

**The ‘I,’ the ‘Other,’ and the Text:  
Is There any Strategy in Teaching Literature?**

Salah BOUREGBI

Laboratory TRADIL/ Department of English,  
University of Badji Mokhtar—Annaba, ALGERIA

[salihbourg@yahoo.fr](mailto:salihbourg@yahoo.fr)

**Abstract:**

Is methodology necessary for teaching literature? Does literature need theories? Is it fair to push students to see the text through the eyes of others? Does student need autonomy in understanding the text? The text is a mine, where the reader tries to dig and probe inside the multilayered structure of its depth. The more you dig and disturb its quietness and quietude, the more you discover unexpected elements, which are hidden under its sediments. Which meaning do we get from reading? Is it of the text, or the author, or the teacher or the student? Interpretation is not a logical process that looks at variations at different levels of meanings. Frequently, it cannot be done without free intentional process of meaning regeneration. The reader/the teacher recreates a story through his reading: this story cannot be labeled as the author's: the text is beyond any grasp. So, what do we teach of/from the text? Where does meaning lie? What parameters can we use to find the relevant key to penetrate the text and decipher its meaning(s)?

**Key Words:** Teaching - Literary Text - Reader's Response - Teacher-Mentor - Pact and Negotiation

**Résumé :**

Est-ce que la littérature a besoin d'une méthodologie pour son enseignement? Est-il raisonnable d'enseigner le texte littéraire à travers des théories et d'oublier/négliger le rôle de l'étudiant et son engagement dans la compréhension du texte ? Où est son implication dans la lecture et l'interprétation du texte ? Accepte-t-il la version des autres et oublie/néglige la sienne ? Toute théorie n'est qu'une convention : le texte reste toujours au-delà de ces présuppositions théoriques. Le texte est un gisement à explorer et à découvrir. Le lecteur essaye de creuser et chercher dans ses structures, qui sont profondes et difficiles à déchiffrer. Quel sens doit-on avoir en lisant un texte? Est-il du texte, ou de l'auteur, ou de l'enseignant ou de l'étudiant ? L'interprétation n'est pas un processus logique ; elle diffère selon la stratégie de lecture. Le texte est ce qu'en fait le lecteur. C'est à lui de régénérer son propre sens à travers sa propre lecture. Que doit-on enseigner du texte, alors ? D'où provient le sens et comment le trouver ? Quelles sont les paramètres qui nous permettent d'avoir le sens 'réel' du texte ?

**Mots clés:** Enseignement - Texte littéraire - Enseignant-mentor - Pacte et négociation - Dialogisme

## **Introduction:**

Does Literature really need methodology for teaching? What do we teach? Do we look for the meaning of the text, or do we use the literary text as a means for teaching language? The choice is very daring and very important: literature as a subject for study is something, and as a tool for teaching is something else. No doubt, they are different and differing, and the ends are not the same. The focal element of this study, then, is the text as a creative piece of literature, which differs from any other empirical, scientific text. It is authentic to itself and 'enjoys' its autonomy.

When we get a text, we think of reading and finding out what it means. But meaning in a literary text is very problematic and needs great skill and apprehension. The graspability of the text seems to be a problem for both teachers and students: it is multi- languaged and multi-voiced. Such spirit of complexity is a real obstacle for the reader, who is lost within the labyrinth of the text: he hears many voices and faces many languages. Which voice to listen to and which language to accept is his problem. So, how can we get the meaning? Is the meaning we have from the text the only one of the text? What about other meanings and interpretations we get from our strategy of reading?

### **1-Meaning(s) and the Literary Text:**

Though the reader is trying to keep closer to the original meaning of the text, or at least what he pretends to see, the strategy of reading makes the text exhibit new clues and complexities in its mode of expression/construction. Reading is not a logical process that looks at logical literary structure that gives the logical meaning of the text. The text is suggestive and its suggestiveness gives possibilities for many interpretations. In other words, if the reader determines the meaning of the words of the text, he will give birth to a new text. That is, intentionality plays a big role in identifying the nature of the reading strategy, which guides the reader to a specific meaning.

BUT: What can we do to understand a text? Through/with which tools can we apprehend it? Whatever we choose as a tool imposes a special meaning dialogically related to the tool chosen. Bryan Harmelink (2011) acknowledges the difficulty of getting the meaning from the sum of words that constitute the text. The meaning is beyond these words and sentences that compose the structure of the text, whether fictional or poetical. He states: "A word still has all the meanings, and context filters out the meanings which do not fit."(p.27) In other words, words do not give meaning, but they contribute in its existence. The literary text holds countless meanings and interpretations. The original is farfetched: it is beyond any understanding and any theory. Even the author cannot understand his text: it is from him but not for him. Put otherwise, the text is autonomous and authentic to itself: being-in-itself. The critic Aiga Kramina (2004) raises the following pertinent question: "Who is in the position to claim that s/he has understood the text –correctly?" (p..37) Reading is manipulating the text and trying to adapt it to your world and intention. Thus, you reproduce another text with the meaning you want.

Other questions impose themselves, here: Is meaning an interpretation derived from the text, or outside of it? How do we get it? Who is in the position to get it? There is a kind of

dialogism between the reader and the text: he wants to know; it wants to resist. The text is flexible but at the same time uneasy. It is like mercury; it slips from your hands and you cannot catch it. This dialogism creates a kind of response within the reader, who tries to penetrate the 'depth', or some darker regions, of the text in order to decipher what the word and structure and composition hint to. In his article, "Theories of Meaning," William Alson (1970) points out that: "An expression to have a meaning is for it to refer to something other than itself, but they [readers] locate meaning in different areas of the situation of reference." (p.20)

The reference, itself, is not clear in literary texts. It could be more inner and inward; furthermore, one reference could have many representations, i.e, more than one meaning. Alson maintains that: "Anything to which we can refer can be referred to by many expressions that do not have the same meaning at all." (p.21) In the same context, the critic Luis Garagalza (2013) points out that: "the search for meaning is endless; it is an infinite adventure." (p.2)

The literary text is subject to interpretations, and any interpretation is what we only guess as meaning, which is in any way very personal and does not reveal all what the text hides under its multilayered structure. In other words, the truth you find in the text is only a truth you have found or created in the text, nothing more.

Due to its complexity, it seems difficult to select an approach that could explain entirely the text. What this selection can do is only to give something/anything of the whole: it is incomplete, intentional and biased. Subsequently, any meaning generation becomes very personal built up on what fits our reading and develops our interpretation. Since interpretation is always undertaken in the present, which continuously evolves, there might in principle be other ways of questioning the text. (Rasmussen,2002, p.3) Having endless interpretations, the text resists and fences its core with language that reveals beyond what its tenses, structures, sentences and expressions denote: the meaning is beyond language. In the words of M. M. Bakhtin (1992): "Reality as we have it in the novel is only one of many possible realities; it is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities." (p.37) In the same vein, the critic Kenneth T. Gallagher (2000) maintains that: "All explanations 'from underneath' is an attempt to explain the more evident in terms of the less evident." (p.152)

Language function is the representation of an idea or a thought, whether psychological, or ideological, cultural or social. It also binds unspoken thoughts together. To explore such texture, the reader should see beyond what language evokes or/and reveals. He must 'undress' it and get inside its kernel. William Righter (1975) points out: "To represent something was to become the mask for a truth, either occult or abstract."(p.8) Paul De Man (1983), on the other hand, claims that language, in its external and internal representations, becomes a mask of what it represents. He says: "It is the distinctive privilege of language to be able to hide meaning behind misleading sign, as when we hide rage or hatred behind a smile." (p.11)

How can, then, the reader accommodate the text, which resists to him? How can he get inside it and listen to its voice(s)? The text is creative and imaginative. The truth, we get from it is no more than the truth inside it. The text is "clouded with ambiguity [and] needs no historical reality." (Righter, p.9)

So, interpretation is a process of meaning regeneration issued from the text. It cannot be otherwise.

## 2-Which Methodology and to What/Whom?

Which adequate methodology should teachers use to teach literature? How can they make it for students? Do we recourse to conventional methodologies already-made for teaching? Do we teach literature as a subject autonomous and independent? Or, do we use it as a means to teach language, culture and even history? Literature is beyond any methodology convention; it is authentic to itself. This authenticity makes it very particular in teaching: that is, the text imposes its own way of teaching. This way becomes very fruitful when the student is involved in text's negotiation. D. Jonathan Picken (2007) states that:

Authenticity is considered to be a virtue in communicative language teaching.... However, authenticity can be understood in at least two ways: authenticity as a quality of a text, and authenticity as an experience. Literature can be authentic in both senses, but the learners' L2 proficiency is likely to play a role in determining whether literary texts can be experienced in something like an authentic manner.(p.12)

When the author produces his text, he does not intend to use it for language teaching, but, rather, to represent something outer and inner to the reader. The literary text is not “fashioned for the specific purpose of teaching a language and it therefore requires students to cope with language intended for native speakers.”( pp. 3-4) What is significant in literature is that the text triggers within students the will to decode and defy its ambiguity and complex structure in order to understand what is hidden behind: the intrinsic more than the extrinsic, the esoteric more than the exoteric. This involvement and the ‘savoir s’engager’ are made possible through motivation, mainly when the text deals with human issues that are common, whatever is the race. Picken maintains that: “Well-written stories of any kind may motivate students to keep on reading for other reasons—because of the ‘suspense of unraveling the plot.’...Thus, both literature and popular fiction genres, such as thrillers, possess qualities that have the potential to make them highly motivating as teaching materials.” (p.14)

So, the free personal response to the text makes the reader delve inside its labyrinth trying to comprehend and grasp the meaning—or at least what he finds as a meaning. This moment by moment process of involvement encourages, progressively, the reader to create (or find) a way to enter the text and challenge its resistance. He tries, at least, to track a voice—his voice—among so many voices the text holds. In literature, as Paul de Man ( 1983) points out, the question of “the self appears at least in four types: 1-the self that judges, 2-the self that reads, 3-the self that writes, 4-the self that reads itself.” (p.32) In the words of Bertrand Russell (1976): “Only sentences have intended effects, whereas meaning is not confined to sentences. Object-words have a meaning, which does not depend upon their occurring in sentences.” (pp.28-29).

The dialogue between the text and the student is fruitful; it engages the student to accommodate it and generates meaning through interpretation. His reading involvement

becomes a kind of extension of his self. Isaac Goldberg(1939) claims that: “Not for nothing does I see mean ‘I understand.’” (p.85)

But the student cannot do it by himself alone. He is in need for a teacher, who plays the role of a mentor, who helps him make it but not make for him. Vridhagiri Ganeshan (2002) states that: “Teachers are expected to reflect upon the broader and deeper meaning of human life and through their teaching initiate discussions on how one can develop oneself into a qualified and competent personality and contribute to improving the world not in self-interest, but for the welfare of humanity. This attitude enlivens and vitalizes teaching and learning.” (p.43)

The challenge of teaching literature is very obvious, mainly in the way to attack the text and approach it. The text is deep; its depth is multilayered. The more you get inside, the more you discover the unexpected: another depth. It becomes hard for the learner to apprehend all this. It is the role of the teacher to guide him in his meaning quest. He should not impose, but only propose what is, probably, expected by the learner. Takis Kayalis and Anastasia Natsina (2010) point out that: “Literary studies, requiring an ethos of patient engagement with challenging texts, confront a cardinal difficulty at this level.” (p.1) In other words, the teacher should know what do students want from him, and, reversely, what does he want from them? This interaction is very positive. It enables the teacher to find a way to involve students in the text and engage in its interpretation. In an introduction to their book, *Teaching Literature: A Companion*, Tanya Agatholeous and Ann Dean (2003) claim that the teacher should ask himself questions that are significant in the understanding of the classroom interaction and students’ motivation. They write: “What do you want your students to learn? What do you want them to *do* in your class? What do they do instead? How do you respond?... *How* did the students come to see it? How did the teacher know that they had come to see it?” (p.1)

The problem with the teaching of literature is that the literary text is taken as a means not an end in itself. The text is displaced and excluded from its right place and used to serve other places and spaces that affect its autonomy and mode of being. In Murat Hismanoglu (2005) terms: “The use of literature as a technique for teaching both basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) is very popular within the field of foreign language learning and teaching nowadays.” (p.54) The text has become a devoiced body, whose unity is ‘dismembered’ and oneness watered down.

The text is a mode of expression and self-metamorphosis, which is beyond any logic. It is an image authentic to itself and has many suggestive meanings related to the strategy of reading. That is to say, the literary text is not exclusively made for teaching foreign learners the target language. It can be an aid in teaching, but cannot be the primary data for this. In the words of Hismanoglu: “Literature is authentic material...Literature is perhaps best regarded as a complement to other materials used to develop the foreign learner’s understanding into the country whose language is being learned.” (pp.54-55)

The teacher of literature should not axe his teaching strategy on vocabulary and structure. Rather, he should encourage the student to read the text and inhabit it. To keep the thread of engagement makes the student more dynamic and enthusiastic. This engagement enables him

to immerse within the different layers of the text in order to get, at least, a meaning among other meanings it enfolds. Hismanoglu points out:

Literature speaks subtly different meanings to different people. It is rare for two readers to react identically to any given text. In teaching, this has two advantages. The first advantage is that each learner's interpretation has validity within limits. The second advantage is that an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is guaranteed since each person's perception is different. That no two readers will have a completely convergent interpretation establishes the tension that is necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas.(p.56)

In the words of Truong Thi My Van (2009): "The reader's role is to discover the one correct meaning by a close reading and analysis of formal elements such as rhyme, meter, imagery, and theme." (p.3)

The mentor must be present to guide his students. Reading without help is boring and the student fails to find pleasure in reading. Because of the linguistic nature of the literary text, which is beyond the conventional language structure and semantic codes, the teacher must be behind the student to back him and develop his sensitivity to literature. Van states that the literary text includes "the unconventional structure of literature, especially poetry, where language often is used in a non-grammatical and loose manner...The teacher encourages students to use their linguistic knowledge to make aesthetic judgments and interpretations of the texts." (p.4)

Involvement in the text creates motivation in the learning process. It must be smooth without any constraint or pressure, mainly when students fail to approach the text. It is for the teacher to create favorable environment and facilitate the dialogic relation with the text. Majeed Mohammed Midhin (2015) in his article "Techniques Used by University Instructors in teaching Short Story," argues that:

The mission of the story instructor involves imparting and developing notions of taste, assessing validity and the ability to recognize beauty...In addition to the fact that not all the students appreciate literature; the teaching effective techniques used by instructors are good means to motivate them. Here, his genius appears to guide his students to full understanding of literary texts. (p.83)

As the quote notifies, the teacher's task is to provide the student with good environment in order to make him move and react to the text without obstacles. He should present a variety of tools and manners that could give a way to the student to build up his track to get inside the text. Midhin claims that:

The teacher in the language classroom can mediate according to this approach between the text and learner. But the vital initial subjective response on which the "meaning" of the text needs to be based must come from the students if it is not be imposed. The implication of this comes from the teacher who devises ways of encouraging students to view the text as it relates to their own lives and society and to negotiate the meaning of the text as a group. (p.92)

Free response to the text is very significant. It gives possibility to students to try by themselves find a meaning through their personal reading strategy. The teacher paves only the way for such engagement. Dinh Thi Hien (2013) states that:

Teachers and students have much concern and interest in literature and relatively broad knowledge on language and language teaching and learning; Students' limited English proficiency and limited knowledge on culture are obstacles that hinder their responses to literary texts....Teachers feel that the materials are challenging to their students, the meaning of literary text changes by generation, and literature is a fruitful means in developing students as whole persons.(p.154)

Undoubtedly, language actualizes literature and organizes its different parts into one unity of effect: its existence. It, thus, represents more than what it hints to, as culture, society and ideology. It steps further to some other aspects and spaces beyond language. So, teaching literature as a work of art is quite different from using literature as a tool for teaching language. It is somehow a problem of doing this; because in the text we can find mistakes made by the author intentionally. Artistic, fictional style is beyond the standard language—language that everyone knows. The cases of James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Finnegan's Wake*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are very illustrative examples. The literary text cannot, always, be a sample for teaching language. Koutsompou Violetta-Irene (2015), in his article "The Use of Literature in the Language Classroom: Methods and Aims," points out such problem in his criticism to the communicative competence. He says: "The focus of this teaching method was on form, on learning the rules of grammar and the lexical items as they appeared in the text. There was no literary interest, nor interest on content." (p.74)

Content in the text dictates its shape and form. The form is the representation of the content through structure. Thus, involvement in the text starts with the form, which guides the reader to the different layers that compose it. This state of being makes the student enthusiastic and motivated. Sharria L Hoskins and Stephen E. Newstead (2009) point out that: "Students with intrinsic motivation will perform better academically than those with extrinsic motivation....Intrinsically motivated students might be expected to develop a deeper understanding of the material than extrinsically motivated students." (p.29) The closer reading of the text enables the student to apprehend the text and its features in order to find some threads that lead to interpretation. Sheridan Blau(1993) maintains that:

The job of the reader or critic of such an artifact was to apprehend all of its features (to engage in "close reading") and to uncover the structures of meaning that informed the text, particularly revealing the ironies and paradoxes that create 'tensions' and explicating the 'unity' that resolved those tensions. In this enterprise, which was typically as much an evaluative as an interpretive one, critics were expected to conduct inquiries in a way that was finely tuned to the emotional nuances of their own reading experiences. (p.2)

Exploration of the text needs help from the mentor, who knows how to do it. In the words of Sheridan Blau (1993) “The problem seemed to derive from what the teachers took as their obligation to arrive through their discussions in their reading groups at a ‘correct’ or authoritative interpretation of the difficult texts they were studying.” (p.9) The multi-voiced reading creates a dialogue between the text and the student. This negotiation in the presence of the teacher is very fruitful. The teacher facilitates this negotiation but does not dictate his intentions. Blau points out that:

Instead of competing for the same discursive space, members of reading groups found themselves collaborating to construct more inclusive readings or to a process of negotiation with each other and with texts that yielded multi-voiced readings which were valuable for the degree to which they revealed subtle features of texts at the same time that they reflected a range of plausible interpretive responses. (p.11)

Negotiation is a mode of thinking, where skill, argument and conviction are substantially used. Thus, the text comes to be the real stimulus that triggers student’s potential. In the words of Celia Esplugas and Margarete Lundweher (1996):

Critical thinking helps students gain confidence in the interpretation of literary works. This can be done by encouraging students to draw their own conclusions by using their own rational faculties...regarding such literary elements as character, theme, and narrator. This process, which includes students' weighing opposing viewpoints, assessing facts and ideas, and drawing conclusions about issues presented in the text, provides students with ‘higher order learning’...that enables them to gain a deeper understanding of the work. (p.450)

The critic Neil Addison (2013) is in favour for teachers’ help in student’s negotiation with the text. He writes: “To avoid being confused or locked out of the text, students need to be encouraged to critically engage with literature by critical comparison with their own culture and individual identities...Teachers should also seek to equip students with a deeper knowledge of the ideological values of the text itself, and the cultures it both embodies and represents.” (p.21)

In his article, “Language for Literature,” Alex Rodger (1983) acknowledges the text’s metamorphosis, multi-linguagedness and multi-voicedness. He attests that the meaning, the reader gets from the text, is what he intends to find out or create through his negotiation. He writes:

Reading experiences are inevitably subjective, so interpretations are likewise inescapably subjective....Texts, however, are not in themselves works of literature: they are simply the reader's means of access to them. The words on the paper remain mere words on paper until a reader actively engages with them as intelligently and as sensitively as his knowledge of life and his command of the language will allow and we have already seen what that implies. The reader has to reconstruct or re-create his own version of what the author hopes to convey by means of language.(p.46)

**Conclusion:**

All meanings are contextual, and all contexts are dialogically related to the reader through his intention and the 'what' to discover and/or create. The literary text is an iceberg: what it hides is more than what it shows. Like mercury, it slips from your hands whenever you try to grasp it.

Interpretation of a text holds many horizons. Subsequently, it cannot be what the text is, but only an answer to what the interpreter has raised as a question. The truth is that the text cannot hold one objective and static understanding: the text's meaning is the outcome of the act of reading, which is a perspective, related to the intention of the reader and the voice he intends to dialogue with.

Literature, as a subject, is in search of a methodology which keeps pace with student's intuitive responses rather than a methodology that inculcates (and hammers) some orthodoxy and a set of ready-made critical judgements. What is noticeable, in our literary classes, is that students are frequently pushed to see literature through the eyes of others. They are not encouraged to use their eyes ('I's') for understanding and interpretation. The teacher is a generator of guiding ideas; he is a catalyst and a reflector for students.

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