance on historical facts to interpret works is justifiable, but can only look into the intrinsic aspects of a text, while textual studies seek more to examine what linguists call the speech acts, and which tell more about the writer's artistic sensibility.

### **Cultural Implications**

There are also specific cultural features in texts which need to be carefully examined. They refer us to contexts, worldviews expressed by writers which are important for any correct hermeneutic treatment. As noted in reference to Joyce's 'Eveline', and given our students' Arab- Moslem background, it is important to take account of the cultural traits of society which bear on the content of a literary work. It is apposite to understand how some of them are referred to in the writers' images and allusions to fully appreciate their ideas or feelings regarding the mores, customs and ethics of their respective societies. An exercise in cross- cultural examination is thus involved, and to be encouraged. In this way, students are in a position to identify the referential functions of modes of narration, tones, images, and thus to interpret authorial projects and motivations. As Claire Kramsch affirms, "every text attempts to have a cognitive and emotional effect on its readers, or to prompt its readers to action" (C. Kramsch, 1998:61). The discourse of the text can thus be studied, and the refraction of meaning intended by authors to foreground their own worldviews can be fully appreciated.

At this juncture, it would be appropriate to mention ideologically- based approaches to literature, and which take account of the confrontational views between North and South in terms of culture and civilisation, as notably

propounded by postcolonial theory in literature. Interesting studies have been conducted to compare texts of former empires and those of colonies to examine in them cases of intertextuality and dialogism. It would be particularly fruitful for our students to trace analogies of situations, echoes, ironies and counterpoints in comparative attempts, notably when one text comes up in clear response to another one. I would mention in this connection the novel by the Sudanese Tayib Salih, *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), which reverses the assumptions and positions contained in Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1902). The journey of the main character is now towards the North. It is no longer Kurtz, Conrad's protagonist, but Salih's Mustapha Sa'eed who experiences malaise, corruption of the mind, and is finally destroyed by his contact with a foreign environment, located in Britain. In both of the excerpts appearing in the appendix, the geographical spaces are empowered with significance; they foreshadow potential danger and death through the device of defamiliarisation (see appendix, extracts 3 and 4). Salih's text, employing an imagery similar to that of Conrad, indeed seems to be "writing back" to him. His protagonist's experience of foreign spaces discloses his creator's ideological beliefs and opinions which reflect, to borrow J. Langer's terms, "the unspoken emotions and reactions beyond the ideas that are more directly expressed (J. Langer:1997:74). They certainly reflect personal experiences, and a prolonged contact with Britain.

## Conclusion

The task of "reading between the lines" in approaching literary texts is thus a complex but necessary step to take for a deep academic apprehension of literature during the undergraduate curriculum. The perception of texts as generators of culture, but also as artefacts containing epistemological biases can only lead to satisfactory examinations, sometimes through comparative and confrontational procedures. A heuristic approach involving a search for pertinent materials can help students refine their perceptions, direct their mode of approach and still maintain an objective distance from the subject dealt with.

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## Appendix

### **EXTRACT 1 : from Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* (1946).**

'Xuma', she said softly.

'Yes ?

'I am no good and I cannot help myself. It will be right if you hate me. You should beat me. But inside me there is something wrong. And it is because I want the things of the white people. I want to be like the white people and go where they go and do the things they do and I am black. I cannot help it. Inside I am not black and I do not want to be a black person. I want to be like they are, you understand, Xuma. It is no good but I cannot help it. It is just so. And it is that that makes me hurt you...Please understand.'

'How can I understand ?'

Eliza sighed and went out again(p.60).

### **EXTRACT 2 : from 'Eveline', in James Joyce's *Dubliners*(1914)**

Her father was becoming old, lately, she noticed ; he would miss her. Sometimes he could be very nice. Not very long ago when she had been laid up for a day, he had read her out a ghost story and made toast for her at the fire. Another day, when their mother was alive, they had all gone out for a picnic to the Hill of Howth. She remembered her father putting on her mother's bonnet to make the children laugh.

Her time was running out, but she continued to sit by the window curtain, inhaling the odour of dusty cretonne. Down far in the avenue she could hear a street organ playing. She knew the air. Strange that it would come that very night to remind her of her promise to her mother to keep the home together as long as she could. She remembered the last night of her mother's illness ; she was again in the close, dark room at the other side of the hall and outside she heard a melancholy air of Italy(p.37).

### **EXTRACT 3 :from Tayib Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*(1969)**

The surface of the sea when calm is another mirage, ever changing and shifting, like the mask on my mother's face. Here, too, was a desert laid out



in blue green, calling me, calling me. The mysterious call led me to the coast of Dover, to London and tragedy.

Later I followed the same road on my return, asking myself during the whole journey whether it would have been possible to have avoided any of what happened. The string of the bow is drawn taut and the arrow must needs shoot forth. I look to right and left, at the dark greenness, at the Saxon villages standing on the fringe of hills. The red roofs of houses vaulted like the backs of cows. A transparent veil of mist is spread above the valleys. What a great amount of water there is here, how vast the greenness !And all those colours !The smell of the place is strange(...)The sounds have a crisp impact on the ear, like the rustle of birds' wings. This is an ordered world ; its houses, fields and trees are ranged in accordance with a plan. The streams too do not follow a zigzag course but flow between artificial banks. The train stops at a station for a few minutes ; hurriedly people get off, hurriedly others get on, then the train moves on again. No fuss(p.27).

**EXTRACT 4 : from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*(1902)**

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the trees were kings(...) There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself ; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect(p.66).